



**The Paradox of Flexibility: Exploring the Dichotomy of Employer-
Initiated Flexible Working Arrangements and Return-to-Office
Directives on Knowledge Workers' Motivation in the Contemporary
Workplace Post-COVID-19**

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science,
University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Business Administration

07 November 2024

ABSTRACT

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a substantial transformation in business operations. With the imposition of lockdowns and social distancing measures, organisations across the globe were compelled to transition from conventional office-based work to adopt flexible working arrangements, prominently featuring working from home. This adaptive response was critical for sustaining business continuity and meeting organisational objectives within a complex and restrictive business environment.

This qualitative exploratory research aims to explore the paradox of flexible working arrangements as initiated by employers to circumvent business challenges during COVID-19 and the new emerging concept known as return-to-office directives, where employers are now mandating employees to adopt pre-COVID-19 office centric setups. Managers are confronted with the paradoxical dilemma of whether to continue with flexible working arrangements or implement return-to-office directives. Each alternative presents significant unintended repercussions. This study aims to establish the effect of these concept on employees' motivation, specifically knowledge workers.

The primary research question sought to examine the impact of management's decision to implement return-to-office directives, which mandate the physical presence of knowledge workers in the office, on their motivation level and attitude towards their work. To fully address the primary research question, managers were also asked to provide recounts of their perception of their staff's motivation towards work after implementing return-to-work directives in addition to data obtained from knowledge workers.

A qualitative research approach was considered appropriate, the researcher adopted interpretivism philosophy to complement it. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the theory development was inductive. Due to time constraints the study was cross sectional and used semi-structured interviews to collect data from participants purposefully drawn from researcher's professional network.

The findings showed that implementing return-to-office directives does not affect employees' motivation, even though the elements of discomfort, inconveniences were noted as well as challenges of dealing with transition was experienced, the level of motivation remained unaffected. Flexible working arrangements were found to enhance employees' motivation. This finding corroborated the literature. Consequently, a framework was developed to elucidate the

effects of flexible working arrangements and return-to-work directives on organisations to help business leaders make informed decisions about workplace policies and their repercussions on employees' motivation, productivity and workplace effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

Flexible Working Arrangements, Return-to-Office Directives, Knowledge Worker, Motivation

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of 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.

Molotsi Ntsieng Hendrick Mofokeng

07 November 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
KEYWORDS.....	iv
PLAGIARISM DECLARATION.....	v
LIST OF APPENDICES	x
LIST OF TABLES.....	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM DEFINITION AND PURPOSE	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background to the Research Problem	1
1.3 Research Problem	4
1.4 The Aim and Purpose of the Research	6
1.5 Significance of the Research	6
1.6 Research Scope.....	7
1.7 The Research Objectives	8
1.8 Layout of Dissertation.....	8
1.9 Conclusion	10
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
2.1 Introduction	11
2.2 Theoretical Framework	11
2.3 Theoretical Framework Guiding the Study	13
2.4 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory	14
2.5 The Concept of Motivation.....	17
2.6 Employee Motivation.....	18
2.7 Flexible Working Arrangements	18
2.8 Flexible Working Arrangement Variations	19
2.9 Flexible working arrangements and Covid-19	20
2.9.1 The Surge in Remote Work.....	20
2.9.2 Preferences for Flexible Working Arrangements	21
2.9.3 Mixed Reactions to Flexibility	21
2.9.4 Evolving Perspectives.....	22
2.10 Employees' benefits of implementation of Flexible Working Arrangements	22
2.11 Employees' Work Preferences.....	24
2.12 Drawbacks of Flexible Working Arrangements	25
2.13 Employer Rationale for Enforcing Return-to-office Directives	26
2.14 The shift towards Return-to-Office Directives	27

2.15 Conclusion	28
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS	30
3.1 Introduction	30
3.2 Research Question 1	30
3.3 Research Question 2	31
3.4 Research Question 3	31
3.5 Research Question 4	31
3.6 Research Question 5	32
3.7 Conclusion	32
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN	33
4.1 Introduction	33
4.2 Choice of Methodology	33
4.3 The Research Onion	36
4.3.1 Research Philosophy	37
4.3.2 Research Approach	38
4.3.3 Research Strategy	39
4.3.4 Research Design	39
4.3.5 Time Horizon	40
4.3.6 Data Collection Method	40
4.3.7 Techniques and Procedures	41
4.3.8 Population	41
4.3.9 Unit of Analysis	42
4.3.10 Sampling Method and Sample Size	42
4.3.11 Measurement Instrument	43
4.3.12 Data Collection Process	44
4.3.13 Data storage	45
4.3.14 Data Analysis Approach	45
4.3.15 Quality Controls and Ethical Considerations	46
4.3.16 Limitations	46
4.4 Conclusion	48
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	50
5.1 Introduction	50
5.2 Description of the Study Sample	50
5.3 Study participants' demographics and discussion	53
5.4 Results for Research Question 1	59
5.4.1 Employees' motivation and attitude	61

5.4.2	Lifestyle Changes and Adjustments	64
5.4.3	Time Management	66
5.5	Results of Research Question 2	68
5.5.1	Benefits and Challenges of Flexible Working Arrangements	70
5.5.2	Work-life balance	70
5.5.3	Communication Effectiveness	73
5.6	Results of Research Question 3	75
5.6.1	Effective Working Environment	76
5.6.2	Organisational Challenges	78
5.7	Results of research Question 4	80
5.7.1	Management's perspective of return-to-office	81
5.8	Results of Research Question 5	86
5.8.1	Future World of Works	87
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS		91
6.1	Introduction	91
6.2	Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ1	91
6.2.1	RQ1 Theme 1: Employee Motivation and Attitudes	91
6.2.2	RQ 1 Theme 2: Lifestyle Changes and Adjustments	92
6.2.3	RQ1 Theme 3: Time Management	93
6.2.4	Literature on Research Question 1 Findings	93
6.3	Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ2	94
6.3.1	RQ2 Theme 1: Work-life Balance	94
6.3.2	RQ2 Theme 2: Communication Effectiveness	95
6.3.3	Literature on Research Question 2 Results	95
6.4	Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ3	96
6.4.1	RQ 3 Theme 1: Effective Working Environment	96
6.4.2	RQ3 Theme 2: Organisational Challenges	96
6.4.3	Literature on Research Question 3 Results	97
6.5	Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ4	97
6.5.1	RQ 4 Theme 1: Management Perspective	97
6.5.2	Literature on Research Question 4 Results	98
6.6	Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ5	99
6.6.1	RQ 5 Theme: Future World of Work	99
6.6.2	Literature on Research Question 5 Results	100
6.7	Conclusion	100
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS		105

7.1	Introduction	105
7.2	Summary of the Research Findings and Framework.....	106
7.3	Framework for understanding the effects of FWA and RTO on employees' motivation	106
7.3.1	Framework Interpretation and impact on Stakeholders	107
7.3.2	Motivation	107
7.3.3	Productivity context.....	108
7.3.4	Effective Work Environment.....	109
7.4	Recommendations for Business when considering changing Workplace Policies 109	
7.5	Recommendations for Future Studies	111
7.5.1	Adopt longitudinal design.....	111
7.5.2	Expand Sample Scope	111
7.5.3	Explore understudied themes	111
7.5.4	Employ mix method	111
7.6	Study Limitations	112
7.7	Conclusions	113
	REFERENCES	114
	APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPROVAL	119
	APPENDIX B: PERMISSION LETTER.....	120
	APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER.....	121
	APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE	122
	APPENDIX E: ON-LINE MEETING INVITATION	126
	APPENDIX F: LIST OF RESPONDENTS	127
	APPENDIX G: CONSISTENCY MATRIX	129
	APPENDIX H: CERTIFICATE OF DATA ANALYSIS SUPPORT.....	132
	APPENDIX I: CODE BOOK	134

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Approval

Appendix B: Permission Letter

Appendix C: Informed Consent Letter

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Appendix E: On-line Meeting Invitation

Appendix F: List of Respondents

Appendix G: Consistency Matrix

Appendix H: Certificate of Data Analysis Support

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1: Layout of Dissertation

Table 2.1: Summary of major employee motivation theories

Table 5.1: Managers' Demographic Information

Table 5.2: Employees' Demographical Information

Table 5.3: Research analysis data on employees' motivation and attitude on Return-to-Work Directives

Table 5.4: Data analysis regarding benefits and challenges of Flexible Working Arrangements

Table 5.5: Data analysis regarding benefits and challenges of Return-to-Office Directives

Table 5.6: Data analysis of Managers' perception of staff motivation

Table 5.7: Data analysis of Managers' perception on retaining Flexible Working Arrangements

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1: The Research Onion

Figure 5.1: Employees' gender profile

Figure 5.2: Managers' gender profiles

Figure 5.3: Employees' age groups

Figure 5.4: Managers' age groups

Figure 5.5: Employees' employment levels

Figure 5.6: Managers' employment levels

Figure 5.7: Employees' levels of education

Figure 5.8: Managers' levels of education

Figure 5.9: Employees' number of years in the organisation

Figure 5.10: Managers' number of years in the organisation

Figure 7.1: Framework for understanding the effects of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives in a context of motivation, productivity and workplace effectiveness.

CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM DEFINITION AND PURPOSE

1.1 Introduction

This qualitative exploratory research aimed to explore the paradox of flexible working arrangements initiated by employers to circumvent business challenges during the COVID-19 era and the new emerging management concept known as return-to-office directives, where employers are now mandating employees to revert to the pre-COVID-19 office-centric set-ups. As such, the study aims to understand the dichotomy of employer-initiated flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives, particularly concerning knowledge workers' motivation in the contemporary post-COVID-19 workplace.

Building from an in-depth comprehension of these contradicting management constructs, the research aimed to explore and comprehend how management can effectively balance the implementation of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives within the current business landscape, particularly in the post-pandemic era.

This chapter provides a background to the research problem and in-depth details of the problem in the business world and in the academic community. Furthermore, the chapter presents the central research objectives, the research problem, the study's significance, and the dissertation's structure.

1.2 Background to the Research Problem

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a substantial transformation in business operations. With the imposition of lockdowns and social distancing measures, organisations across the globe were compelled to transition from conventional office-based work to flexible working arrangements, prominently featuring the work-from-home (WFH) model. This adaptive response was critical for maintaining strategic objectives within a complex and restrictive business environment. Alkhawaldeh et al. (2023), Franken et al. (2021) and Kong et al. (2022) underscores this shift's significant influence on the contemporary workplace.

Before the pandemic, flexible working arrangements were largely discretionary, with many organisations lacking formalised policies to govern such practices (Franken et al., 2021). Conversely, the abrupt transition to mandatory remote work necessitated that organisations

rapidly develop and implement flexible work strategies and policies (Franken et al., 2021). These adaptations were essential not only for sustaining organisational activities but also for ensuring business sustainability under unprecedented conditions.

Moreover, employees found themselves needing to acclimate to these novel working paradigms, often spending extended periods outside the traditional office context. In this vein, many organisations adopted flexible work arrangements as an immediate response to the COVID-19 challenges, positioning them as a critical mechanism for sustaining operations during periods of restriction. Kong et al. (2022) support the assertions of Franken et al. (2021), indicating that the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly catalysed organisations' rapid adoption of flexible working arrangements.

Flexible working arrangements are defined as an organisation's strategic approach to fostering flexibility in where and when work is carried out (Mwando et al., 2021). This initiative grants the employees greater freedom by removing inflexible structures and harnessing technology to support remote work and interaction within the organisation (Wiatr, 2021). Ultimately, this enhances work-life balance, boosts employee satisfaction and productivity, and reduces commuting time. Numerous positive aspects of adopting flexible working arrangements have been well documented in the literature, such as the reduced need to commute, which, in turn, contributes to employee productivity due to less disruption and time spent in traffic (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017)

For an organisation to thrive in a rapidly changing business environment, it must adapt quickly and demonstrate sufficient flexibility to navigate swift changes. Several studies have lauded flexible work arrangements as a business strategy that has enabled many organisations to navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 era.

On the contrary, the transition to remote work presents significant challenges for both employees and employers. On an individual level, employees have had to navigate the complexities of transforming their living spaces into functional work environments, troubleshoot various technology-related issues, find ways to effectively balance their professional responsibilities with their personal lives, and take proactive measures to safeguard their mental well-being in the absence of traditional workplace support systems (Chafi et al., 2021). Additionally, balancing work and personal life and prioritising mental well-being has become increasingly complex due to isolation (Franken et al., 2021).

On the business side, many organisations were taken by surprise and found themselves inadequately prepared for the new flexible working arrangements (Franken et al., 2021). This resulted in difficulties in managing the workforce while striving to achieve both short-term and long-term objectives.

The return-to-office concept emerged in mid-2022, during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many business leaders began to reconsider their workplace policies, particularly the efficacy of flexible working arrangements in the post-pandemic business landscape (Ding & Ma, 2024). As such, return-to-office policies mandate that employees work from the office, at least for several days or, in other cases, for the entire five-day week.

Post-COVID-19, most organisations began to mandate return-to-office by calling their employees back to the office due to declining collaboration and organisational culture. Trevor and Holweg (2022) state that when organisational culture is on the decline, employees develop weaker connections and, therefore, collaboration suffers, negatively impacting business performance. Other publications and articles highlight innovation as another element that suffered due to flexible working arrangements (Trevor & Holweg, 2022). The COE of Apple, Tim Cook, underscored the importance of being physically present, arguing that innovation is not always a planned activity. Non-routine activities, such as water cooler conversations, spark innovation, and with flexible working arrangements, the opportunity for these encounters has diminished (Trevor & Holweg, 2022). Cook's concern is emphasised by Chafi et al. (2021), who claim that with the transition to remote work, there is a heightened necessity for scheduled meetings as opposed to the informal, in-person check-ins that, in the work environment transpired spontaneously in the corridors.

Wadhawan (2019) presents a compelling argument regarding the vital importance of social relationships within the workplace, highlighting their absence in the context of flexible working arrangements. The author emphasises that fostering supportive interactions and cultivating collaborative environments significantly enhances employee productivity, efficiency, and overall job satisfaction. Furthermore, this notion is equally supported by Green et al. (2020), who highlight that the reluctance of organisations to adopt flexible working arrangements often stems from concerns over communication breakdowns and collaboration deficits. This results in an inadvertent increase in social isolation among employees, which poses a substantial risk to both individual and organisational performance. Employees, particularly junior staff, hesitate to seek assistance on minor issues while working remotely, fearing that they will be perceived as bothersome, thus compounding their sense of isolation. Another adverse consequence of implementing flexible working arrangements is the occurrence of consecutive meetings, which

contrasts with the natural breaks typical of work environments. These back-to-back meetings result in cognitive overload and fatigue (Chafi et al., 2021).

Moreover, Chafi et al. (2021) amplify these concerns, revealing that employees operating within flexible work arrangements frequently grapple with feelings of loneliness and exclusion, especially in decision-making processes. The limited feedback and guidance available to them can exacerbate their sense of isolation. This begs the question: Are the potential benefits of flexible working arrangements worth the costs associated with social disconnect and culture collapse?

Flexible working arrangements offer particular advantages that are well-researched and documented. However, they simultaneously inhibit the collaborative spirit organisations strive to cultivate. In essence, while flexible work arrangements are designed to enhance individual autonomy, they risk undermining the social fabric that underpins effective teamwork and productivity. Several senior executives who advocate for return-to-office policies contend that flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, detrimentally affect organisational productivity, collaborative innovation, culture, and core values (Ding & Ma, 2024). Therefore, a critical re-evaluation of these policies is necessary.

The concept of return-to-office is still emerging and has not yet been firmly established in academic discourse. However, its impact is felt worldwide, creating significant upheaval in the workplace. Disputes between employees and management regarding return-to-work directives and flexible working arrangements have become increasingly contentious. This ongoing conflict has attracted considerable interest from scholars and business consultants who aim to analyse the implications of these dynamics in the context of the post-COVID-19 business landscape.

This conflict underscores significant issues related to the future of work, particularly the challenge of finding a solution that accommodates employees' demands for flexibility while capitalising on the benefits of a physical office-centric model. An in-depth analysis of this dilemma is essential for comprehending broader organisational challenges and for identifying avenues to cultivate more effective workplace motivation in an increasingly dynamic environment.

1.3 Research Problem

The ongoing debate between flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives highlights a crucial conflict in contemporary organisational management. As businesses navigate the post-pandemic landscape, management must balance productivity, employee morale and

motivation with the need to foster a collaborative workplace and a heightened sense of connectivity among employees and culture. The return-to-office mandates reflect a complex balance, aiming to preserve foundational elements of company culture while adapting to the evolving expectations of a post-pandemic workforce. The organisation's initiative to reinforce office-centric work norms represents a strategic investment in what leaders perceive as essential drivers of organisational resilience and innovation.

The rationale behind the return-to-office perspective is the belief that a physical presence in the office environment enhances collaboration, fosters innovation, and cultivates a greater sense of connectivity among employees (Amazon, 2024). These factors are considered essential for nurturing a corporate culture that is dedicated to excellence in customer service and business growth. This juxtaposition underscores a tension between the desire for flexibility, as evidenced during the pandemic, and the directive to revert to traditional office settings.

Return-to-office policies may unintentionally reduce employee motivation and engagement, both of which are essential for sustained performance. Employees who successfully adapted to flexible work arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic strongly advocate for their continuation. Their strong performance during this period demonstrates that flexible work can be a viable alternative to traditional office settings (Trevor & Holweg, 2022).

Managers are reevaluating the effectiveness and relevance of flexible work policies while acknowledging the inherent benefits of in-person collaboration. Face-to-face interactions are often considered essential for fostering spontaneous creativity, facilitating real-time problem-solving, and strengthening interpersonal relationships among team members. These dynamics are not only operational but also crucial for cultivating a culture of innovation and maintaining a competitive edge. Management must make informed and deliberate decisions regarding the impact of return-to-office directives on employees' well-being, motivation, and behaviour in relation to their work duties.

Chafi et al. (2021) present a comprehensive statistical analysis of the shift in working practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, remote working was uncommon, with only about 5% of employees in the United States of America and 3.2% in the European Union (EU) opting to work from home, primarily among highly skilled and highly paid workers. However, the pandemic led to a significant transformation, with approximately 50% of American and 39% of European employees transitioning to flexible working arrangements. The implications of this widespread adoption of flexible work post-pandemic must be thoroughly examined.

The Telework-ability Index indicates that approximately 36% of jobs in the EU are classified as suitable for remote work after pandemic-related restrictions were relaxed (Chaf1 et al., 2021). This finding raises important questions regarding the modalities through which the remaining 64% of jobs are being performed, necessitating further exploration of work practices in the post-pandemic landscape.

The research problem is that management is confronted with a paradoxical imperative - the decision to continue flexible working arrangements or implement return-to-office directives. Implementing return-to-office directives may lead to employee pushback, loss of key talent, reduced motivation, and overall decline in performance. Conversely, maintaining flexible working arrangements poses the risk of decreased innovation, loss of competitive advantage, and erosion of organisational cultural cohesion.

1.4 The Aim and Purpose of the Research

This study aimed to explore and sought to understand how management can effectively balance the implementation of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives within the current business landscape, particularly in the post-pandemic era. This involves contrasting employer-initiated flexible working arrangements with return-to-office directives and examining the resulting impact on employee motivation, especially in knowledge-based roles.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight and a deep understanding of how work motivation changed for knowledge workers who are or were formerly working flexibly but have been mandated to return to the office by management. The study identified specific components of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives that enhance or diminish knowledge workers' motivation levels, which could be accomplished by engaging knowledge workers and managers to understand the contribution of each concept to improving or reducing motivation.

1.5 Significance of the Research

Numerous studies have shed light on the prevalence of flexible working arrangements before and during the pandemic. However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature on post-pandemic revocation of these arrangements, which were widespread during the pandemic. Specifically, there is a dearth of studies that contrast employer-initiated flexible working arrangements with the return-to-office directive and examine the resulting impact on employee motivation. This gap in

the research warrants further investigation to fully understand the implications of these contrasting approaches in the post-pandemic era.

The implementation of return-to-office directives post-pandemic and revocations of flexible work arrangements has become a prominent and highly debated topic, attracting significant attention from business practitioners and academics. However, it is notable that business consultants and practitioners authored a substantial portion of the literature on this subject, which may introduce certain biases or perspectives more aligned with specific organisational interests.

It is hoped that the outcomes of this research will contribute to the literature, enabling the business community and academics to understand better how these contrasting business practices play out in the real world, the repercussions of choosing one over the other, and how the decision will impact the motivation of knowledge workers.

1.6 Research Scope

This exploratory qualitative study investigated the perceptions of management and employees concerning the dichotomy between employer-initiated flexible working arrangements and return-to-work directives, particularly on knowledge workers' motivation in the contemporary workplace post-COVID-19. Considering business leaders' complexities and challenges in transitioning from flexible work arrangements to enforcing return-to-office directives, this study concentrates on elucidating the paradox of flexibility and return-to-office directives. It examines explicitly how knowledge workers' motivation level changes due to transitioning from flexible working arrangements to return-to-office within a single organisation operating across multiple cities in South Africa, focusing on various departments.

Furthermore, the study critically reviews the existing literature related to the paradox of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives phenomenon to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. It is crucial to acknowledge that the scope of the research is confined to data gathered from participants within the selected organisation. Therefore, the perspectives offered by respondents should not be interpreted as grounds for forming broad or general conclusions. The researcher recognizes that insights derived from the study may serve to inform and enhance future research on similar topics.

1.7 The Research Objectives

The study addressed specific research objectives to bridge gaps in the current literature.

1. Determine how implementing return-to-work directives changed (or will change) knowledge workers' motivation and attitude towards work.
2. Ascertain the benefits and drawbacks of flexible working arrangements for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation.
3. Uncover the benefits and drawbacks of return-to-work directives for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation.
4. Find out management's perception of staff motivation towards work after implementing return-to-work directives.
5. Find out management's perception of staff motivation if flexible working arrangements are retained.

In terms of sampling, the sample comprised members of management staff and employees from the same organisation who are knowledge workers in various departments and locations. Their perceptions were deemed appropriate to gain new insights into addressing the research problem and accomplishing the research objectives.

1.8 Layout of Dissertation

Table 1.1: Dissertation Layout

	Chapters	Topic and Discussion
1	Chapter 1	Problem Definition and Purpose of the Research ✓ Introduction and Background ✓ Aim and Purpose ✓ Significance of the Research and Scope ✓ Research Objectives

2	Chapter 2	Literature Review ✓ Theoretical Framework ✓ Hierarchy of needs Theory ✓ Concept of Motivation and Employee Motivation ✓ Flexible Working Arrangement Discussion ✓ Return-to-Work Directives Discussion
3	Chapter 3	Research Question Discussion ✓ Main and Sub-questions Development and Discussion
4	Chapter 4	Chosen Research Methodology and Research Design ✓ Qualitative Research ✓ Research Design ✓ Research Methodology ✓ Population and Sample ✓ Limitations
5	Chapter 5	Research Results and Data Presentation ✓ Study Participants' Demographics Presentation and Discussion ✓ Research Findings Discussion ✓ Theme, Categories and Codes Discussion ✓ Study Results Presentation
6	Chapter 6	Result and Data Analysis ✓ Comprehensive Data Analysis ✓ Results Analysis and Discussion ✓ Qualitative analysis of interviews
7	Chapter 7	Study Recommendation and Conclusions

		✓ Summary of Research Findings ✓ Framework and framework interpretation ✓ Study Recommendations for Businesses & Practical Implications ✓ Recommendations for future studies ✓ Study Limitations ✓ Conclusion
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Source: Research data (2024)

1.9 Conclusion

Globally, flexible working arrangements have emerged as the predominant alternative to conventional employment methods, with an increasing number of organisations adopting these practices (Kong et al., 2022). However, top management of organisations now encounter novel challenges in implementing return-to-office directives, which various publications have indicated can influence employee behaviour and motivation as workers transition back to the office setting. The edict to return-to-office is implied to be indispensable for reinforcing organisational culture. The logic underpinning this stance is that a physical presence within the office setting fosters enhanced collaboration, spontaneous creativity, facilitating real-time problem-solving and innovation, and a heightened sense of connectivity among employees, elements deemed crucial for cultivating a corporate ethos committed to customer service excellence (Amazon, 2024). Face-to-face interactions are often regarded as vital for enhancing interpersonal relationships among team members.

Despite the extensive ramifications of the pandemic, there remains a notable gap in the academic literature regarding management's perceptions of return-to-office directives and their subsequent impact on employee motivation. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the study's background, delineates the research problem, contextualises the study and its objectives, and outlines the structure of the dissertation. Chapter 2 deals with the literature review and establishes the theoretical framework for this research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The literature review aimed to address and explore various existing issues related to a research problem in academic studies (Snyder, 2019). Literature reviews serve to highlight what has been discussed and understood and what remains unknown in the field (Campbell et al., 2020). Snyder (2019) argues that the primary purpose of including a literature review in research studies is to provide researchers with ample empirical data and a deeper understanding of the topic or issue being investigated by reviewing previously conducted studies.

Moreover, Campbell et al. (2020) explain that a theoretical framework serves as the foundation upon which epistemological data could be developed in academia. Researchers use a theoretical framework to articulate their arguments thoughtfully and accurately within their studies (Campbell et al., 2020). Thus, Chapter 2 discusses the literature relevant to the topic under investigation. Since this study was guided by grounded theory, this chapter also explores the theoretical framework adopted for the research.

The study is premised on knowledge workers and can be defined as workers that are concerned with producing and distributing ideas and information instead of goods and services (Serrat & Serrat, 2017). Knowledge workers are individuals that are hired by organisation specifically for their proficiency or expertise of the subject matter rather than their capabilities to execute manual labour (Serrat and Serrat, 2017). Their value add to organisation lies in their cognitive capability to perform complex tasks, with the specific focus on solving organisational problems using data, processing it to create novel solutions to achieve desired outcomes (Surawski, 2019). They possess a large body of knowledge and niche competencies in their speciality usually obtained through university qualifications and experience. They flourish when given autonomy to perform their tasks (Serrat and Serrat, 2017).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The literature is rich with various major theories that provide new insights into and a deep understanding of employee motivation in the workplace, which includes the leading theories adopted in many studies such as Equity Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, Work

Design Theory, Goal-setting Theory, and Expectancy Theory among others (Lee & Raschke, 2016). Many scholars agreed that motivated employees lead to outstanding organisational performance (Lee & Raschke, 2016). This section of the study discusses the various theories presented in empirical research and highlights the main theoretical framework adopted to understand employee motivation in guiding this study.

Studies showed that employees are motivated differently; for instance, others' motivation is driven by extrinsic factors, while intrinsic factors drive others. Despite the varying sources of motivation affecting employee performance, it is essential for management to thoroughly understand what motivates their employees to enhance productivity and achieve organisational goals. While contemporary theories often focus on cross-disciplinary fields to understand employee motivation, traditional theories primarily concentrate on specific aspects believed to be employees' main sources of motivation. Table 2.1 below (Lee & Raschke, 2016) recapitulates employee motivational theories and their bases.

Table 2.1: Summary of major employee motivation theories

	Theory of Motivation	Author	Principal Discussion
1	Goal Setting	Locke & Latham	Emphasis on goals specifies the challenges and encourages feedback. Working towards these goals provides motivation and a sense of purpose. However, focus on outcomes can compromise learning.
2	Work Design	Hackman & Oldman	Five core critical job elements drive employee motivation through difficult tasks and lead to better employee performance.
3	Equity and Justice	Adams	Equity between employees is driven by justice towards each other. Fair treatment leads to high performance and citizenship behaviour.
4	Hierarchy of needs Theory	Maslow	The hierarchy of needs drives employee motivation. There are five levels in the hierarchy of need, are physiological,

			safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization
5	Expectancy Theory	Vroom	The theory indicates that our motivation to behave in a particular manner is largely influenced by our expectations of the outcomes and their desirability. Employees tend to exert significant effort when they believe that their hard work will lead to favourable performance evaluations, which can, subsequently, result in rewards such as salary increases that ultimately help them achieve their personal goals.
6	Cognitive Evaluation Theory	Deci	Proposed there are two motivators, intrinsic and extrinsic.
7	Reinforcement	Skinner	Theory suggests that employees' behaviours are shaped by outcomes

Source: Lee and Raschke (2016)

2.3 Theoretical Framework Guiding the Study

Considering that the research topic and problem are quite novel, it is implausible that prior research has examined the objectives of this study. This research investigated the dichotomy between employer-initiated flexible working arrangements and return-to-work directives, particularly regarding their impact on the motivation of knowledge workers in contemporary workplaces in the aftermath of COVID-19. Maslow's Hierarchy of needs Theory was adopted to enhance understanding of this phenomenon. The following section of this chapter elaborates on the selected motivation theory and articulates reasons it was deemed suitable for the study.

2.4 Moslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

A need in the context motivation theory is defined as an individual's inner condition that make certain outcomes look desirable and when unsatisfied it create a drive within the individual (Ramlall, 2004). These needs are physiological and psychological deficiencies that drive actions (Ramlall, 2004). Maslow's Hierarchy of needs Theory is a theory about what motivates and fulfils humans, its argues that motivation is formed because of the hierarchy of needs (Wolor et al., 2020). The hierarchy of needs are often arranged in pyramid, with survival (physiological) need at the bottom and more creative and intellectual needs (self-actualisation) at the top (Rouse, 2004). Therefore, every worker has five levels of needs: physiological, safety and security, social belonging, esteem/ego, and self-actualisation (Huitt, 2007). Maslow's needs are arranged hierarchically, with lower-level needs taking precedence over upper-level needs.

Moslow's hierarchy of needs as explained by Rouse (2004) is as follow, the first need is physiological need, and refers to needs for food, water, and condition essential for body to survive. The second need is safety and security need, which relate to the need for protection from danger or living or working in a safe environment and having a stable source of income, and good health (Rouse, 2004). Social belonging need relates to the feeling of belong into a group, having a secure relationship, to love and be loved (Rouse, 2004). The esteem refers to the need to be admired and respected, such as possessing self-worthy, capabilities, dignity, status, reputation and respect from peers. The last need, self-actualisation is concerned with a person's fulfilling his or her full potential (Rouse, 2004).

It is important to comprehend that lower-level (physiological) basic need must be fulfilled first before a person could seek for higher need (psychological). Moslow's Hierarchy of needs Theory posits that people's need at each level ought to be mostly but not completely met, before moving to the higher need (Huitt, 2007). According to Maslow, managers who wants to motivate their employees they must first understand where their employees are sitting in the hierarchy of needs, because human needs are dynamic, and what is key for managers to motivating employees is to aim at satisfying the next employees' need (Wolor et al., 2020). Therefore, the implication of this theory provides valuable insight for managers and leaders to continuously find ways of motivating employees by developing programs or policies aimed at fulfilling developing or unmet needs (Ramlall, 2004).

The order of the level of needs is not completely fixed. For instance, some people can achieve self-actualisation despite being in poverty, thus human behaviours are motivated by multiple needs simultaneously (Huitt, 2007).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented changes in how employees and employers operate in the workplace (Franken et al., 2021). The shift to flexible working arrangements was predominantly driven by employers' need to sustain jobs while maintaining business continuity, which in the context of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs Theory this is associated to addressing the physiological need, by first securing employment, ensuring that organisations remain operational amid of COVID-19 restriction through the implementation of flexible working arrangements, specifically working from home and introduction of shifts. Working from home made employees motivated due to inherent work-life balance benefits (Wolor et al., 2020).

Many employers prioritised employees' safety by implementing flexible work arrangements in response to government restrictions to limit the spread of the virus (Kong et al., 2022). This flexibility allowed staff to work remotely, ensuring compliance with government regulations. In the context of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs Theory, employers primarily prioritized the safety and security of their employees while simultaneously striving for organisation's sustainability in the face of Covid-19 trade restrictions. This approach addressed the emerging complex concern between management and employees, as employees expressed anxiety regarding the potential risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus in the workplace. Employers further provided masks, sanitizers, and other protective equipment to provide much needed safety measures. As such the second need for safety and security was addressed.

Maslow's theory clearly illustrates the motivational needs driving both employers and employees to seek flexible work arrangements. Having already addressed their safety and security needs, employers and employees alike aimed for social belonging and esteem before pursuing self-actualisation.

As some employees begin to work remotely, especially working from home, decreased the interpersonal contact among employees, some experiencing isolation and loneliness (Wolor et al., 2020, Green et al., 2020; Wadhawan, 2019). The need for managers to resolve isolation issues emerged, if not addressed it would reduce motivation because of the lack of face-to-face encounters with colleagues for collaborative problem solving and not getting enough and prompt support from managers (Wolor et al., 2020). Social belonging need was addressed mainly through the introduction of digital communication platform like Teams or Zoom to allow staff to interact

while working remotely and made them feel that they are a part of the organisation. It is through these interactions that make employees felt treasured and appreciated by their employers and colleagues. However, this position contradicts the views of managers advocating for a return to the office, who argue that flexible working arrangements adversely affect social belonging (Green et al., 2020; Trevor & Holweg, 2022; Wadhawan, 2019). They emphasised that these arrangements result in a notable absence of social relationships and interactions resulting in isolation. The sharing of information and virtual face-to-face engagements through technology increased employees' motivation (Wolor et al., 2020)

The esteem need involves having stable self-respect and earning respect from others. Employers and employees achieve self-respect need by gaining respect from their Exco leaders and peers by ensuring business continued to be operational during Covid-19 lockdowns. The flexible working arrangements enabled the organisations to navigate pandemic restrictions and achieve high-performance and financial results during the COVID-19 era (Ballentine et al., 2022; Chafi et al., 2021). These arrangements enabled the organisations to navigate the restrictions imposed by governments during the pandemic, thereby aiding them to attain high-performance outcomes during the COVID-19 era (Ballentine et al., 2022; Chafi et al., 2021).

As one need is substantially achieved, the more the employers and employees are motivated to pursue the next need on the hierarchy. Research suggests that employees with flexible work options demonstrate heightened motivation and job satisfaction, contributing to enhanced output and efficiency (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Consequently, this improved productivity often translates into better organisational financial performance, as Mwando et al. (2021) attested.

Employees' perception of self-actualisation is found in their belief that flexible working arrangements should remain indefinitely as a way of conducting business, the flexible working arrangements has become a proven alternative to achieve business objectives and, in some cases, exceed standard performance (Kong et al., 2022).

As companies began to issue return-to-office directives, it became apparent that the transition from flexible working arrangements to return-to-office necessitated a significant personal transformation for employees, substantially impacting their behaviours, attitudes and motivation towards their work. The implementation of return-to-office directive would have a far-reaching consequences on the employees hierarchy of needs, and demand management to seek interventions to address the emerging unmet needs.

2.5 The Concept of Motivation

Motivation is meant to facilitate individual's behavioural change to act in a direction of a desired objective (Shahzadi et al., 2014). Dinibutun (2012) defines motivation as an internal force that directs, influences and encourages persistence in one's work efforts. While there are various theories of motivation that attempt to explain the concept, most of them primarily focus on employee behaviour in specific situations or time frames (Dinibutun, 2012). According to Shahzadi et al (2014) they defined motivation as reflection of the level of energy, enthusiasm, innovation and commitment that employees bring to their job. The concept of motivation, often discussed in business and management studies, is typically defined by scholars as an action, involving effort and direction undertaken by an individual or group towards a desired goal (Ganta, 2014). The role of the manager in the workplace is to deliver organisational objectives through employees by developing willingness in employees to work (Shahzadi et al., 2014). Thus, managers should be able to motivate their employees. Ganta (2014) supports Shahzadi et al. (2014) views that employees who are motivated tend to be productive and produce quality outputs, and likely to remained with their employer when they feel appreciated by management. Motivated employees are likely to be self-driven, highly engaged in their jobs, they embrace autonomy and take responsibility for their work (Shahzadi et al., 2014).

Rouse (2004) referred to Maslow's assertion that motivation originates from psychological processes that activate particular behaviours necessary for task completion, thus propelling individuals toward attaining positive outcomes. Ganta (2014) explained that psychological processes motivate individuals, guide their actions, and foster consistent behaviour, enabling them to perform their work duties successfully.

The literature on motivation remains extensive, with numerous studies examining various aspects, including methods for enhancing employee motivation, principles of motivation, motivation theories, and measurement of motivation. Literature showed that organisational performance is influenced by many factors, with employee motivation at the centre. When employees are motivated organisational performance is heightened (Shahzadi et al., 2014). This framework provides a fundamental understanding of how different factors can influence employee motivation and performance.

2.6 Employee Motivation

Numerous research studies engaged in extensive discussions and developed frameworks focusing on employee motivation (Ganta, 2014). While these frameworks provided valuable insights into the concept, none fully captured the essence of employee motivation, particularly in contemporary contexts following the pandemic. During the pandemic time, employees experienced increased flexibility, which brought about many benefits to employees, however, they were subsequently required to return to pre-pandemic office work environments and had to forego the benefits of flexibility.

One widely recognised framework identified intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that universally influenced employee behaviour in the workplace (Ganta, 2014). Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal drive individuals experience from a personal appreciation and enjoyment of completing a task. In contrast, extrinsic motivation arose from external sources or incentives that encouraged employees to engage in activities to achieve their goals and complete tasks.

Similarly, organisation use employee performance to motivate employees to direct their efforts towards the achievement of organisational goals. As such organisation can use bonuses and other form of incentives to drive performance (Shahzadi et al., 2014). If employees are motivated, they are inclined to perform better.

For managers to achieve organisational goals, the training of its staff is fundamental important, as it help to improve skills to execute the work effectively and keep up with the latest developments. Training enhances and updates employees' capabilities and lead to improved performance (Shahzadi et al., 2014). Employees who possess necessary skills and competency are generally motivated to do their job.

2.7 Flexible Working Arrangements

Flexible working arrangements emerged as a significant topic in organisational studies, reflecting changes in workplace dynamics and the increasing demand for work-life balance. Kelliher and Anderson (2010) defined flexible working arrangements as encompassing various options, such as non-standard hours, reduced work hours, compressed workweeks, and various forms of remote work. A key aspect of these arrangements was the employee's ability to determine their work schedule, contrasting with traditional models in which the employer typically dictated the

hours and conditions. It was important to recognise that not all flexible work was voluntary, underscoring the complexity of employee choice in this context.

Mwando et al. (2020) comprehensively defined various forms of flexible working. The authors identified time flexibility, which included flexitime, allowing employees to choose their start and finish times. They also discussed the compressed workweek model, where employees worked longer hours each day in exchange for fewer workdays per week. Another important aspect was location flexibility, also known as teleworking, which enabled employees to work from home or other remote locations. Additionally, contractual flexibility included arrangements such as job sharing, where the responsibilities of a single position were divided between two individuals.

De Menezes and Kelliher (2011) expanded on the concept of flexible working arrangements by defining them as conditions that enable employees to modify their work quantity, timing, and location. This viewpoint aligned with the definitions offered by Mwando et al. (2021) and other scholars, supporting the notion that flexibility is a complex and multifaceted concept.

The implications of flexible working arrangements extended beyond just employee preferences; they also encompassed broader organisational benefits. Ballantine et al. (2022) highlighted that these arrangements enabled organisations to assist employees in better balancing their work and family commitments. This support was achieved by adjusting the timing and/or location of regular work tasks, fostering a more adaptable work environment.

Although researchers defined flexible working arrangements in slightly different ways, the core principle remained the same: these arrangements aimed to increase employee autonomy in managing their work responsibilities.

2.8 Flexible Working Arrangement Variations

A study by Avgoustaki and Bessa (2019) highlighted the significance of understanding the complexities of flexible working arrangements in modern workplaces. The authors argued that prior research often focused on a narrow range of flexible options, overlooking the wider variety of arrangements typically offered by organisations. They categorised these arrangements into two main types: employee-centred and employer-centred.

Employee-centred flexible working arrangements were designed to meet the needs of employees, thereby enhancing personal satisfaction and promoting a healthy work-life balance. In contrast,

employer-centred arrangements primarily served the interests of employers, often at the expense of employee preferences (Avgoustaki & Bessa, 2019).

De Menezes and Kelliher (2017) further contributed to the discourse by classifying flexible working arrangements into two categories: formal and informal. This classification was based on whether the arrangements arose from established organisational policies or resulted from informal discussions between employees and employers. Consequently, these different types of arrangements affected employee effort and motivation in various ways, highlighting the importance of understanding who benefited from flexible working options.

Flexible working arrangements referred to practices that allowed variations in when, where, and how work was performed, as noted by Mwando et al. (2021) and other researchers. These arrangements included various configurations, such as weekend shifts, overtime, contractual obligations, part-time positions, job-sharing, flexible hours, and location-based flexibility (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017; Avgoustaki & Bessa, 2019).

Flexible working arrangements include various options to cater to employees' needs. Flexitime allows employees to set their start and finish times while meeting required shift hours. The compressed workweek enables longer hours across fewer days. Teleworking is defined as performing tasks from locations other than a traditional office, such as home or designated remote sites. Variations include flexible workspace options and working from home (WFH), facilitating job responsibilities outside conventional office settings. Additionally, voluntary part-time work provides flexibility through arrangements like job-sharing, which divides responsibilities between two individuals (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017; Mwando et al., 2021).

2.9 Flexible working arrangements and Covid-19

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed workplace dynamics, especially with the increase in remote work arrangements (Kong et al., 2022). This section examined the motivations for adopting flexible working arrangements and their impact on employees and organisations.

2.9.1 The Surge in Remote Work

Research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a substantial increase in remote work as organisations adapted to lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus (Kong et al., 2022).

The traditional office-based work model became unsustainable, prompting employers to implement flexible working arrangements (Franken et al., 2021). With mandated closures of non-essential businesses forcing employees into self-isolation, many organisations recognised the need to transition to flexible work arrangements (Wiatr, 2021).

2.9.2 Preferences for Flexible Working Arrangements

The shift to flexible working had significant implications for both employees and employers. Some workers desired to continue remote work, while others preferred a return to traditional office settings (Kong et al., 2022). The pandemic amplified the inclination towards flexible work arrangements. Research by Kong et al. (2022) indicated that a considerable portion of the workforce favoured these arrangements more than before the pandemic, primarily due to a perceived increase in productivity.

Wiatr (2021) identified several advantages of flexible working arrangements, including improved work-life balance and efficiency. The author suggested that employee commitment may have strengthened as individuals alternate between remote work and in-person collaboration. Kong et al. (2022) further emphasised that reduced commuting times positively impact productivity by providing employees more time for tasks.

From an organisational perspective, Kelliher and Anderson (2010) highlighted various benefits linked to flexible working arrangements, such as increased productivity, higher quality output, improved financial performance, and a better ability to attract and retain top talent. These benefits were crucial in a competitive labour market, where employee satisfaction and loyalty were essential.

2.9.3 Mixed Reactions to Flexibility

Despite its benefits, flexible working arrangements do not appeal to all employees (Kong et al., 2022). A notable workforce segment continues to advocate for a return to traditional office environments. This sentiment is not new; for instance, Marissa Mayer, then CEO of Yahoo, eliminated remote work policies in 2013, arguing that in-person collaboration would enhance productivity and foster a more cohesive corporate culture (Kong et al., 2022).

2.9.4 Evolving Perspectives

Most existing literature on flexible working arrangements predated the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there was a significant increase in the use of these policies during and after the pandemic (Kong et al., 2022). Before the crisis, the movement towards flexible working was primarily driven by employees seeking such options. In contrast, the current environment reflects an employer-driven adoption, where employers often mandated these arrangements. This shift highlighted a critical evolution in the perception of flexible working arrangements. Employees and organisations had begun to view these arrangements differently compared to their pre-pandemic experiences, suggesting a need for further investigation into the long-term implications of this transformative period.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the landscape of flexible working arrangements, revealing opportunities and challenges for employees and organisations. As the balance between remote work and traditional office settings continues to evolve, ongoing research remains crucial to understanding the implications of these changes in workplace dynamics.

2.10 Employees' benefits of implementation of Flexible Working Arrangements

The concept of flexible working arrangements has attracted significant attention in organisational studies due to its potential impact on employees and employers. Many researchers have examined factors that influence the effective implementation of these arrangements and subsequent organisational advantages.

Studies conducted by Ballentine et al. (2022), Green et al. (2020), Kelliher and Anderson (2010), and Mwando et al. (2021) identified several critical determinants that shape the adoption of flexible working arrangements within organisations. These determinants encompass organisational culture, leadership support, technological infrastructure, and employee preferences. A supportive organisational culture prioritising work-life balance is essential for cultivating an environment conducive to flexible work arrangements. Furthermore, leadership commitment is paramount, as leaders must advocate for and exemplify flexible work behaviours to encourage employee engagement.

Technological infrastructure is a fundamental enabler of flexible working arrangements, equipping employees with the tools for effective remote communication and collaboration. As organisations

increasingly invest in advanced technological solutions, employees find themselves better positioned to execute their tasks beyond the confines of traditional office settings.

The literature has extensively documented the advantages associated with implementing flexible working arrangements. Among these, increased productivity has emerged as a primary benefit. Evidence suggests that employees with flexible work options demonstrate heightened motivation and job satisfaction, contributing to enhanced output and efficiency (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Consequently, this improved productivity often translates into better organisational financial performance, as Mwando et al. (2021) emphasised.

Moreover, flexible working arrangements play a pivotal role in attracting and retaining top talent. Green et al. (2020) argued that in a competitive labour market, many high-calibre candidates perceive job flexibility as a critical factor in their employment decisions. Organisations offering flexible work options are likely to experience reduced employee turnover and fostered greater loyalty and organisational commitment (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Another significant advantage associated with flexible working arrangements is the reduction in absenteeism. Employees benefit from balancing personal responsibilities alongside their professional obligations, resulting in fewer unscheduled absences (Ballantine et al., 2022).

The transition towards remote work also enabled organisations to optimise their workspace management by minimising the necessity for extensive office space. Companies can lower rental and operational costs, reallocating these savings towards strategic initiatives that enhance employee satisfaction and overall performance (Mwando et al., 2021).

Additionally, flexible working arrangements facilitate enhanced geographical mobility, allowing organisations to tap into a broader talent pool without geographical limitations. Wiatr (2021) noted that this capacity to engage with qualified candidates who prefer remote work fosters greater team diversity and innovation.

In the context of globalisation, flexible working arrangements have proved essential for organisations striving to remain competitive and responsive to the needs of a diverse, global customer base. Organisations need to maintain accessibility across various time zones, making flexible work arrangements vital for sustaining uninterrupted service and support. The leveraging of technology, including virtual meetings and collaborative platforms, mitigates travel costs and enables organisations to operate more efficiently in a global marketplace (Green et al., 2020).

The literature underscored several critical determinants, including organisational culture, leadership, technology, and employee preferences, that significantly influence the effectiveness of flexible working arrangements. The corresponding benefits, such as increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, improved talent attraction and retention, cost savings, and enhanced geographical mobility, highlighted the integral role of flexible working arrangements in contemporary organisational practices. As globalisation and technological advancements reshape the workforce landscape, flexible work arrangements have become increasingly vital for achieving organisational success and enhancing employee satisfaction.

2.11 Employees' Work Preferences

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a substantial increase in remote work, primarily due to lockdowns and efforts to limit the spread of the virus (Kong et al., 2022). Organisations had to urgently adapt to this new operational model as traditional workplace arrangements became increasingly impractical and unsustainable (Franken et al., 2021). This shift had significant implications for both employees and employers. While some employees preferred the option of remote work, others wished to return to conventional office settings. It is important to note that the transition to working from home (WFH) was largely involuntary.

Interestingly, preferences for flexible working arrangements, especially remote work, appeared to strengthen after the pandemic compared to before. A survey conducted by Leger (2021) indicated that 35% of employees would have considered leaving their organisation if management had eliminated flexible work arrangements. This shift in employee lifestyle highlights the importance of the flexibility that employers had offered during the pandemic.

Leger, a reputable polling and marketing research firm affiliated with the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) and the European Society for Opinion and Market Research (ESOMAR), conducted an extensive survey in collaboration with the Canadian Press in 2021 to assess the impact of the pandemic on work situations in Canada and the United States. The survey results showed that 49% of respondents worked from home almost exclusively, while 50% reported doing so for one to twelve months. Among those evaluating their remote work experiences, 82% provided positive feedback, while 17% reported negative experiences. Notably, 64% found working from home easy, while 33% faced challenges.

Preferences for work arrangements varied significantly among respondents. Specifically, 20% wanted to return to the office daily, 19% preferred to work entirely from home, 40% sought a hybrid model, and 19% indicated they would only work on-site only, when necessary, up to one or two days per month. Moreover, 47% of respondents noted that although remote work had initially been beneficial, they now felt a stronger need to return to the workplace. In contrast, 35% stated they would have sought alternative employment if required to return to a traditional office setting.

In Leger's 2021 study, approximately 38% of employees strongly desired to continue flexible working conditions after the pandemic, starkly contrasting to the 20% who preferred a daily return-to-office. The study further emphasised that 35% of employees would have seriously considered resigning if required to revert to traditional work environments.

The findings from Kong et al. (2022) and the Leger survey (2021) collectively highlight a critical issue for organisational management. These findings underscored the dilemma faced by management: the need to implement a return-to-office directive versus the pressure to sustain flexible work arrangements. Whatever the decision, it was likely to significantly impact the motivation levels of knowledge workers or business performance and culture, raising important questions about the future of work in a post-pandemic context.

2.12 Drawbacks of Flexible Working Arrangements

Trevor and Holweg (2023) emphasised that one significant drawback of flexible work arrangements is their potential to weaken organisational culture by reducing employee connections. This dilution undermines the collective values and beliefs that form the organisation's foundation. A strong culture is cultivated through meaningful interactions reinforcing shared interests, assumptions, and norms. Creative collaboration and teamwork become particularly challenging in flexible work arrangements, especially for cross-team projects that typically require face-to-face engagement (Trevor & Holweg, 2022). Consequently, maintaining flexibility proved less effective for these collaborative efforts.

Furthermore, implementing flexible work arrangements led to an "always-on" culture, where employees felt pressured to remain constantly available for emails or calls, even outside their designated working hours. This ongoing pressure resulted in burnout and exhaustion, which, in

turn, hindered employees' ability to perform essential tasks and negatively impacted the organisation's overall success.

Additionally, if flexible work arrangements are limited to a select group of individuals, this disparity erodes the morale of employees who do not have such opportunities (Amirul et al., 2023). Research indicated that employees working flexibly often experience feelings of loneliness and isolation from their colleagues (Green et al., 2020). The absence of social relationships in the context of flexible working arrangements is another drawback Wadhawan (2019) emphasised. Therefore, when access to flexible work options is inequitable, it further diminishes the morale of employees who lack these arrangements (Amirul et al., 2023).

2.13 Employer Rationale for Enforcing Return-to-office Directives

With the rapid advancement of technology and a highly competitive environment, traditional working methods have been challenged and replaced by more agile and flexible approaches. The onset of COVID-19 accelerated the adoption of flexible working arrangements (Kong et al., 2022). This led to numerous academic studies investigating the implications of these flexible working arrangements in both the private and public sectors. Researchers aimed to understand the relationship between flexible work and various factors, such as productivity, employee well-being, strategic implementation, self-efficacy, and innovative work behaviours.

Additionally, previous research has looked at how flexible working arrangements are implemented, their advantages and disadvantages, their effects on individuals and organisations, their impact on technology adoption, and employee welfare. Some studies also explored the unforeseen consequences of adopting flexible work arrangements, assessed the current understanding, and identified directions for future research.

While the benefits of flexible working arrangements are often accentuated, it is essential to consider their potential drawbacks and long-term impacts. The forced flexibility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for managers and organisations, especially where flexible working was not a standard practice (Franken et al., 2021). This situation required quick adaptation from both employers and employees. However, implementing flexible work arrangements often overlooked the unique circumstances of individual employees. For instance, it did not consistently account for whether employees had access to suitable workspaces at home or their living conditions allowed for remote work (Franken et al., 2021). Critical issues like reliable

access to electricity, particularly in regions like South Africa, which are prone to frequent power outages, were not always addressed.

Management acknowledged employees' challenges with flexible arrangements and sought to alleviate this pressure by permitting a return to the workplace. These return-to-office directives aimed to counter the unintended adverse effects of flexible work arrangements, which diminished collaboration, innovation, and organisational culture.

2.14 The shift towards Return-to-Office Directives

In recent years, organisations across the globe and more notably corporate America have experienced a significant shift in workplace arrangements, transitioning from flexible and remote work practices to stricter pre-COVID-19 office-centric setups. This change signifies a reversion to pre-pandemic office conditions, indicating a departure from the flexible working arrangements that were established during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many companies have intensified their enforcement of attendance requirements, retracting previously offered incentives like commuter subsidies and introducing punitive measures for non-compliance. Disciplinary actions and limitations on career advancement have become common during this transition (Daily Maverick, 2024).

A notable example of this trend is IBM, which established specific guidelines for its workforce. In early 2023, Senior Vice President John Granger mandated that all U.S.-based managers report to the office at least three days a week, regardless of their previous working arrangements (IBM, 2020). Granger emphasised the importance of monitoring compliance through badge-in data accessible to relevant managers. Additionally, the company's memo stated that employees working remotely and living beyond a certain distance from their designated offices were required to relocate within an 80-kilometre (approximately 50 miles) radius, with exceptions for valid reasons such as medical conditions or military obligations (Daily Maverick, 2024). Furthermore, Granger stipulated that managers who were unwilling or unable to relocate would face separation from IBM (Daily Maverick, 2024). The company believes this policy balances flexibility with the perceived advantages of in-person collaboration, asserting that such an environment enhances productivity, innovation, and customer service.

IBM's position aligns with the strategic objectives of CEO Arvind Krishna in 2023. These objectives prioritise onsite presence as a criterion for promotional opportunities, favouring employees who adhere to office-based work over their remote counterparts. This trend was

echoed by Dell, which, in early 2024, adopted a similar stance by mandating employees to work onsite approximately three days a week, with a more lenient implementation planned for May 2024. Dell further emphasised that remote or hybrid workers would be ineligible for promotions, indicating a sector-wide reassessment of remote work policies. By September 2024, Dell imposed an additional requirement mandating its sales team to work on-site five days a week.

Amazon's transition under CEO Andy Jassy also reflects this shift. In early 2023, Jassy reassessed the company's approach to flexible working arrangements, advocating for a hybrid model requiring an on-site presence for at least three days per week (Amazon, 2024). By September 2024, Jassy issued a memorandum mandating a more stringent office policy, a return-to-office, compelling employees to work from the office five days a week and reinstating pre-pandemic workplace norms effective January 2025 (Amazon, 2024). Jassy justified this directive as essential for strengthening Amazon's organisational culture, which he believes has been vital for the company's exceptional growth over the past three decades.

Several arguments supported Jassy's strategic positioning. He maintained that physical presence in the office is crucial for reinforcing organisational culture, suggesting that it fosters collaboration, innovation, and a strong sense of connectivity among employees (Amazon, 2024). These factors are deemed essential for cultivating a corporate ethos committed to excellence in customer service. Additionally, Jassy and his strategy team asserted that face-to-face interactions facilitate spontaneous ideation and real-time problem resolution, strengthening interpersonal relationships among team members (Amazon, 2024). These elements are considered integral for sparking innovation and preserving the competitive advantage that underpins Amazon's growth trajectory and continued success.

This literature review illustrates a trend among major corporations to revert to stricter return-to-office policies following the pandemic. The shifts observed in significant companies such as IBM, Dell, Amazon, Apple, Shell, and many others underscore a broader reassessment of remote work, reflecting a belief in the benefits of in-person work environments for collaboration and organisational success.

2.15 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the theoretical framework adopted for the study and included a literature review emphasising key motivation theories in management research. Among these theories was

Maslow's Hierarchy of needs Theory, which posited that individuals were driven by motives and needs that could be comprehensively understood through a hierarchical structure. The needs identified by Maslow included physiological needs, safety and security, social belonging, esteem/ego and self-actualisation. Maslow's Hierarchy of needs Theory was considered appropriate to guide the study. It aligned well with the topic, which explored the contrast between employer-initiated flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives and their impact on the motivation of knowledge workers in the contemporary workplace following the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter further discussed and explained the concept of motivation. It also addressed various aspects of flexible working arrangements, as well as emerging issues and arguments surrounding return-to-office initiatives, with a focus on how these factors influenced employee motivation. Chapter 3 presented and explored the main research questions that the study sought to address.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Introduction

The qualitative research method is often used when the researcher aims to understand the reasons behind people's behaviours or actions (Rosenthal, 2016). Research questions are central and indispensable in adopting the appropriate research strategy and approach and choosing the most effective research design and methodology to guide the research study's data collection and analysis process (Cargill & O'Connor, 2021).

As such, research questions present the overall bird's-eye view and the direction and approach for the study (Cargill & O'Connor, 2021). Also, it is essential to note that sub-questions accompanying the main research questions aim to delve deeper into specific aspects of the phenomenon under study.

This chapter discusses and outlines the main and sub-research questions that seek to address the research problem in the study. The following key questions were formulated to address the research objectives discussed in Chapter 1 to fully understand the implications of these contrasting approaches in the post-pandemic era.

3.2 Research Question 1

How has implementing return-to-office directives changed (or will change) knowledge workers' motivation and attitude towards work?

Considering the benefits and challenges associated with flexible working arrangements, management faces the critical decision of whether to continue these arrangements or to enforce return-to-office directives. Each alternative presents significant unintended outcomes. Consequently, the primary research question sought to examine the impact of management's decision to implement return-to-office directives, which mandate the physical presence of knowledge workers in the office, on employee motivation and attitude towards their work. The first research question aimed better to understand knowledge workers' attitudes and change in motivational level towards return-to-office directives. Responses of study participants to this question contributed to the study's objective of exploring how knowledge workers perceive and respond to these directives, as well as how their attitudes and motivations influence organisational performance and their ability to work effectively.

3.3 Research Question 2

What are the benefits and drawbacks of flexible working arrangements for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?

Reflecting on the complexities and paradoxes of flexible working arrangements, it is essential to understand how these setups can benefit and challenge knowledge workers in the flexible working context. Several studies examining the lived experiences in the post-COVID-19 landscape (Alkhaldeh et al., 2023; Chafi et al., 2021; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Kong et al., 2022; Trevor & Holweg, 2022) have highlighted a range of advantages and hurdles faced by employees engaged in flexible or remote work. The second question aimed to explore the potential benefits and challenges experienced by knowledge workers in these arrangements. Additionally, data collected from research participants provided insights into the implications for both the organisation and the employees.

3.4 Research Question 3

What are the benefits and drawbacks of return-to-office directives for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?

During the interview process, study participants were questioned about the advantages and disadvantages of return-to-office directives enacted by management. As a result, research question three was formulated to investigate various benefits and challenges encountered by knowledge workers when transitioning back to the office-base setup after an extended period of flexible working arrangements. The data collected from participants in response to this question illuminates these return-to-office policies' potential benefits and drawbacks. This information underscores how these directives can either enhance or impede organisational and employee performance, particularly for knowledge workers.

3.5 Research Question 4

What perception does management hold about staff motivation towards work after implementing return-to-office directives?

This research question aimed to examine management's perspectives on return-to-office directives and their impact on employee motivation. It emphasised how management evaluates

employees' attitudes towards these changes. Question four sought to gain insights into motivation shifts observed among knowledge workers transitioning back to the office settings from flexible arrangements. The responses provided a clearer understanding of how organisational leaders are navigating the shift from traditional office environments to flexible work during the pandemic and, recently, the ongoing trend of returning to the office in the post-pandemic era.

3.6 Research Question 5

What perception does management hold about staff motivation; should flexible working arrangements be retained?

Building on research question four, which aimed to understand management's perception of their employees' motivation levels following the implementation of return-to-office directives, research question five explores the consequences of flexible working arrangements. Specifically, it examines how organisational leaders view employee motivation and overall organisational performance if flexibility is retained instead of choosing to return to the office. The results derived from management's responses to this question are intended to provide the researcher with a deeper understanding of staff attitudes and preferences regarding flexible working arrangements as an alternative to return-to-office mandates.

3.7 Conclusion

In alignment with Bell et al. (2022) recommendations regarding the critical importance of formulating practical research questions that appropriately address research problems and fulfil research objectives. The research questions formulated herein aimed to address the research objectives to investigate the dichotomy between employer-initiated flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives, specifically, to examine their respective impacts on knowledge workers' motivation in the post-COVID-19 context of the contemporary workplace.

Balancing employee needs with organisational goals is crucial. Regardless of the managements' choice, there may be unintended consequences that could affect employee motivation, weaken organisational culture and innovation and, ultimately, result in decreased performance.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

4.1 Introduction

The primary goal of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how knowledge workers' motivation levels shifted due to management implementing return-to-office directives after enjoying flexible working arrangements for an extended period. Chapter 4 discusses the research design and methodology selected to align with the research study's objectives. This study adopted a qualitative approach, specifically grounded theory, which aligns with the exploratory nature of the research. The data was collected through conducting semi-structured interviews. The total number of participants was 26, of which 14 were knowledge workers who were exposed to flexible working arrangements but have since been mandated to return to the office, and the other 12 participants were managers of these knowledge workers whom the organisation tasked to implement return-to-office directives. Data for the research was collected from a single organisation, albeit from various regions in South Africa and involving different departments.

4.2 Choice of Methodology

Saunders et al. (2019) articulates a study's selection of research approach as a strategic framework and plan for conducting the research and gathering knowledge. Furthermore, Saunders et al. (2019) underscores that the chosen research approach significantly influences the effectiveness of a study. Thus, high-quality research results directly in selecting the appropriate approach for a particular study.

The researcher purposefully adopted a qualitative research approach to carry out this study. Rosenthal (2016) posits that qualitative research methods are frequently employed to gain insights into the underlying motivations that drive individuals' behaviours and actions. This approach allows researchers to explore not only what people do but also the reasons behind those actions, facilitating a deeper understanding of human behaviour within its social context. This method thoroughly explores various human behaviours' underlying reasons, attitudes, and motivations. The study aimed to gain a comprehensive insight into how motivation levels have changed for knowledge workers who formerly worked flexibly but had to return to the office due to management directives.

A qualitative research approach was considered appropriate because it helped the researcher to understand the intricate meanings and experiences of human lives within the context of the social world (Fossey et al., 2002). Also, to complement the qualitative nature adopted for the study, the researcher used an interpretivist philosophy, “which advocates the necessity to understand the differences between humans and their role as social actors” (Saunders & Lewis, 2017, p. 109).

Another reason for adopting a qualitative approach in this study was to gain deeper insights into the experiences of knowledge workers during flexible working arrangements. The study also aimed to understand how the shift back to the office influenced their attitudes, behaviours, and motivation towards work. To accomplish this, exploratory research was conducted to uncover new perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation effectively.

Given the study's exploratory nature, the theory development approach was inductive to understand better the meaning a knowledge worker attaches to the return-to-office directives. The inductive approach provided the flexibility needed to change the direction of the research as it progressed (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). This was critically important given that there is a dearth of studies that contrast employer-initiated flexible working arrangements with return-to-office directives that examine the resulting impact on employee motivation, and the data solicited from participants may potentially result in unpredictable outcomes (Saunders & Lewis, 2017).

This study's most suitable research strategy is grounded theory, which effectively aligns with the research objectives, research questions, time constraints, available resources, and the inductive approach to theory development (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). Grounded theory was selected as the research strategy because it allows for the development of new theories based on the data collected rather than merely verifying existing theories. This was deemed appropriate given the aim of the research to advance theoretical understanding regarding the impact of management's policies on knowledge workers' motivation.

Throughout the study, a conscious effort was made to adopt an open and flexible approach, enabling the integration of new information and insights as they emerged. This flexibility promotes a richer understanding of participants' experiences. The researcher entered the study with complete objectivity, devoid of any predetermined notions or biases. This approach allowed for a thorough and unbiased examination of the findings, ensuring the integrity and validity of the research outcomes, as argued by Turner and Astin (2021).

Participants in this research were knowledge workers from the researcher's professional network, and for their participation in the study, the researcher obtained permission from the company to

conduct interviews. The Human Resources Manager formally approved the request and provided written confirmation. Following the receipt of Ethical Clearance and notification from the Human Resources Manager, details about the research were shared with potential respondents in the company network via email. This communication clarified that the researcher had been authorised to invite participants to contribute to the data collection process on a voluntary basis. Consequently, the research was conducted with proper ethical clearance and organisational support, ensuring that participants' rights and confidentiality were respected. The involvement of the Human Resources Manager in communicating with potential participants further established trust and credibility for the research.

Individual potential respondents from a professional network were contacted and invited to participate in data collection for the study, adhering to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act, 2020) and Ethics Committee requirements. Before the interviews, the researcher ensured that all participants were thoroughly informed about the nature of the research and voluntarily agreed by signing a consent form. Participants received comprehensive information regarding the objectives of the study, data collection methods, and their rights, including the right to withdraw without any penalty at any time. Respondents were reassured that only necessary data would be collected. Furthermore, all data were treated with strict confidentiality and securely stored, and only aggregated data were reported, with no personal names or identifiable information disclosed.

A mono-data collection method provides more profound and abundant data and enables effective data collection, making it best suited for exploratory research studies (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). While the mono-data collection method was employed, it accommodated two perspectives categories of views on data collection. The first involved views of employees who were working flexibly but had been mandated to return from the office due to the implementation of return-to-office directives, and the second related to views of the employer or managers responsible for implementing the return-to-office directives and managing these employees. This depth of data is especially beneficial for exploratory research, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and motivations.

Given time constraints, a cross-sectional time horizon was deemed the most appropriate choice for the research study. The data was collected through brief semi-structured interviews with participants at a specific time. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit and obtain rich data. In these interviews, open-ended questions and follow-up probes were used to delve into participants' experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. This approach allowed

for a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, providing valuable insights for the study (Rosenthal, 2016).

Overall, these methodological choices were well-suited to address the study objectives and yield meaningful insights into the complex dynamics of employee motivation in the context of changing work arrangements.

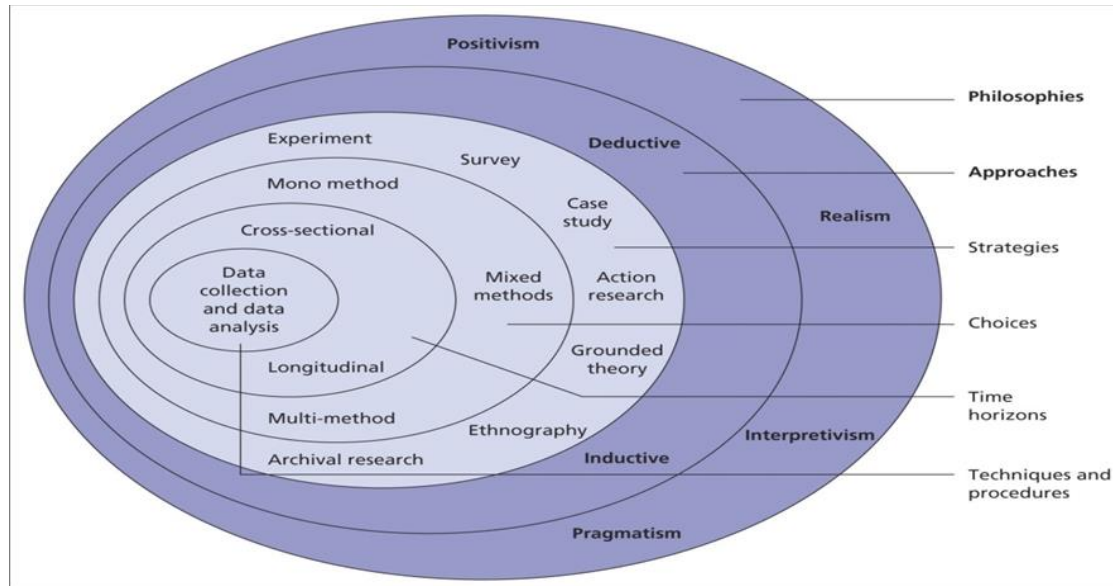
4.3 The Research Onion

The trajectory and strategy of any study are fundamentally anchored in its research methodology. Saunders et al. (2019) underscores the critical role of research methodology in determining whether a study yields robust conclusions or fails to provide meaningful insights. Beyond guiding the research strategy, the methodology also shapes the philosophical assumptions and beliefs essential for a nuanced understanding of the research questions posed (Saunders et al., 2019).

The Research Onion framework (Saunders & Lewis, 2017) was adhered to when conducting the study. This framework is essential for engaging with the critical components of successful research. The Research Onion serves not only as a roadmap through the intricate steps of a study but also as a crucial framework that enhances the rigour and clarity of findings. Ignoring these foundational elements can compromise the integrity of the study, leading to weak conclusions and missed opportunities for genuine understanding.

Figure 4.3. outlines the process used to determine the chosen research methodology and study design. Additionally, it explains various elements the researcher employed to guide the data collection process.

Figure 4.3: The Research Onion



Source: Adapted from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019)

4.3.1 Research Philosophy

Saunders et al. (2019) argues that a comprehensive understanding of various paradigms is vital for establishing a solid methodological foundation and selecting appropriate theoretical tools. The authors defined research philosophy as encompassing the diverse norms and theories contributing to knowledge development. In contrast, Creswell (2013) highlights the influence of researchers' personal beliefs and assumptions that emerge from their unique experiences during data collection and suggests that these perspectives can significantly shape the findings, particularly about the subjects involved in the study.

Considering these differing viewpoints, interpretivism was adopted as the guiding philosophy in this study. This philosophy recognises the importance of theoretical frameworks and personal experiences while acknowledging other approaches, such as positivism, realism, and pragmatism.

This qualitative exploratory study aimed to explore the motivations and perceptions of knowledge workers concerning flexible working arrangements and the impact of return-to-office directives on their work motivation. An interpretivist approach was deemed appropriate as the study focused on the socially grounded beliefs of knowledge workers. The research sought to understand

participants' motivations, beliefs, and perceptions during flexible working arrangements and after implementing return-to-office policies. As Saunders et al. (2019) articulates, interpretivism is a philosophical framework that empowers researchers to objectively observe and analyse phenomena as they are experienced and understood by participants within their natural context. This approach emphasises the importance of subjective interpretations, allowing for a deeper exploration of lived experiences. By focusing on participants' perspectives, interpretivism facilitates the development of robust conclusions grounded in the realities of those directly involved in the study. This critical lens underscores the necessity of understanding the complexities and nuances inherent in human behaviour and social interactions.

4.3.2 Research Approach

The selection of an inductive research approach for this study is grounded in its fundamental alignment with the objectives of exploring new theoretical insights related to motivation and the perceptions of knowledge workers regarding return-to-office directives, particularly in the context of post-experiences with flexible working arrangements.

Inductive approaches are inherently designed to generate theories rather than test existing ones. This aligns well with the exploratory nature of the current study, which seeks to understand complex behaviours and motivations that still need to be fully captured by established theories. The inductive approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of social phenomena as it involves a collection of rich qualitative data as noted by Saunders et al. (2019).

Furthermore, qualitative methods associated with the inductive approach provided flexibility in data collection, enabling the researcher to adapt to the evolving nature of participants' responses (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). This adaptability is crucial in capturing knowledge-workers' varied experiences and perceptions, particularly in a dynamic work environment characterized by changing expectations and practices post-return-to-office.

The inductive approach also facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences, thereby contributing to developing theory grounded in real-world contexts. This is particularly relevant in today's rapidly changing work landscape, where traditional models may no longer apply effectively. By employing an inductive methodology, positioned this study to uncover and articulate new themes reflecting workers' actual perceptions and motivations, thereby enriching the existing literature on flexible work arrangements and return-to-office mandates.

In summary, the choice of an inductive research approach is not only justified but also essential for this study's objectives. It supports a comprehensive exploration of participants' perspectives, fosters theory development, and ensures that the findings are relevant and applicable to the current work environment.

4.3.3 Research Strategy

A research strategy is fundamentally employed to delineate the approach a study will take in addressing its research questions, thereby facilitating the attainment of reliable and valid results (Bell et al., 2022). This strategy serves as a structured framework, enabling researchers to make informed decisions regarding selecting appropriate methodologies for data collection and subsequent analysis of their findings (Bell et al., 2022). Such a systematic approach is essential for ensuring the rigour and credibility of the research process. Prominent research methodologies encompass case studies, ethnographic studies, experimental surveys, and archival research (Chang et al., 2020). These strategies are integral to the investigation of complex phenomena across various disciplines.

Many exploratory or descriptive studies predominantly rely on surveys for data collection, especially when working with a large target population, as this method facilitates efficient data analysis and conclusions (Chang et al., 2020). Given the exploratory nature of this qualitative research, a semi-case study approach was chosen to enhance the efficiency of data collection and analysis. This strategy aimed to gain insights from knowledge workers within a single organisation, in various locations and spanning multiple departments, to understand their perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation.

4.3.4 Research Design

The critical step following selecting an appropriate research methodology is implementing the most effective method, whether quantitative, mixed, or qualitative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Within qualitative research, researchers have access to various designs, including narrative design, case studies, action research, and phenomenology, as Gray et al. (2020) outlined. Comprehensive investigations typically characterise case studies to unpack complex or challenging phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Alternatively, phenomenological designs are predominantly employed when researchers seek to delve into the meanings and interpretations surrounding specific issues (Saunders et al., 2019).

This study aimed to explore knowledge-workers' lived experiences and perceptions concerning the phenomenon being examined. A phenomenological design was selected as an appropriate approach for this exploratory interpretivist inquiry. This design enabled the collection of rich and meaningful conclusions that are relevant to the research problem.

4.3.5 Time Horizon

Most research studies are conducted within a defined time frame, allowing researchers to complete their research study effectively. Creswell and Creswell (2018) notes that the time horizon refers to the total duration allocated for completing a study successfully. Researchers can choose between two types of time horizons that align with their study objectives: cross-sectional or longitudinal (Saunders et al., 2019).

In essence, cross-sectional studies focus on a specific moment in time and context, as is the case with this research. In contrast, longitudinal studies require more time for data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Considering the unique circumstances and challenges associated with this study, the researcher prudently opted for a cross-sectional time horizon to ensure the research was completed within the available time constraints.

4.3.6 Data Collection Method

Researchers must judiciously select data-gathering methods that are intricately aligned with their study objectives to maximize the effectiveness of their findings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Saunders et al. (2019) delineate several viable options, including focus groups, interviews, surveys, and the analysis of secondary documents. The method selection process is inherently contingent upon the specific aims of the research (Saunders & Lewis, 2017).

For instance, Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue that various data-gathering methods are optimally suited to distinct research designs; interviews, in particular, are predominantly associated with qualitative research paradigms. In the present study, data were collected through online interviews, recognised as an effective approach for garnering in-depth insights. Moreover, Saunders and Lewis (2016) underscore the efficacy of interviews in securing reliable and unbiased data from participants. This data collection method not only cultivates a rich dialogue but also facilitates a nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives, thereby enhancing the validity of the research outcomes. Thus, the strategic selection of face-to-face online interviews

transcends mere pragmatism; it significantly enriches the credibility and depth of the research findings, thereby contributing to the scholarly discourse in the field.

4.3.7 Techniques and Procedures

In this qualitative research study, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a digital-based platforms, specifically Teams, to collect data from participants. Questions that align with what Saunders et al. (2019) describe as a predetermined questions approach were prepared before the interviews. This involved using identical or standardised interview questions throughout all interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In developing genuinely open-ended questions with a natural flow, inspiration was drawn from Rosenthal (2016). Emphasis was placed on using clear and unambiguous language to facilitate participants' understanding.

4.3.8 Population

A study population is a collection of groups, items, or individuals from which research participants are selected, as defined by Saunders et al. (2019). In line with this definition, Creswell (2013) underscore the critical importance of both characterising the study population and accurately quantifying its size during the research process.

The study specifically targeted knowledge workers who were engaged in flexible working arrangements or had been exposed to such arrangements within the last 36 months. It also included managers responsible for formulating and implementing policies regarding flexible work arrangements and return-to-office directives within a single organisation, but focusing on multiple departments dispersed across different cities within South Africa.

Participants were purposefully drawn from the researcher's professional network to minimise potential bias, thereby ensuring a representative sample across diverse cities in South Africa and a range of departments within the organisation. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of perspectives from different functional areas, including Engineering, Project Management, Research and Development, Finance, Supply Chain Management, Information Management, Human Resources, and Training. The emphasis was on employees with recent experience with flexible working arrangements, along with the involvement of managers tasked with overseeing transitions from flexible settings to back to traditional office environments. This positioned the study to critically explore the implications and challenges associated with the

contradiction of flexible work policies and return-to-office mandates on knowledge workers' motivation.

4.3.9 Unit of Analysis

A unit of analysis is defined as a representative sample from the target population in a study (Saunders et al., 2019). It encompasses a specific fraction or percentage of a defined group from which pertinent research data are collected, along with the characteristics of the individuals or groups under investigation. In the context of this research, the primary unit of analysis consisted of the experiences and insights of knowledge workers who were currently engaged in flexible work arrangements or have participated in such arrangements within the last 36 months. To test and prove the views of knowledge workers, the study in addition, included perspectives from managers responsible for implementing and rescinding these flexible work policies within the organisation. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the impact and efficacy of flexible work arrangements from both employee and managerial viewpoints.

4.3.10 Sampling Method and Sample Size

Research data were collected through a non-probability sampling method to address the primary research questions. Given the challenges of determining the population size and the feasibility of implementing probability sampling, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted to gain qualitative insights. This approach was justified by the need to selectively engage a specific cohort of participants who would provide relevant and insightful responses, thereby facilitating the attainment of the study objectives (Saunders & Lewis, 2017).

The research concentrated on knowledge workers who had experienced flexible working arrangements and were subsequently required to return to the office along with their managers. A specific organisation was selected for the study, enabling the identification of both employees and managers to represent the target population. The sample was homogeneous, comprising knowledge workers within a single organisation across various departments and regions, ensuring minimal variation in the data collected. This approach was developed to obtain comprehensive insights that accurately reflected the shared experiences and perspectives of knowledge workers in a specific sector (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). Saunders and Lewis (2017) suggest that a sample size of 4 to 12 is typically sufficient for a homogeneous population.

Data for the study were collected from a purposive sample of 26 participants. This group comprised 14 employees who had previously been engaged in flexible working arrangements but were subsequently required to return to the office alongside 12 managers tasked with managing these employees' performance and implementing the return-to-office directives.

The data collection process included a provision for additional interviews if data saturation was not achieved or if the research questions remained insufficiently addressed, which ensured that data collection would continue until no new insights were generated.

4.3.11 Measurement Instrument

This exploratory study employed a semi-structured interview guide as its primary data collection instrument, aligning with established qualitative research methodologies. Prior to the interviews, the research questions were carefully prepared and evaluated based on research objectives. Creswell and Creswell (2018) posit that exploratory studies should ideally contain six to fifteen interview questions. Accordingly, questions were formulated and designed to elicit in-depth insights and perceptions from respondents regarding the phenomenon under investigation.

Moreover, the researcher aimed to implement variable measurements in the context of one-on-one interviews. While physical face-to-face interviews were initially planned, the study adapted to internet-mediated face-to-face interviews due to geographically dispersed participants and to those unable to meet in person. These real-time online interviews were facilitated through a Teams web-based collaboration tool, thereby ensuring accessibility and flexibility.

The interviews were structured as semi-structured dialogues, guided by a carefully crafted set of questions to gather pertinent data to address the research objectives and questions. As described by Saunders et al. (2019), this approach enabled the researcher to maintain a predetermined framework while allowing for exploratory discourse. Interviews were designed to last approximately 60 minutes, thus providing participants ample opportunity to articulate their personal experiences and insights regarding changes in motivation levels following the withdrawal of flexible work arrangements and the implementation of management-mandated return-to-office policies. Knowledge workers engaged in reflective analysis of their experiences during the flexible work phase, specifically considering how their transition back to the office impacted their motivation and attitudes toward their work. Concurrently, managers provided insights into their perceptions of how the return-to-office directives influenced the motivation and behaviour of their employees.

The researcher developed interview questions based on Rosenthal's (2016) principles for crafting open-ended questions that promote natural flow of conversation. The clear and unambiguous language was prioritised to enhance participant comprehension and improve data accuracy. Consequently, the interview questions were standardised and uniformly administered to all selected participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview guide offered a structured yet flexible method, allowing for the inclusion or exclusion of questions based on their relevance to each participant's experience. This approach aimed to enhance the validity of the findings and deepen the understanding of participants' experiences during a significant transitional phase in modern work environments.

4.3.12 Data Collection Process

Data collection in qualitative research necessitated the development of an interview guide specifically designed to address the core research questions. This guide was crafted to facilitate semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The format allowed participants to articulate their narratives and perspectives regarding the research topic. While the interview guide maintained a consistent set of questions, it was structured to offer flexibility, enabling the rearrangement or modification of questions based on their relevance to individual participants (Saunders & Lewis, 2017).

In preparation for the interview process, it was imperative to critically evaluate the design and structure of the interview questions to ensure their efficacy in eliciting meaningful dialogue. To this end, open-ended questions were formulated to stimulate thoughtful responses while sustaining an engaging conversational flow (Rosenthal, 2016). Emphasising clarity and employing straightforward, unambiguous language were key priorities to foster a deeper understanding and enhance the quality of the data collection process. Additionally, all questions were tested for quality from the interviewees' perspective, ensuring both comprehensibility and effectiveness before commencing the interview process.

Participants were accessed through researcher's professional networks and relevant Human Resources Manager. The interviews were scheduled via Microsoft Teams to ensure confirmation of both the date and a convenient location for participants. With the participants' informed consent, interviews were recorded using audio or video Microsoft Teams conference capability. A consent form was provided and signed by both the researcher and participants to confirm their voluntary agreement to participate in the research data collection process. When the researcher did not

receive a signed consent form, the mutual acceptance and participation in the actual meeting was interpreted as implicit consent to engage in the interview.

At the outset of each interview, the researcher underscored the significance of data confidentiality and participant anonymity and rights, as detailed in the consent form. Following this introduction, an overview of the research objectives was presented, encouraging participants to share their experiences and perspectives freely and openly concerning the research topic.

4.3.13 Data storage

All research data collected has been carefully stored in a secure information technology environment, with additional backups in place to ensure its integrity. As best practices recommend, researchers must protect their data by securely storing it in a highly secure location upon completing any study. The University of Pretoria (GIBS) offers such facilities. Additionally, all research data must be retained for the duration required by the University of Pretoria (GIBS) before being responsibly disposed of, ensuring compliance with ethical and institutional standards.

4.3.14 Data Analysis Approach

The data analysis process commenced immediately after collecting interview data, encompassing both transcribed text and non-textual qualitative data, such as audio recordings obtained via Teams. The data were meticulously coded into relevant themes and categories for in-depth examination. Best practices in qualitative data preparation were adhered to, which ensured that interview data underwent thorough cleaning for consistency and quality.

The recorded material was diligently transcribed into written format upon completion of the interviews. A comprehensive analysis of the transcripts focused on identifying prominent patterns, themes, and trends that emerged throughout the interviews. This analysis was systematically executed, which proved invaluable in pinpointing and extracting key thematic elements. A thematic analysis approach was strategically employed, enabling a critical evaluation of the data and offering insights into the nuanced perspectives of participants.

4.3.15 Quality Controls and Ethical Considerations

To ensure effective data collection, piloting the measurement instrument through a mock-up interview process and data capture was imperative. This enabled the identification and correction of issues in the measurement instrument before data collection commenced to remove ambiguity and prevent inaccurate data capturing. To improve data reliability, the data collection process was uniform and documented promptly to ensure data credibility and fit for data analysis and subsequent processes.

Employing purposive sampling ensured that the contents of interview questions were directly relevant to the participants, thereby significantly enhancing the credibility of findings obtained from data collected from individuals who are well-versed in the research topic (Creswell, 2013). Rigorously verifying and triangulating the collected data from each participant during data analysis further bolstered the credibility of the data. Throughout the data collection process, the data were meticulously double-checked for bias. Additionally, extra interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved to effectively address the research questions and significantly enhance the transferability of findings.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee by demonstrating adherence to ethical standards before data collection. The consent forms reassured participants that their data would be handled judiciously. The researcher guaranteed that the data collected, and any information shared during the interview process would remain confidential and that participants' rights would be fully respected.

4.3.16 Limitations

Research studies frequently encounter limitations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Saunders et al, (2019), it is imperative for researchers to address these shortcomings thoroughly. The limitations of a study can significantly arise from the researcher's competencies, as personal biases may influence the execution of interviews or surveys (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The subjective nature of qualitative research inherently allows for bias to emerge (Saunders et al., 2019). Furthermore, the robustness of study conclusions largely depends on the researcher's integrity and adherence to methodological rigour throughout the research process.

This research may have encountered limitations in the following key areas:

1) Participant's Bias

The interviews conducted were qualitative in nature and it is important to recognise that participants' bias may influence the findings, both consciously and unconsciously (Saunders & Lewis, 2017).

2) Lack of Experience

The study's findings may lack robustness due to the researcher's limited interview experience, which may contribute to insufficient data collection and analysis. Consequently, the study might not yield comprehensive conclusions regarding the phenomenon investigated.

3) Sampling Method

The application of non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, precluded the ability to draw statistical inferences, as the sample did not represent the entire population (Saunders & Lewis, 2017).

4) Sample Size

The limited sample size, which did not represent the entire population, restricted the capacity to derive conclusive insights into the research problem.

5) Single Source of Data

The data was collected from a single organisation, while different regions and departments were included. This homogeneity may introduce bias to the data and potentially lessen the diversity of thoughts and experiences in the data collected.

6) Mono-Method Approach

The research adopted a mono-method qualitative design, thus using a single approach for data collection. This choice excluded alternative methods that could have enhanced the richness and quality of the data collected.

7) Constraints of Online Platforms

The use of online application called Microsoft Teams restricted opportunities for physical observation during interviews. Poor sound quality and connectivity issues may have inhibited data collection efficacy. Thus, the data collected may reflect only the researcher's interpretations of the interviews.

8) Lack of ability to read body language and non-verbal cues

Interviews were conducted online due to the geographical dispersion of participants. However, online collaboration tools inherently possess limitations, including connectivity challenges and

subpar audio-visual quality. Moreover, the researcher's inability to observe participants' body language and non-verbal cues, which is critical for comprehending their emotions and perspectives (Rosenthal, 2016), restricted the potential for more in-depth probing during interviews.

9) Generalisability of Findings

The results of this study cannot be generalised across all business sectors, as they are based on a purposive sampling of participants from one organisation, specifically the perspectives of knowledge workers and their managers from a single organisation. Consequently, the perspectives and insights obtained may be biased and reflective of only that specific organisation.

10) Researcher Bias

The researcher's biases could have a significant influence on the entire process, potentially affecting both the data collected and the outcomes. Reliance on a single data collection method further limited the diversity of perspectives across various industries.

11) Time constraints

The study was conducted within predetermined timelines, which may have induced haste and could have, consciously or unconsciously, resulted in missing critical data in the process.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to outline and justify the chosen research methodology and design for this study. The Research Onion framework was systematically adopted to establish a clear and effective plan for selecting the suitable research methodology and design. The researcher employed a qualitative approach grounded in interpretivist philosophy, thereby ensuring a robust response to the research questions while achieving the objectives delineated in the first chapter.

Employing an exploratory framework allowed this research to delve into the perceptions and motivations of knowledge workers regarding flexible working arrangements implementation, its subsequent withdrawal, and the influence of management's return-to-work directives on employee motivation in their daily duties.

Finally, this chapter provided an in-depth analysis of the research methodology and design used to address the research questions and reasons behind the selected choice. It addressed the inherent limitations of the study.

A qualitative, exploratory, inductive, and phenomenological approach was systematically applied to address the research problem comprehensively. The rich, detailed descriptions offered by participants underscore the advantages inherent in qualitative research. Primary data were collected through a series of interviews.

Chapter 5 provides a thorough and detailed presentation of the results, offering a comprehensive understanding of the findings in relation to the research objectives.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 discussed and delineate the sampled population made up of 14 knowledge workers and 12 managers. Furthermore, Chapter 5 discusses the research's findings obtained from the participants through semi-structured interviews in line with the Research Questions articulated in Chapter 3.

The study generated codes from data collected during interviews. Groups of codes or categories were formed. An inductive approach was used to methodically produce relevant themes for data translation. The research results are presented per each Research Question.

5.2 Description of the Study Sample

The study sample comprised fourteen (14) employees who are employed as knowledge workers in one organisation, holding different roles in various departments across different offices in South Africa. The second group of respondents were twelve (12) managers responsible for overseeing the performance of these knowledge workers during the transition in workplace policies from office centric to flexible working arrangement and back to office centric. From the need to gain new insight on the topic, it was regarded appropriate to interview managers and employees on their perceptions of the changes and challenges that sprout from flexible working arrangements and directives for return-to-office and its impact on employees' motivation at work post-COVID-19.

Table 5.1: Employees' Demographic Information

Participant (Alias)	Gender	Age group	Employment Level	Level of Qualification	No. yrs in the Organisation
E1	Female	40-49	Professional	Bachelor's degree	6-9
E2	Female	+50	Professional	National Diploma	+10
E3	Male	40-49	Professional	Master's degree	+10
E4	Female	40-49	Professional	National Diploma	+10
E5	Female	40-49	Professional	Honours degree	6-9
E6	Male	+50	Professional	National Diploma	+10
E7	Male	40-49	Professional	Bachelor's degree	10
E8	Male	30-39	Professional	Master's degree	6-9
E9	Male	40-49	Professional	Bachelor's degree	+10
E10	Male	+50	Professional	Master's degree	+10
E11	Male	30-39	Professional	Master's degree	3-5
E12	Male	30-39	Professional	Bachelor's degree	0-2
E13	Male	40—49	Professional	Bachelor's degree	+10
E14	Male	+50	Professional	Bachelor's degree	+10

Source: Research data (2024)

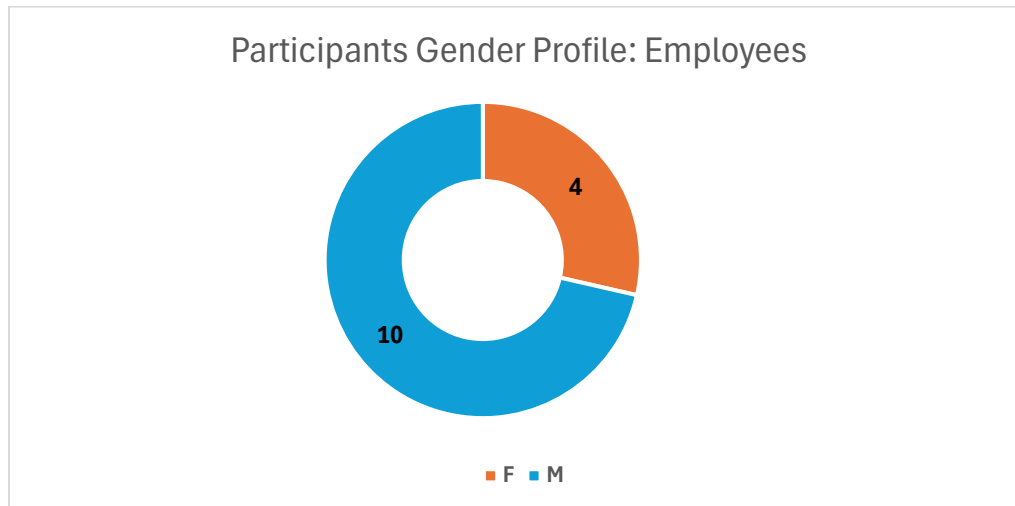
Table 5.2: Managers' demographic information

Participant	Gender	Age Group	Employment Level	Level of Qualification	No. yrs in the Organisation
M1	Female	40-49	Senior Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M2	Female	+50	Senior Manager	Honours degree	+10
M3	Male	40-49	Middle Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M4	Female	30-39	Middle Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M5	Female	+50	Middle Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M6	Female	+50	Middle Manager	Master's degree	+10
M7	Male	+50	Senior Manager	Master's degree	+10
M8	Male	Unknown	Senior Manager	Unknown	Unknown
M9	Female	40-49	Senior Manager	Honours degree	6-9
M10	Female	Unknown	Senior Manager	Unknown	Unknown
M11	Male	+50	Senior Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M12	Female	40-49	Senior Manager	Master's degree	+10

Source: Research data (2024)

5.3 Study participants' demographics and discussion

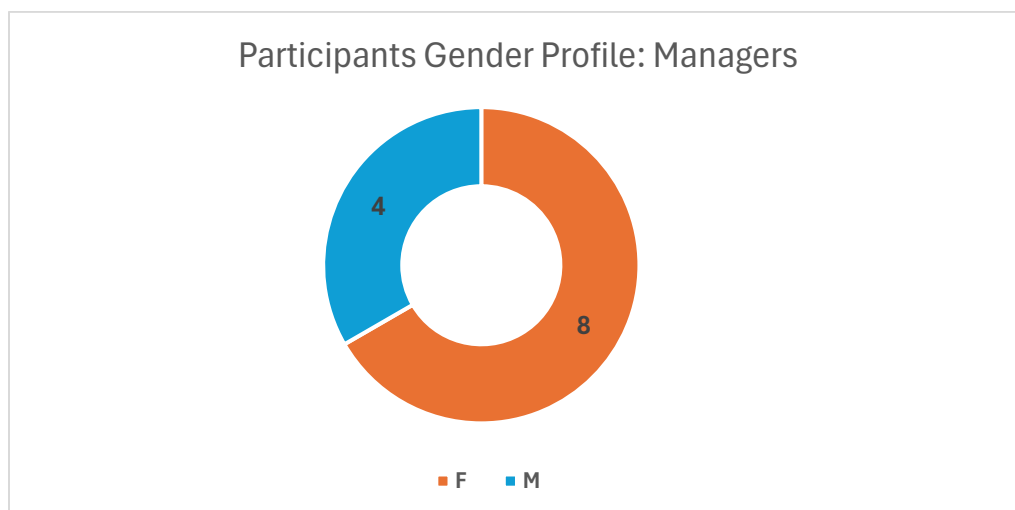
Figure 5.1: Employees' Gender Profile



Source: Research data (2024)

The research data presented in Figure 5.1 reveals that out of the fourteen (14) knowledge-worker employees sampled for the study, ten (10) were men, and only four (4) were women.

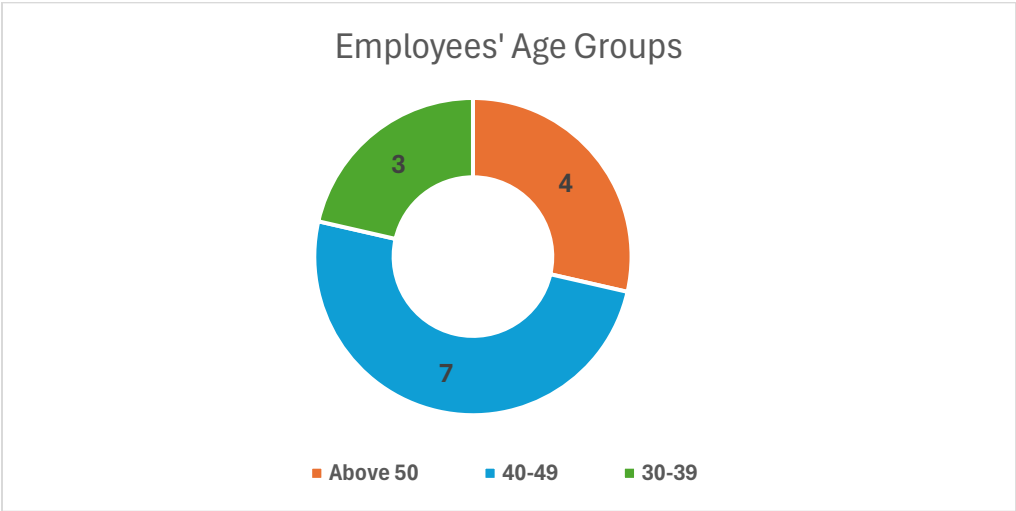
Figure 5.2: Managers' Gender Profiles



Source: Research data (2024)

The gender profiles of the knowledge workers and managers in the study present a striking contrast to those of the employee group. Among the 12 research participants in the managers' group, the majority were women, holding eight (8) management positions. Out of these, five (5) were in senior management roles, and three (3) were in middle management roles. In contrast, men occupied only four (4) management positions, with three (3) in senior management and one in a middle management role. This distribution highlights the organisation's commitment to creating a more inclusive and diverse workplace, particularly in leadership positions.

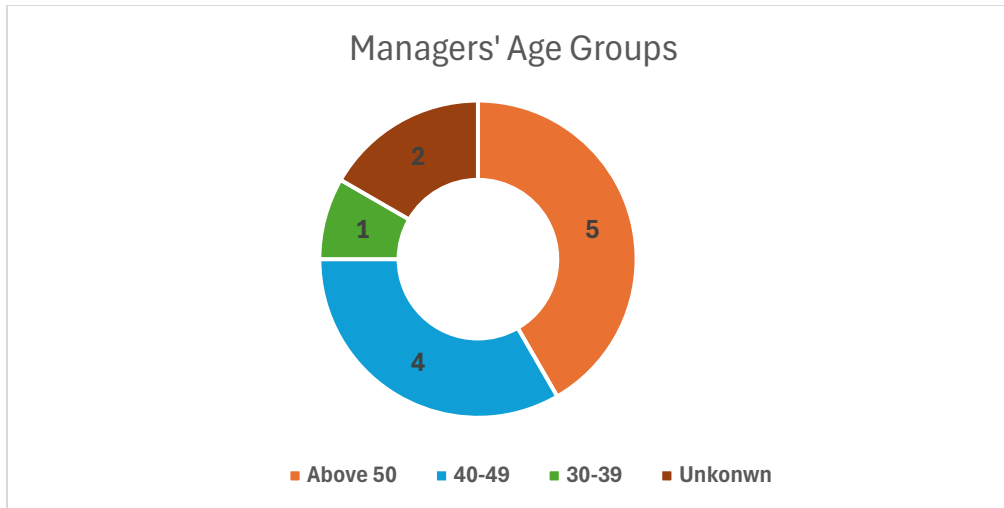
Figure 5.3: Employees' Age Groups



Source: Research data (2024)

As depicted in Figure 5.3, the majority of the study participants were middle-aged, with only a small proportion of employees exceeding the age of fifty (50) and possessing extensive experience as knowledge workers. Notably, four (4) participants reported being between the ages of 30 and 39; this group also had the least amount of work experience when compared to their older counterparts above the age of 50.

Figure 5.4: Managers' Age Groups



Source: Research data (2024)

Of the twelve (12) managers sampled in the organisation, five (5) were middle-aged. Four (4) managers indicated that they were between the ages of 30 and 49, with one indicating that they were between 30 and 39. The remaining five (5) managers were above the age group of 50. However, two of the study participants chose not to disclose their respective age groups.

Figure 5.5: Employees' Employment Levels



Source: Research data (2024)

Data collected from semi-structured interviews with a group of employees revealed that all 14 participants were knowledge workers from various departments and regions in the same organisation.

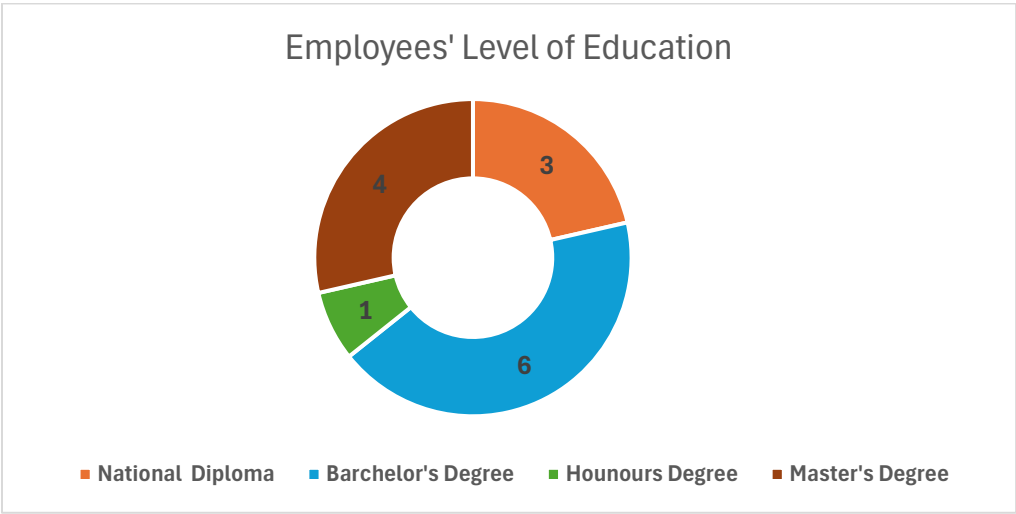
Figure 5.6: Managers' Employment Levels



Source: Research Data (2024)

Figure 5.6 shows a total of eight (8) participants from the managers' sample who worked as senior managers, while four (4) worked as middle-line managers. It was believed that valuable insights derived would provide a clear and objective explanation of their perceptions of the change from flexible working arrangements to the implementation of return-to-work directives and how it impacted employee motivation towards performing their duties at work.

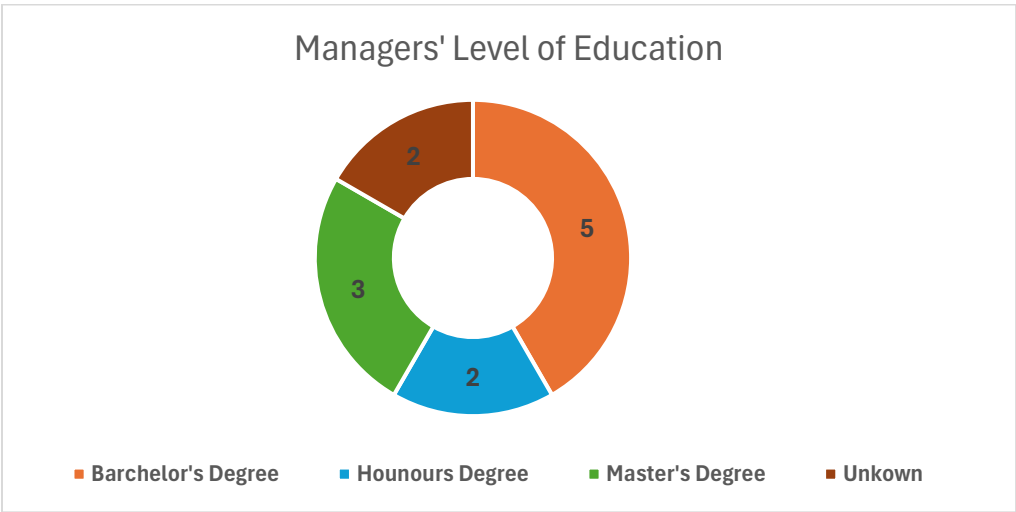
Figure 5.7: Employees’ Levels of Education



Source: Research data (2024)

The educational levels of employees play a crucial role in obtaining rational and reliable data to address the research problem. The benefit of selecting candidates with high educational qualifications is, they possess a thorough understanding of the subject matter and can objectively share their insights on the phenomenon being studied.

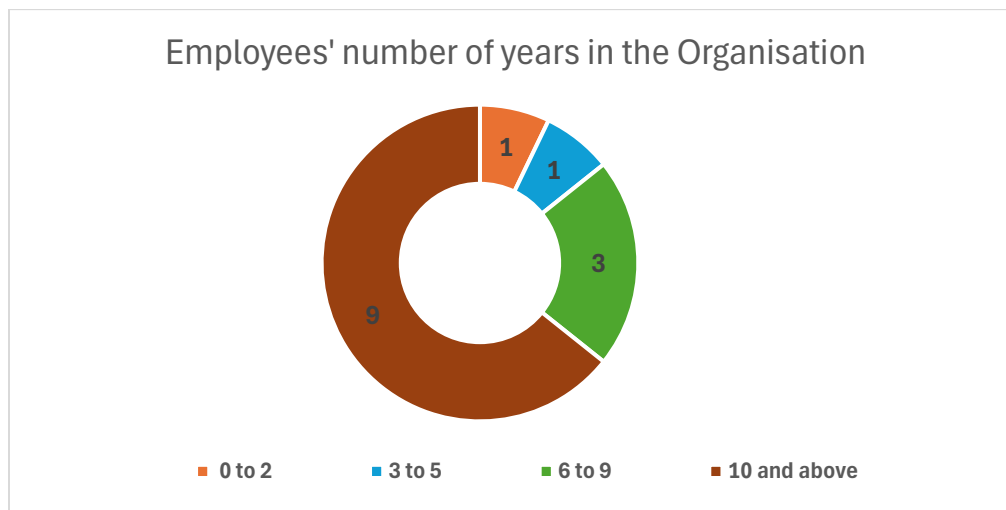
Figure 5.8: Managers’ Levels of Education



Source: Research Data (2024)

The effectiveness of management in fulfilling their job responsibilities is directly tied to their knowledge, educational background, and job experience. This study seeks to explore management perceptions of their employees' motivation due to the transition from flexible working arrangements to the implementation of return-to-work directives; thus, the shared experiences of managers are essential to the study's objectives.

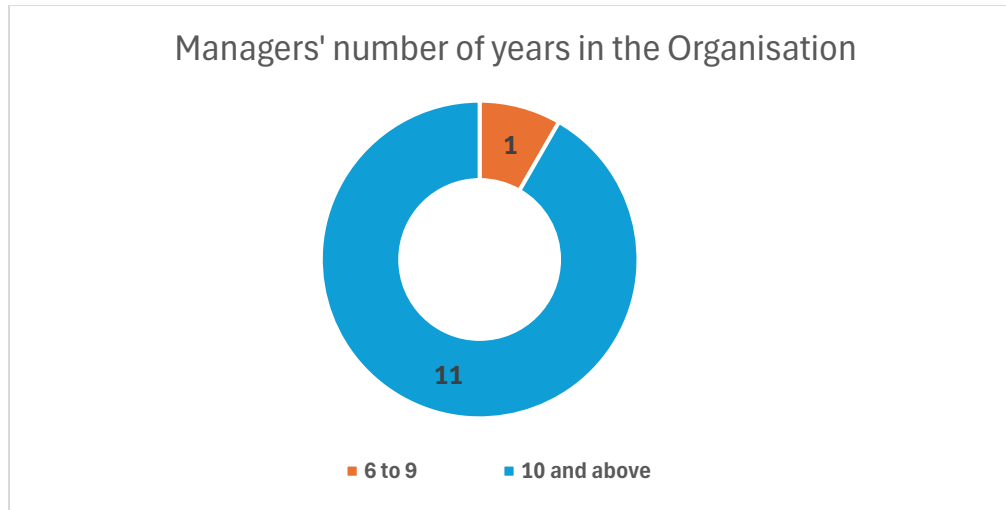
Figure 5.9: Employees' Number of Years in the Organisation



Source: Research data (2024)

One of the most important demographic factors considered for purposively sampling participants in this study was their length of employment with the organisation. This was crucial because the study aimed to gather lived experiences and perceptions of how the transition from flexible working arrangements and the subsequent shift to return-to-office directives affected employees' motivation to perform their work duties after COVID-19. Therefore, it was essential to select knowledge workers who had meaningful experience. As illustrated in Figure 5.9, nine (9) employees reported that they had been with the organisation for more than 10 years with three having spent over six years but below nine.

Figure 5.10: Managers Number of Years in the Organisation



Source: Research data (2024)

Eleven (11) managers out of twelve (12) stated that they have been working for the organisation for more than ten (10) years, while one (1) in the group indicated that they have been with the organisation for more than six (6) years, but below 9 years. Only one manager indicated that he/she has been with the organisation for exactly ten (10) years. Insights and lived experiences obtained from the responses to the research questions by managers assisted the researcher in gaining new and in-depth insights into their perceptions towards changes from flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives towards understanding the effect they had on employee motivation towards performing their work duties.

5.4 Results for Research Question 1

How has implementing return-to-office directives changed (or will change) knowledge workers' motivation and attitude towards work?

This question is aligned with the first research objective, which seeks to explore employees' sentiments regarding return-to-office directives and how these directives impacted motivation of knowledge workers in the contemporary workplace. Specifically, it examines how the shift from flexible working arrangements to a return-to-office setup has affected the attitudes and motivation of knowledge workers concerning their job responsibilities. The goal is to better understand knowledge workers' perspectives on return-to-office directives. It is important to highlight that the main research question investigates how management's decision to enforce return-to-office

directives, requiring knowledge workers to be physically present in the office, influences their motivation toward their work. As such, the respondents were asked the following sub-questions to understand and collect relevant data on the main question.

- i. *How did you feel when you first heard about the decision to return to the office?*
- ii. *Can you describe your initial thoughts and emotions regarding this directive?*
- iii. *How do you currently feel about being back in the office?*
- iv. *How has this transition affected your motivation at work?*
- v. *How would you compare your level of motivation now to when you were working flexibly?*

Participants' responses to these questions contributed to the study's objective of exploring how knowledge workers perceive and respond to these directives and how their attitudes and motivation influenced organisational performance and their ability to work effectively.

The following sections presents theoretical categories and relevant themes developed for data translation. A summary of analysed data categories is provided in tables.

Table 5.3: *Research analysis data on employee's motivation and attitude on return-to-work directives*

RQ	Code Groups/ Categories	Themes	Theoretical Categories
RQ0	Participants' demographic information		
RQ1	Employees' behaviour	Employee motivation and attitude	Impact of return-to-office directives
RQ1	Employees' motivation		
RQ1	Work-life balance	Lifestyle changes and adjustments	
RQ1	Routine changes		
RQ1	Commuting time	Time Management	
RQ1	Work performance		

Source: Research data (2024)

Research data analysed from knowledge workers' responses regarding how changes from flexible work arrangement to return-to-office had impacted their attitude and motivation towards their work duties highlighted three main themes: employees' motivation and attitude, time management changes and lifestyle changes and adjustments. Section 5.2.1 discusses employees' motivation and attitude, 5.2.2 unpacks lifestyle changes and adjustments, while section 5.2.3 focuses on time management changes.

5.4.1 Employees' motivation and attitude

Of the 14 participants interviewed, only 8 (58%) were adversely impacted by the change from working flexibly to being mandated to work from the office, citing productivity losses due to increased commuting times. When working flexibly, they stated that they could start their shifts earlier in the morning at home and avoid being stuck in congested traffic peaks. They also pointed out the negative effects of commuting costs which due to commuting to work and back. Furthermore, 58% of the participants reported negative feelings towards return-to-office directives and argued that working flexibly (from home) allowed them to begin their shift earlier and extend their work hours to late in the evening, ultimately enhancing their productivity. At home, they took shorter breaks compared to the traditional hour-long lunch at the office, thus enhancing their productivity. However, this flexibility is absent in the office environment; employees are unable to start their shift early and face a strict knock-off time. Many rush to leave work precisely at knock-off time to beat the traffic congestions, ensuring they return home before sunset to attend to family responsibilities. They underscored that commuting is negatively impacting their productivity.

Of the 14 participants, 2 (14%) indicated a feeling of excitement toward the implementation of the return-to-office directive. They cited that they could collaborate with their colleagues and use them as a soundboard to problem-solve and generate innovative ideas.

In the last segment, only 4 (28%) participants indicated they were indifferent or mixed feelings about returning to the office. They favoured the benefits of flexible working arrangements akin to those expressed by individuals negatively impacted by the transition. However, they further emphasised their inclination towards the benefits of being physically present in the office, including enhanced team collaboration and the potential to ignite creativity in a group environment.

There is a notable divide among employees' feelings and attitudes regarding the return-to-office directive when they first hear about it and what they think of it. Eight employees (58%) reported

feeling negatively affected, while the other two (14%) showed some excitement. Also, the last segment of four (28%) expressed feelings of indifference toward the change.

Some of the participants who were negatively affected by the change said,

Employee 5 (E5): "To be honest, I think I'm less productive when I'm in the office... There are more people to talk to... So, I get distracted very easily, whereas at home, I can focus".

E6 felt that the concept of flexible working arrangements was proven during COVID-19 era, they delivered solid performance, going back to office is regressing.

Employee 6 (E6): "When the requirement for coming back to the office was given, for me, it was regressing instead of progressing. Because it has been proven that in the area we operated, we were able to first produce required outputs, whether you were home or not. Secondly, I was more productive at home than I was in the office. The cost of working from the office is expensive due to the driving distance from home to the office."

E8 emphasised his discontent with fact that even with three days mandatory office days, you still find out more people are not in, and the office is like a graveyard and can not collaborate with your team, which defeats the purpose of coming back to office.

Employee (E8): "We now have flexibility where people are in the office three days a week, and some days are quite energised, where there are a lot of people. On days when people take their days off, if you are here, it is like a graveyard. There is no one around, and is not a positive space to be in."

Participants with mixed feelings said, E4 said,

Employee 4 (E4): "When I heard about the decision, for me, it was a mixed feeling. Obviously, we spent so much time working from home, but it was also exciting to be able to be back to connect with people in person."

And further added that, at home she struggled to disconnect to her work and take breaks, therefore, in the office setting she could take tea and lunch breaks as per normal and knock off with everyone.

Employee 4 (E4): It is a 50/50 kind of benefit. The time I spend on the road could be the time I spend doing something productive. On the other hand (at home), I hardly get time to relax (take breaks); I do everything in front of the workstation."

Employee 3 reiterated that,

Employee 3 (E3): "It was a mixed bag. Change is difficult. Having to change routine that you have gotten used to and now you have to go back to the office obviously comes with anxiety. There was some happiness that you are going to see colleagues that you have not seen in a while. However, I enjoyed spending with family in Jo'burg (when I was working flexible), and having to go back to Cape Town put me off."

Two participants who were excited about the change said,

Employee 2 (E2): "So I think it worked very well for me because you had two days that you were in the office, even if it was long longer hours (compressed hours) that means that you worked."

Employee 12 (E12): "It is good that we are back in the office, engaging with your colleagues and using them as a soundboard to bounce ideas. It becomes a challenge when you are alone at home to execute this kind of work."

In examining the changes in employees' motivation toward their work, it was observed that all employees exhibited a commendable level of professionalism. When asked about the impact of transitioning from flexible working arrangements to an office-based setup on their motivation, all participants indicated that this change did not affect their motivation levels. They seemed to have successfully separated their personal feelings about their preferences from the organisational policies. They welcome managements' decision to implement the return-to-office directives and hoped to realise the benefit that comes with it, of collaborating with other colleagues to execute tasks effectively. This distinction held true even for those who were negatively impacted and disagreed with management's return-to-office directives. Some participants argued that flexibility is not necessarily linked with an employee's goals and performance targets in the organisation. They understood that it is essential to complete required tasks, regardless of whether one works in the office or remotely. This suggests that while flexible work arrangements are an attractive benefit, they are not a fundamental necessity in the organisational context

When asked about the change in the level of motivation and attitude towards their work due to the implementation of return-to-office directives, participants said,

Employee 1 said,

Employee 4 (E4): "I don't think much has changed. I'm still the same motivated, I guess."

Employee 11 added that,

Employee 11 (E11): "I would say that I don't feel like it made a change in my motivation either."

Employee 5 further added that,

Employee 5 (E5): "It didn't decrease my motivation. I think my mindset is of such that regardless of where I am, I must give my best at my job."

Employee 6 reiterated that,

Employee 6 (E6): "You do what you need to do, whether you are at home or you are in the office. So, I don't think motivation is that much of an issue because of the fact that you need to do what you need to do."

5.4.2 Lifestyle Changes and Adjustments

All fourteen (14) knowledge workers who were interviewed indicated that the implementation of the return-to-office directive did not affect their motivation; some suggested that they are self-driven professionals and believe that as an employee, you need to do what is needed, regardless of whether you are at home or at the office. However, most employees mentioned that implementing return-to-work directives caused them significant readjusting in their daily routines. There was a sense of discontent and inconvenience among employees in dealing with the new routine of working from 8 to 5 o'clock. For example, (E9), an employee who had been working for the organisation for more than 10 years and has children at home who require her to take them to school and back daily, said

Employee 9 (E9): "At first, I was scared that directives to return to the office would affect my daily planning and work routines at home. However, I have adjusted to working from the office, just like before".

When asked about the change in her motivation level, employee E9 said:

Employee 9 (E9): "Also, the transition from working from home to going back to work offices has not really affected my motivation or attitude towards my work, but I am still adjusting to the new normal lifestyle I was used to, of working while I take care of my home duties at the same time".

Similarly, participant E1 also indicated concern about the change in her routine, arguing that she has been working from home for three years and had gotten used to waking up late and not worrying about commuting and being stuck in traffic. She noted that the change impacted her daily routine.

Employee 1 (E1): "It was a tough one. I was not looking forward to coming back to the office. I think it was after three years of working from home, so we had already adjusted to the idea of working from home, and now we had to let go of. The thought of waking up earlier and being stuck in traffic, those were the elements I was worried about"

During the interviews, participants were clear on the state of their motivation towards performing their duties in the company environment by mentioning that not so much has changed. However, three participants mentioned that the transition has not given them enough time to adjust back to working from the offices. For instance, some employees mentioned that they were still getting used to office practices. Two were accustomed to working without direct supervision from management, while the others needed to adapt to an open-plan office, where noise and conversations are prevalent.

Employee 11 said,

Employee 11 (E11): "In terms of working from home, I would say it is more comfortable. You are in your own space. I feel micromanaged in the office".

Employee 3 (E3): "Because I was used to conducting my work duties without supervision or line managers, I am still finding it extremely hard to work under the scrutiny of my line managers".

Employee 2 emphasised the challenge of adjusting to office constant interruptions,

Employee 2 (E2): "If you are in the office and you have things you like to do. And there are constant interruptions; you are not as productive as you would have been as when you work from home."

Employee 3 raised concern about some disruptive office practices, such as informal meetings and time-consuming corridor talks.

Employee 3 (E3): "Office can be disruptive with all these informal meetings and corridor talks that one does experience".

5.4.3 Time Management

Most organisations' operational office hours start from 8 am till 5 pm, with approximately an hour split between tea breaks and lunch. However, flexible working arrangements, especially working from home, meant that employees had the autonomy to choose when to commence with their duties, take breaks and shut down for a day. They could manage their work schedule without the restrictions of office hours. Time management changed significantly for employees as return-to-office came with its requirements in managing their work time. One of the respondents highlighted that:

Employee 7 (E7): "To be honest, at first, it was difficult to organise my work and manage my time efficiently while working from home because I was used to going to work and conducting my work duties during the given working period. Now, I have to adjust from managing my time for work to managing house duties. It is difficult to switch off because the laptop is visible and the temptation to work is there, but when I work from the office, when I knock off, I never open my laptop at home."

Another respondent, a senior employee who has worked for more than 10 years with the organisation, said:

Employee 11(E11): "I strictly conduct myself working from home the same way I used to while working from the offices. However, with flexible working arrangements, I find myself sometimes distracted by many family issues that result in me not managing my work time efficiently".

Employee 4 noted with flexible working arrangements, she did not have to wake up early or get stuck in traffic; contrary to now, she had to go to the office early and by the time she is back, she is very tired. She said:

Employee 4 (E4): "The fact that I'm able to wake up and work from home without having to worry about traffic. ~ So, by the end of the day, I'm exhausted! As I would need to be at the office say, from 8 am to 5 pm".

Moreover, most participants pointed out that commuting to and from work, especially in large cities, significantly contributes to lost productivity, and stifles time management. Working from home allows them to begin with their work as early as 6 AM or 7 AM, but the commute eats up that time—it can take up to an hour each way. They also noted that navigating through heavy

traffic directly affects the time they arrive at the office and start working, making it difficult to honour some meetings, thus impacting their productivity and time management negatively.

E1 and E2 commented on the impact of productivity due to returning to the office, which demands commuting, and said,

Employee 1, said:

Employee 1 (E1): "I'm more productive on a day that I work from home than when I work from the office. So, I'm more productive at home than I'm at the office."

Employee 2 added that:

Employee 2 (E2): So, I'm more productive when I'm at home. I can do focus work, just get on with it, and do what needs to be done. Like I said previously, if you are in the office ~ you have constant interruptions. You are not as productive as you would have been."

Employee 6 reiterated the negative impact of commuting to and back from work and productive time lost due to lunch or tea breaks when in the office.

Employees 6 (E6): "You lose about an hour going to work versus staying at home. In addition, you spend about 30 to 45 minutes at the canteen, where you'd probably take about 10 minutes (at home)."

Participant (E4) indicated that one drawback of working remotely that impacts time management and performance is the unavailability of managers and colleagues when contacting them for assistance or wanting to use them for sound-boarding ideas. This impedes progress, introduces delays in the decision-making process, and ultimately detrimentally affects workplace performance and delivery timelines.

Employee 4 (E4): "Working from home, you never know the availability of people because sometimes having a status that says available, doesn't mean that the person is available".

Research data from the interviews indicated that most employees had adjusted well to flexibility, i.e. working from home. In fact, data indicated that their time management improved, allowing them to perform their work duties, particularly focused tasks, more effectively.

Employee 8 said,

Employee 8 (E8): 'So my house is sort of a peaceful environment. if I'm going to be doing report writing or something along those lines which requires focus time, I find it nice to be able to do that at home.'

Employee 4 added that,

Employee 4 (E4): "Despite managers' efforts to supervise us from an internet platform, flexible working arrangements gave me more time to achieve my work goals efficiently and cover other important family matters at the same time".

Time management and lifestyle adjustment were raised as the key central issues participants had to deal with after management revoked the flexible working arrangements. As such, most respondents revealed that their motivation and attitude towards performing their daily work tasks were not impacted by the change from flexible working arrangements to working from the company's offices.

In conclusion, it was clear that working from home had the advantages of enhanced work-life balance, like spending more quality time with family and attending to personal chores and errands during the work week. Another upside included an enhanced level of productivity, where employees could dedicate a few extra hours to productive work. These extra hours were made possible because employees did not have to commute to work when working remotely. However, the flexible working arrangements also posed challenges; a few employees alluded to being isolated from the team. Others were concerned about the issue of the non-availability of colleagues and managers when staff wanted to pick their brains on urgent matters. As such, only 14% of participants favoured returning to work in offices believing it offered instant opportunities to get management support and to collaborate with colleagues.

5.5 Results of Research Question 2

What are the benefits and drawbacks of flexible working arrangements for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?

The question aligns directly with Research Objective 2, which aims to explore and ascertain the advantages and disadvantages of flexible working arrangements and their implications for knowledge workers' motivation. Furthermore, the data collected from research participants offered insights into the implications of flexible working arrangements on both the organisation

and knowledge workers. Answers to this question provided the researcher with comprehensive insights into flexible working arrangements and how knowledge workers perceive them in real life.

Several studies examining employees' experiences during the COVID-19 era (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2023; Chafi et al., 2021; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Kong et al., 2022; Trevor & Holweg, 2022) have identified a range of advantages and obstacles faced by employees engaged in flexible working arrangements.

The researcher formulated the subsequent sub-questions to understand better the advantages and disadvantages of flexible working arrangements and their implications for knowledge workers' motivation.

Benefits experience with flexible working arrangement

- i. *Can you share specific examples of how flexible working has positively impacted your work performance or productivity?*
- ii. *How has flexible working influenced your work-life balance?*
- iii. *Are there particular aspects of your personal life that have improved due to flexible working? And how?*
- iv. *What have been the main benefits of flexible working arrangements for you personally?*
- v. *Can you describe any moments or experiences that highlighted the benefits of flexible working for you?*
- vi. *What specific factors related to flexible working arrangements have influenced your motivation positively?*

Drawbacks experience with flexible working arrangement

- vii. *What challenges have you encountered while working flexibly?*
- viii. *How have these challenges affected your ability to perform your job?*
- ix. *How has flexible working impacted communication and collaboration with your colleagues and managers?*
- x. *Have there been any difficulties in maintaining effective teamwork while working flexibly?*
- xi. *Have you experienced feelings of isolation or disconnection from your team or the organisation while working flexibly?*
- xii. *If so, how did these feelings affect your work and motivation?*
- xiii. *What specific factors related to flexible working arrangements have negatively impacted your motivation?*

5.5.1 Benefits and Challenges of Flexible Working Arrangements

Data collected from participants addressed research question two, which examined knowledge workers' experiences with flexible working arrangements, particularly the associated benefits and drawbacks. The qualitative data revealed that the majority of participants valued the autonomy afforded by working without direct supervision.

Table 5.4: Data analysis regarding the benefits and challenges of Flexible Working Arrangements

RQ	Code Groups/ Categories	Themes	Theoretical Categories
RQ0	Participants' demographic information		
RQ2	Quality time with family	Work-life Balance	Benefits and challenges of flexible working arrangements
RQ2	Multi-tasking		
RQ2	Team availability	Communication Effectiveness	
RQ2	Collaboration		

Source: Research data (2024)

5.5.2 Work-life balance

Participants noted that flexible working arrangements improved their quality time with family and allowed them to manage personal errands while still meeting business objectives. They indicated they felt more productive working from home than in a traditional office environment. The home setting helped them avoid distractions, enabling them to focus more effectively on their work. Additionally, they appreciated the autonomy that came with organising their own schedules while working remotely. As a result of flexibility their productivity increased, and work-life balance improved as they could fit personal chores and errands into their workday without compromising business objectives and targets.

Participant E5 explained that:

Employee 5 (E5): "To be honest, flexible working arrangements assisted me a lot with more time to be with my children and family. Because I was not driving to the office in the morning, I could drive my children to school and spend more time with my parents".

Participant E3 added that,

Employee 3 (E3): "Besides having enough time to be with family, flexible working arrangements allowed me to conduct my daily work duties at my own pace, increasing my productivity" (E 3).

Employee 8 stated that he could multitask and had time to complete personal chores while working from home, highlighting an improved work-life balance.

Employee 8 (E8): "Flexible working arrangements really changed the way I self-managed my time and conduct my work duties. I was able, for the first time, to multitask between home duties while managing to deliver on my work goals simultaneously".

Additionally, Employee 1 reiterated that

Employee 1 (E1): "Working from home has balanced my personal life. Instead of doing washing over the weekend, I can do it during the week because I'm here. I can just put everything in the washing machine. Whenever I want to stretch (take a break), I can go to the laundry room to put in a little bit of washing. The next time I want to stretch again, I go back and hang it out."

Employees E2 and E3 also supported the above points, with E2 emphasising the work-life balance she has, enabled her to take her son to sports practice during normal working hours, by working in extra hours, and E3 noted that he could take his kids to school and back.

Employee 2 (E2): "My son goes to rugby practice outside town and must be there at 5 pm. ~ It would be stressful for me if I had to come to work, then drive all the way back home to fetch him and then leave for practice." (~ indicating that she works extra hours to compensate for the early knock-off)

Employee 3 (E3): "It has positively impacted our work-life balance in that, you know while one was working from home, you are able to do school runs for the kids. Whereas in normal circumstances, you wouldn't".

Employee E12 further supported the above views saying that:

Employee 12 (E12): "I get more done in my personal life before and after work. So yes, it really helps me to get some of my personal stuff done."

Flexibility is not everything to everyone (Franken et al, 2021) as such, some participants reported drawbacks. E1 mentioned having difficulties adjusting to flexible working arrangements citing family demands conflicting with work obligations and issues of isolation. Participant E1 said,

Employee 1 (E1): "At first, it was nice not to work from the office. However, I found myself doing less work due to family demands during work hours. ~ I was working alone from home. I truly think it was better to work from the office environment because of the environment and structure that allows me to conduct my duties efficiently".

Employee 2 underscored the issue of load-shedding, which is common in South Africa, as the drawback:

Employee 2 (E2): "You need WI-FI to be able to attend meetings (online). I have a generator ~but when the network is down, you can't work."

The majority of participants view flexible working arrangements as an effective strategy that enhances productivity and, more importantly, work-life balance. They reported that eliminating commuting gave them more time to accomplish more work. The most emphasised benefit was the reduction in travel costs. Some employees noted that they spent significant money on fuel and vehicle maintenance if they had to commute to the office regularly. Flexible working arrangements enabled employees to work comfortably from home, allowing them to complete focused work without disruptions from co-workers, which are common in an office environment.

When exploring further some of the disadvantages of flexible working arrangements, data collected showed that when working from home, it is common for employees to spend long hours on their workstations, which can be detrimental to their health when unchecked. The inability to switch off results in exhaustion and mental fatigue, rendering one incapable of performing their work. Employee 1 said:

Employee 1 (E1): "Sometimes you end up working and forgetting about your family. You can sit here from 5 am till 8 pm."

Employee 4 further reiterated that:

Employee 4 (E4): "When I work from home, I mean, I hardly get time to relax. I tend to do everything in front of my workstation. Even if I drink coffee or if I have lunch."

The data suggests that only two employees reported concerns regarding feelings of isolation or disconnection while working from home. Employee 8, when asked if he experienced feelings of loneliness or isolation while working from home, stated that:

Employee 8 (E8): "Definitely, that does happen occasionally, especially when calendars are sort of free, and you bogged down with something, and you don't hear from anyone for a long time."

Employee 1 agrees with the above view said:

Employee 1 (E1): "Isolation!!! Yes, that's the word I was looking for. Yes, you feel isolated".

5.5.3 Communication Effectiveness

Flexible working arrangements provide numerous benefits for both organisations and employees, boosting employee motivation (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). However, not all employees find flexible working arrangements appealing (Kong et al., 2022). Employees reported experiencing significant communication challenges with their colleagues and managers, especially when working from home. They noted that it was common to encounter to experienced situations where they needed assistance from either their manager or a colleague, whether to soundboard an idea or for something else. However, those individuals were unavailable during flexible working arrangements.

Two participants, when asked to share their experiences, said:

Employee 4 (E4): "So, at times you are desperate in need of someone's help, and I mean you are unable to get hold of them, whereas in the office, it is as easy as just going to someone's desk or office."

Employee 11 (E11): "It's not always that simple to reach someone if you wanna ask them a question. They have phones, but it's not always to say they are available to consult; that is a challenge!"

Additionally, E4 reiterated that:

Employee 4 (E4): "Working from home, you never know the availability of people because sometimes having a status that says available doesn't mean that the person is available".

When further quizzed about some of the notable drawbacks they experienced during flexible working arrangements, the participants mentioned that collaboration was another element that was notably absent (Trevor & Holweg, 2023). Employee E3 gave his account of how flexible working arrangements impacted communication and collaboration

Employee 3 (E3): "It had a negative impact because you are not sure whether or not the person you are talking to is fully present unless you switch on the video."

E3 emphasised the above point by noting that collaboration and communication were confined to an online platform. In contrast, in a normal office setup, you could walk to that person's office and converse.

Employee 3 (E3): "To speak to someone now, you have to set up a (Teams) meeting, where (under office-based conditions) you could easily get into that person's cubicle."

E6 shared a different perspective on communication from E3. He does not think there should be a breakdown in engagement. E6 said:

Employee 6 (E6): "I don't think there should be a breakdown in engagement versus being in the office. I mean, if you need to chat to someone, you ring them and ask them. Are you available?"

E6 believes you should take the initiative to reach someone you need to talk to and not be discouraged by their online status.

Effective communication in flexible working arrangements depends on the availability of team members and managers and their ability to collaborate effectively. When team members or managers are unavailable when needed, communication can be severely hindered. Furthermore, any obstacles to collaboration can reduce the effectiveness of communication, ultimately impacting the overall performance of the organisation.

5.6 Results of Research Question 3

What are the benefits and drawbacks of return-to-office directives for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?

Aligned with research objective three, research question three was developed to help the researcher examine the advantages and disadvantages of return-to-office directives and their impact on the motivation and attitudes of knowledge workers. This question aimed to evaluate employees' views on the benefits and drawbacks of returning to the office, particularly the implications for their motivation when transitioning back to office settings after a prolonged period of flexible working arrangements. During the interview process, participants were asked about the benefits and drawbacks of return-to-office directives issued by management.

The data collected from participants in response to this question highlights the potential benefits and drawbacks of return-to-office directives. It underscores how these directives can either enhance or hinder employees' motivation, especially among knowledge workers. To gain a deeper understanding, knowledge workers were asked the following sub-questions regarding their views on the benefits and challenges of the return-to-work directive:

Sub-questions in relation to the benefits of return-to-office directives

- i. What have been the main benefits of returning to the office for you personally?*
- ii. Can you share specific examples of how returning to the office has positively impacted your work performance or productivity?*
- iii. How has returning to the office affected communication and collaboration with your colleagues and managers?*
- iv. Have there been improvements in teamwork and project coordination since returning to the office?*
- v. How does the office environment contribute to your motivation and job satisfaction?*
- vi. Are there aspects of the office setting that you missed while working flexibly?*
- vii. Since returning, do you feel more connected to your colleagues and the organisation? Why or why not?*
- viii. What specific factors related to returning to the office have influenced your motivation positively?*

Sub-questions in relation to the drawback experiences of return-to-office directives

- i. What challenges have you faced since returning to the office?*

- ii. *How have these challenges affected your ability to perform your job and maintain your motivation?*
- iii. *How has returning to the office impacted your work-life balance?*
- iv. *Do you find that commuting has impacted your motivation or energy levels at work?*
- v. *What specific factors related to returning to the office have influenced your motivation negatively?*
- vi. *Have you considered leaving the organisation because of the return-to-office directives?*

Table 5.5: Data analysis regarding the benefits and challenges of Return-to-Work Directives

RQ	Code Groups/ Categories	Themes	Theoretical Categories
RQ0	Participants' demographic information		
RQ3	Work resources	Effective working environment	Benefits and Drawbacks of Return-to-office
RQ3	Teamwork		
RQ3	Adjusting to office-base challenges	Organisational challenges	
RQ3	Talent Management		

Source: Research data (2024)

5.6.1 Effective Working Environment

Participants highlighted several advantages they experienced when returning to the office environment. They noted increased collaborative work and overall effectiveness, stating that they could accomplish more collaborative tasks in a shorter period. This suggests that an office-centric environment can be more effective in delivering results.

Employee 4 mentioned that with return-to-office, there are no delays in information flow when seeking help or having inquiries; the feedback is received promptly.

Employee 4 (E4): "What tends to be a downside for me (when working remotely) is people can procrastinate in terms of getting back to you"

Employee 1 indicated that,

Employee 1 (E1): "Sometimes going to the office helps you resolve other queries quicker than when you sit here (at home); it results in taking you more hours to resolve something that that you could have resolved with somebody."

E6 and E1 further added that,

Employee 6 (E6): "And like I said, you tend to be able to engage better face-to-face versus remotely. So, that's one of the positives."

Employee 1 (E1): "Some people, it's not easy to do things virtually."

They further mentioned that personal interactions enhanced teamwork and collaborative effort, and they could engage with colleagues from other office departments. The prospects of employees meeting and engaging with other colleagues from different departments over coffee or in the corridor to discuss projects or work issues is increased, thus, improving workplace effectiveness. These encounters lead to spontaneous discussions where they can share and refine innovative ideas. This kind of interaction boosts productivity and fosters innovation and workplace effectiveness. Employee 5 attested to this and said:

Employee 5 (E5): There is an advantage of going into the office, being able to meet up with specific people, they can provide you with valuable input, especially from other team not necessarily yours."

Finally, Employee 11 said

Employee 11 (E11): "I get to interact with my colleagues. I get to soundboard. I get to engage. I get to get their opinions and perspectives on things directly. So, it's direct feedback that I obtain from them if I'm in the office."

The quick response time associated with in-person communication was also emphasised, as it is generally more efficient than online queries, thus improving workplace effectiveness.

Additionally, personal interactions allow employees to check in on one another, promoting mutual support. In contrast, virtual settings often make it difficult to read body language or gauge someone's feelings or understanding of the conversation. They further stated that being in the office negatively affects their work-life balance. They emphasized that the key drawback of return-to-office directives is that spend less time with family, and chores that they would have done during the work week now move to the weekend, reducing rest and quality time with family. In addition,

due to commuting, they have less time to fit in hobbies, go to the gym, prepare healthy home-cooked meals, and attend extra mural activities for their children.

5.6.2 Organisational Challenges

Participants highlighted the advantages of returning to the office, such as improved personal interactions with colleagues, which foster effective collaboration among team members and speed up problem-solving compared to remote working. However, they noted commuting to work and back as one of the biggest drawbacks due to significant productive time lost while travelling from home to work and back. Participants noted other challenges with in-office work settings. They pointed out that an open-plan office setting tends to be disruptive and challenging when doing focused work. Colleagues can walk into your workstation and start a conversation, distracting your attention from completing your planned tasks.

In a hybrid work environment, not all employees are present on office days, which can hinder collaboration and innovation, defeating the purpose for which it was created.

Employee 14 (E14) said,

Employee 14 (E14): “So it is demotivating when I’m in the office, and I find that someone is not there that I want to communicate with”.

Employee 1 (E1) also said,

Employee 1 (E1): “We don’t see as many people as we used to every day. You can go for three months without seeing somebody, but you work together – you just come in on different days”.

Employee 6 mentioned that the in-office setup could be disruptive, as employees often spend a significant amount of time discussing non-work-related matters.

Employee 6 (E6): “What I have not spoken about is the additional time you could lose by being in the office due to engagements, ad-hoc engagements versus structured engagements”.

Employee 4 noted that the open-plan office setup provides limited privacy, making it difficult, especially when you need to take a call in privacy.

Employee 4 (E4): "You've got less privacy. Sometimes, there are things you need to do privately, like taking a call. You can't really take your call privately; you're going to have to find a quiet corner. So, those are the things I miss most about working from home."

The transition from flexible working arrangements to working from the office has detrimental effects on talent acquisition and retention. Fewer employees indicated they would leave the organisation if mandated to work a 5-day week in the office. However, the impact on the organisation can be dire if key talent is lost and is becoming difficult to source due to return-to-office directives. In recent years, many recruiting managers have used flexible working arrangements as the organisation's value proposition to attract key talent.

The participants, when asked whether they would consider leaving the organisation if it reverted from a flexible model to a traditional 5-day workweek, nearly all participants (12 out of 14) indicated that they would not contemplate leaving. They argued that flexibility was not the reason for the decision to join the organisation and noted that they had already experienced this working environment since joining the organisation. Consequently, they felt confident adapting to a full 5-day week in-office without concern. Only two participants indicated they would leave if a full 5-day week in the office was implemented.

Of the participants who said they would consider leaving the organisation due to return-to-office directives,

Employee 11 said,

Employee 11 (E11): "Difficult one, but it is certainly something that you consider when applying for the work nowadays. You want flexibility!"

Employee 13 (E13), with over 10 years of service in the organisation, works from home, out of town on a full remote arrangement. He indicated that he would leave the organisation if he were mandated to relocate and come to the office on a 5-day week.

Employee 13 (E13): "I will leave, yes."

E8 further accentuated the challenges caused by return-to-office directives by giving an example of his brother, in a knowledge worker role; he said,

Employee 8 (E8): "He works for the tech company and is the software engineer. And for him, flexible working hours and remote work is very much a part of his life. And he has threatened to leave places where they tell him to come back to the office".

The data collected elucidates the challenges associated with the transition back to the office. The anticipated benefits of this approach are enhanced collaboration, teamwork, innovation, and problem-solving, which in contrary are compromised in a hybrid model, when employees frequently fail to go to the office on their designated workdays. Consequently, in a flexible working arrangement setting, the efficacy of collaboration, teamwork, innovation, and problem-solving diminishes, while organisational culture continues to erode.

Simultaneously, the loss of critical skills and the difficulty in attracting high-quality talent can have detrimental effects on the organisation's performance. As Manager 12 (M12) attested those younger employees value flexibility; if the organisation is unable to offer this, there is a significant risk of losing valuable talent.

The next section explores how management views the situation through research questions RQ4 and RQ5 from Chapter 3. These questions were asked to the 12 managers of knowledge workers who implemented return-to-office policies and oversaw the shift from flexible work arrangements to an office-centric environment.

5.7 Results of research Question 4

What perceptions does management hold about their staff motivation towards work after implementing return-to-office directives?

In alignment with research objective four, which was aimed at exploring management's views on how return-to-work directives affect their staff motivation towards work, this research question aimed to examine management's perspectives on return-to-office directives and their impact on employee motivation. It emphasised management assessments of their employees' attitudes towards these changes. Question four sought to gain insights into motivation shifts observed among employees transitioning back to the office from flexible working arrangements. The responses provided a clearer understanding of how employees were navigating the shift from flexible working arrangements back to traditional office-based environments in the post-pandemic era.

The following sub-questions were posed to managers to gain a deeper understanding of their perception if there were changes in the motivation level of their staff post return-to-office implementation after being exposed to flexible working arrangements.

- i. How have the return-to-office directives impacted your staff's motivation levels?*

- ii. *Can you provide specific examples or observations that support your view?*
- iii. *What feedback have you received from employees regarding the return-to-office directives?*
- iv. *How has this feedback influenced your understanding of their motivation and engagement?*
- v. *How has the return to the office impacted the company's culture, sense of belonging and collaborative innovation within your team/organisation?*
- vi. *Could you share your observations on any changes in staff productivity and performance since implementing return-to-office and how these changes relate to their motivation levels?*
- vii. *Do you think you might lose key talent due to return-to-office directives? Why or why not?*
- viii. *Do you think returning to the office is beneficial in the long term? Why or why not?*
- ix. *What suggestions do you have for improving the return-to-office experience to support motivation and productivity better?*

Table 5.6: Data analysis of Managers' perceptions of staff motivation

RQ	Code Groups/ Categories	Themes	Theoretical Categories
RQ0	Participants' demographic information		
RQ4	Perceived motivation	Management perspective of return-to-office	Management perception of staff's motivation towards work after implementing return-to-office directives.
RQ4	Culture and productivity perceived tolerance level of return-to-office directives		

Source: Research data (2024)

5.7.1 Management's perspective of return-to-office

Managers were quizzed about their perception of their employees' motivation levels as they transitioned from flexible working arrangements, where they worked flexibly but had to return to the office after the implementation of return-to-office directives.

Manager 1 (M1) underscored an important point to consider when determining how the work should be organised and where it should be executed. She stated that the decision depends on the employee's role and circumstances rather than painting all employees with the same brush. She argued that some roles must be executed in-office while others can be successfully executed remotely and flexibly. For example, an employee who is a specialist and delivers end-to-end services virtually, working within an internationally dispersed team, may find it challenging to justify coming into the office. They spent all their time collaborating with globally dispersed teammates virtually and providing services online. On the other hand, employees who have challenges working from home, for whatever reason, but can work flexibly must be afforded the opportunity to work from the office. The front-line employees responsible for producing the product or delivering the service cannot work remotely and need to be at the office.

Manager 1 (M1): "Some people prefer being in the office when they got too much distraction at home, so they don't mind. They are actually happy. And then there are others that do more focused roles and feel they struggle in office; they are negative".

Manager 4 further emphasised the importance of role when it comes to working flexibly versus in-office; she said,

Manager 4 (M4): "If you are in employee relations, you need to be onsite so you can deal with people. Yes, you need to be on-site. ~But if you are working on systems, there is no people-facing, you are not directly liaising with the business. So, you don't have clients that are going to come to you for assistance".

M1 accentuated that "Flexibility is not a one-size-fits-all." Understanding that flexibility and office-centric arrangements are role and circumstance-dependent, M1 emphasized that implementing return-to-office initiatives without considering these factors will make some employees very happy and motivated to return to the office, while others will not. Managers observed that the return-to-office initiative had a disparate impact on employee motivation. While some employees demonstrated enthusiasm for returning to the workplace, others exhibited a noticeable lack of interest, and the rest showed mixed feelings.

Managers, M4 and M9 observed their employees demonstrating mixed feelings towards implementations of return-to-office directives, citing that while their employees were excited to come back to the office and to see their colleagues face-to-face, they were concerned with commuting time and the likelihood of their productivity dropping down. M4 and M9 said,

Manager 4 (M4): "So it two-fold in a sense that people were happy to come to see the people, to meet their teammates, to be engaging with people in a face-to-face manner because it makes the relationships easier". ~ "The downside for that is travelling and sitting in traffic"

M9 further said that,

Manager 9 (M9): "Their motivation has been positive towards that. Although it's a mixed bag, it comes with travelling and all those things that are against you, you've become used to not travelling, it's easier than having to travel daily".

Manager 4 (M4): "Those days that they are at home, the production levels actually go up, and I can see that from the stats I collect."

Regarding motivation levels, as perceived by managers, employees who aligned with return-to-office directives showed heightened excitement to be back in the office.

Manager 12 said,

Manager 12 (M12): "So this group of people who are excited to be in the office and not at home. ~ They are excited about the office."

Manager 6 added that,

Manager 6 (M6): "So I've had a conversation with them, and they were very happy to come to the office. Firstly, because they are an incredibly close team. So, they are very good friends. If I could put it that way. And they were missing each other working from home".

Some managers stated that the change had no impact on their staff's motivation,

Manager 7 (M7): "From our team, we did not have any issue when they were asked to come back to work. ~ I did not see any change in motivation".

Manager 5 indicated that their staff had difficulty, stating that the business provided much support during the COVID-19 lockdowns and the advent of flexible working arrangements. However, the return-to-office transition was never supported.

Manager 5 (M5): "I just felt like there wasn't as much support for this transition. So, a lot of people had to deal with it on their own. And you know, it was difficult because it was quite a change".

Manager 3, stated that,

Manager 3 (M3): “At first, there was a lot of resistance”.

Based on the data collected, there is a varying view about the employees' level of motivation that managers perceived from their different teams, supporting and emphasising Franken, et al. (2021) view that flexible working arrangements cannot be everything to everyone.

All managers agreed that return-to-office directives improve the organisation's collaboration, engagement, culture and problem-solving effectiveness.

Manager 3 stated that her team's productivity, coherence and collaboration improved while acknowledging that her team spends a significant amount of time chit-chatting in the office, but when asked about delivery and productivity, her team was always on top of the game, she said,

Manager 3 (M3): “Is anyone owing me something? The answer is NO! They love spending time together and isn't it more positive to have a working environment where you have a team that is friends? I let them do their chatting, and soon enough, they will get back to work. ~Then it's quiet, and when I walk past, they are immersed in their work again.”

Manager 1 added that despite being mandated to go to the office, her employees' productivity and performance levels were maintained, and there is an inclination to go the extra mile, signalling that their motivation level and attitude towards work remained unchanged, regardless of whether they worked from home or from office. This view is supported by employees' sentiment that their motivation did not change.

Manager 1 (M1): “Look, no one is slipping up on their performance, but I do find that a lot of people are having to work longer hours at home to make up for the time lost when they are in the office because the office is maybe distracting”.

Managers also stated that employees typically spend an extra hour in the morning and afternoon to maintain productivity. However, when they are required to come into the office, they cannot produce the same output level as during flexible working arrangements due to additional commuting time, leading to a decline in productivity.

Manager 4, said,

Manager 4 (M4): “People stay all across, whether is from Pretoria to Johannesburg or from the East, it a lot of commutes, where they feel that there is the time there could have been working but, now they're spending it in traffic”.

The managers stated that the time employees spend in traffic commuting from home to the office and back impacts them negatively, as they must work late to compensate for the lost time. This manager's perception is congruent with the employees' findings from research question one.

A notable drawback of returning to the office is that employees often request time off to pick up their children from school or to manage other personal errands. Manager 12 noted that this is because many employees have arranged their lives around remote work' flexibility and due to return-to-office directives, they must request time out during the shift.

Another negative impact of the return-to-office directive is that employees tend to be more productive when working from home. While they used to be online from early morning until late evening, the requirement to work from the office has led many to shut down their laptops by 4 p.m. to leave the office and rush home to avoid traffic. This change is adversely affecting their productivity and overall performance.

Manager 1 said,

Manager 1 (M1): "Now people are sacrificing an hour in the morning an hour in the afternoon that they would have spent being productive by travelling to the office"

M6 further argued that working from home is more productive than being in the office, she said,

Manager 6 (M6): The team worked harder than they did when we were in the office, I think partly because they did not have to commute. They could literally work on their pyjamas if they wanted. So, I could find that when I logged on to my computer at 5 am in the morning two or three of them were online as well".

When asked whether the organisation would risk losing key talent if it implemented a five-day return-to-office directive, 12 of 12 managers unanimously responded, "Definitely yes." Some managers added that young professionals are more likely to leave sooner than their older counterparts. This finding raises significant concerns regarding the organisation's sustainability and calls into question the relevance of the pre-COVID-19 office-centric work model within the contemporary workplace.

The researcher further inquired with managers about the potential long-term benefits of a return-to-office directives for the organisation. Their responses indicated that it largely depends on the nature of the work conducted by employees. For instance, employees in organisations where physical interaction is crucial for the successful delivery of a product or service may be required to be present on-site. Conversely, employees whose roles predominantly involve delivering

services that are executed virtually may not necessarily need to work from the organisational premises. Of the 12 managers, 12 advocated for a hybrid model, allowing employees to work in the office and remotely as and when required, a type of flexible working arrangement.

5.8 Results of Research Question 5

What perception does management hold about their staff's motivation should flexible working arrangements be retained?

In alignment with the fifth research objective, this question aimed to explore management's views on how they perceive their staff's motivation and attitude towards work if flexible working arrangements are retained.

Research question five specifically explored management's views and experiences of their employees' attitudes and predispositions towards flexible working arrangements. In addition, it seeks to explore and understand the management views of the preferred work environment by comparing three working setups: 1. flexible working arrangements (working 5-day week remotely), 2. full office-based (working 5-days week in the office), and 3. hybrid working model (working some days in the office and some days remotely). Furthermore, it explores how these preferences affect motivation and job performance.

Management's responses to this research question gave the researcher a deeper understanding of staff attitudes and preferences concerning flexible working arrangements as alternatives to return-to-office mandates in the long term. The following sub-questions were posed to managers to understand better their perceptions of their employees' attitudes and inclinations towards flexible working arrangements and determined the preferred working setup and its effects on employees' motivation.

- i. *How do you anticipate retaining flexible working arrangements would affect staff motivation levels in the long term?*
- ii. *Can you share any specific reasons for your expectations?*
- iii. *Based on your experience, what would be your preferred work environment (fully flexible, fully office-based, or a hybrid model)?*
- iv. *How would this preference affect your motivation and job performance?*

Table 5.7: Data analysis of Managers' perceptions on retaining Flexible Working Arrangements

RQ	Code Groups/ Categories	Themes	Theoretical Categories
RQ0	Participants' demographic information		
RQ5	The upside and downside of flexibility	The future world of works	Management perception of staff's motivation due to flexible working arrangements being retained.
RQ5	Employee-preferred working setup		

Source: Research data (2024)

5.8.1 Future World of Works

Managers were asked to share their perspectives on how they perceive the retention of flexible working arrangements affecting employees' motivation in the long term and substantiate their responses. In addition, they were given three (3) options of working arrangements to choose the one they think is most suitable for their environment. Of all managers interviewed, 12 out of 12 stated that their employees' motivation would increase if they had flexible working arrangements. Some stated that moral and motivation will increase, for instance, if employees were asked to work late, will be more willing to do so, based on reciprocity principle, and in turn the company will respond with a positive favour when they need flexibility. Other managers added that, flexibility comes with work-life balance, that employees primarily preferred.

Here is what some of the managers said,

Manager 1 (M1): "The morale will go up. So, when you have flexible arrangements with employees, they don't mind if suddenly you ask them to work a bit late in the afternoon. It's a bit of give and take. They are more willing to stay on long. Sometimes they work quite late, and you don't get complaints because they know the company is flexible".

Manager 4 (M4): "I actually think it will increase motivation if you give them the opportunity to flexibility".

Manager 9 (M9): "I think for a lot of them, it will push the motivation up."

Manager 7 (M7): "So, from the employees' point of view, they like that because it gives them flexibility."

Manager 8 (M8): "It will be a positive impact. Again, it comes down to work-life balance. I think people have gotten accustomed to some of those aspects of remote working".

This finding suggests that managers view flexible working arrangements as an option preferred by their employees, contrary to office environment. All managers assert that retaining flexible working arrangements will benefit the organisation and improve employees' morale. They cited advantages such as enhanced productivity and morale, time and cost savings from eliminating commuting, and improved work-life balance. Such arrangements can help the organisation attract and retain high-quality talent. In addition, some managers emphasised the importance of personal interaction, cautioning that working full time at home can be detrimental to motivation over a longer period.

M9 said,

Manager 9 (M9): "I think personal interaction at work is important, and if you don't have it, you gonna lose that motivation. So, for me, working from home on a permanent basis can only work for about 12 to 18 months because, after that, you start drifting apart and forgetting who you are."

M6 emphasised M9's point that, while flexibility is appreciated, employee interactions are essential. She said,

Manager 6 (M6): "They'll love it (flexibility to be retained). ~They like the connection, the coming together, having lunch together and the laugh. I honestly think a mix is best, and I can speak for my team because I know them well."

Subsequently, managers were given three options to choose from, indicating which operating model they believe will best serve their employees. The options included: (1) fully flexible (full-time remote work), (2) hybrid model (a combination of in-office and remote work), and (3) fully office-based (full-time in the office). Notably, 12 out of the 12 managers opted for the hybrid model, arguing that it effectively provides the advantages of both remote and in-office work.

M4 said,

Manager 4(M4): "I think more from the sense that everyone gets the exposure that they need from you (as a manager), from that mingling with staff, with employees, but also still have the time to stay at home and do what you need to do. That way you have the best of both worlds".

Further, M3 indicated that,

Manager 3 (M3): "Cause hybrid provides both the flexibility and also the office face time".

Additionally, M5 reiterated that,

Manager 5 (M5): "I will definitely go for a hybrid model. Obviously, I think it is just the best of both worlds, but not a restrictive hybrid model.

M8 supported the above views, saying that,

Manager 8 (M8): "Yes, I think people have gotten accustomed to the hybrid model and that face-to-face interaction".

Of the 12 managers interviewed, all 12 said that they prefer a hybrid model for their employees, citing that it provides the best of both worlds. They cited that employees in a hybrid model can have face-to-face interaction with one another for the designated days they are required to be in the office environment. More importantly, hybrid arrangements will allow them to collaborate, innovate, and solve problems quicker than when they are in isolation and give them much-needed airtime to interact with their managers. On the days that they are working from home or remotely, employees can be able to do focused work without the interruptions that are inherent to the office environment.

Two managers emphasised that the hybrid model must not restrict the days employees must come to the office. They suggested that employees should be given autonomy to decide when to come to the office.

Manager 1 (M1): "There must be a more deliberate reason other than you have to come to the office because you've been mandated to do it."

M5 added that,

Manager 5 (M5): "With three days that we have to be in the office, I have noticed that they have now said that you have to be in the office on a Monday or Friday. I assume it is

because people took off Mondays and Fridays. But I think this is too restrictive. We need to get to the point where we can trust people.

Based on the data collected regarding RQ5, it is apparent that management views flexible working arrangements as a preferred form of working set up for their employees, suggesting flexible working arrangements as the future world of works. In addition, they also indicated that they would prefer a hybrid model as compared to working remotely full time. The hybrid model will afford employees time to engage face to face with their managers and colleagues, and complete collaborative work. The other days can be spent at home doing focused work.

The managers when implementing the flexible working arrangements should consider the type of work the employee is performing, as not all roles are suitable to be performed flexible, and their circumstances at home, if it feasible to work from. Kong et al. (2022) asserted that, with flexible working arrangements, some people preferred to continue working from home, in contrast, others preferred not to or were unable to. Kong et al. (2022) assertion is supported by Franken et al. (2021), they noted that the shift to flexible working arrangements had significant implications for both employers and employees. As a result, some employees preferred the option of working remotely, while others preferred to return to conventional office settings. Therefore, employees who are unable to work from home should be offered opportunity to come to office to perform their duties.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.1 Introduction

This section provides a concise summary of the key findings and themes that emerged from the study presented in Chapter 5. It re-examined and critically discussed the research findings in relation to the Research Objectives and Research Problem outlined in Chapter 1, with the intention of addressing the Research Questions presented in Chapter 3. Furthermore, the responses were integrated with pertinent literature reviewed in Chapter 2 underpinned by Research Methodology presented in Chapter 4.

The following discussion compares the responses of knowledge workers with those of managers. This comparison aimed to determine whether the responses aligned or differed while highlighting trends, linkages, and outliers.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ1

The key findings directly address the Research Question 1 are outlined below.

How has implementing return-to-work directives changed (or will change) knowledge workers' motivation and attitude towards work?

The data analysis revealed three main themes: employee motivation and attitudes, lifestyle changes and adjustments, and time management.

6.2.1 RQ1 Theme 1: Employee Motivation and Attitudes

Three employee cohorts with varying views and attitudes towards work emerged regarding the first theme. In the first cohort, 58% of participants (knowledge workers) resented return-to-office directives. They argued that these directives took away their productive time due to commuting to and from the office. They further contended that they were more productive at home than when they worked from the office, stating that being in the office made them prone to disturbances from colleagues. Unlike at home, where it was quiet, they could do focused work effectively.

In the second cohort, about a third of employees (28%) indicated excitement towards the directive to return to the office. They said collaboration, teamwork, personal interaction, problem-solving, and innovation had improved.

In the third cohort, out of 14 participants, only 2 (14%) indicated indifference towards implementing return-to-office. They had mixed feelings.

Based on the data collected, it was evident that most employees (58%) were discontent with the rollout of return-to-office, and as a result, did not result in a positive attitude towards work.

Participants expressed discontent and inconvenience regarding management's implementation of return-to-work directives because these were abruptly instituted and caused significant readjustment in their daily work and family routines. It was found that commuting to work was a major cause of poor time management and loss of productive time. Employees felt inconvenienced and had to adapt to the new routine of working from 8 to 5 o'clock and fit in the travel time to work and back, which cost them over 2 hours of productive time each day due to distance and traffic congestion.

The interesting finding regarding motivation was that employees were explicitly asked how their motivation had changed after the implementation of return-to-office directives; all 14 out of 14 stated that it did not affect their motivation.

6.2.2 RQ 1 Theme 2: Lifestyle Changes and Adjustments

Employees demonstrated discontent about the inconvenience brought about by the business changes to withdraw flexible working arrangements and implement return-to-office directives, which compelled them to come to the office. With the return-to-office directives, employees had to adjust to new routines, i.e. waking up early, being under constant supervision from management, and dealing with the constant disruptions from colleagues in the office. These employees had become accustomed to the routine associated with flexible working arrangements and had organised their lives accordingly. They emphasised that they enjoyed the autonomy and the productivity that comes with flexible working arrangements. With the return-to-office directives, they had to adjust to waking up early, commuting to the office and back, and facing constant supervision and disruptions from the office. It was also found that they considered the office environment as less productive compared to working flexibly. The disruptiveness in office was even higher in the open plan setting, making it difficult for the person sitting nearby to focus.

6.2.3 RQ1 Theme 3: Time Management

When working from home, employees did not have to commute to work. That time had been used in the morning and afternoon as the productive time to advance the tasks at hand. Some employees and managers who engaged in flexible work arrangements reported starting their workdays as early as 5 am and concluding as late as 10 pm during periods of high demand. However, transitioning to a return-to-office model necessitated sacrificing a minimum of two hours of productive time due to commuting. Consequently, the commuting process significantly detracted their overall productivity. In addition, at home, they had shorter breaks and could eat while working, thus improving productive time. Breaks are strictly observed in the office, and colleagues expected you to join them for lunch and coffee breaks. This culture was great for social interactions; however, it impeded productivity. Given the unpredictability of traffic congestion, employees often experienced delays, and prone to arriving late at the office, which resulted in missed morning meetings, particularly in metropolitan areas. The findings indicated that return-to-office directives significantly affected employees' time management.

6.2.4 Literature on Research Question 1 Findings

The research results indicated that 58% of employees were discontent with the idea of implementing return-to-office. Their discontent stemmed from the loss of personal benefits and work-life balance associated with flexible working arrangements.

Attitude and motivation are related ideas in psychology, but they meant different things in how people behaved. Attitude relates to how an individual feels about or thinks about a specific point, person, or idea. Dinibutun (2012) defined motivation as an internal force that directs, influences and encourages persistence in one's work efforts. Simultaneously, the research results indicated that 100% of employees reported that the transition from flexible working arrangements to return-to-office settings did not affect their motivational level. These findings, when put together, pointed out that employees were not typically driven by extrinsic factors, such as return-to-office directives or flexibility to maintain goal-oriented behaviours. The knowledge workers were able to do what the business required of them, exceptionally, regardless of whether they were working from home or in the office. The driving force behind their actions to pursue personal and organisational goals lay in the intrinsic factors that directed and influenced their efforts towards work. Ganta (2014)

explained that psychological processes motivated individuals, guided their actions, and fostered consistent behaviours, enabling them to perform their duties successfully.

The study findings regarding motivation and attitude were incongruent with the literature. One would expect attitude to influence motivation. However, the sampled knowledge workers demonstrated a greater extent of a negative attitude towards the return-to-work directive, which changed their work environment for the worse, at least for 58% of the sampled knowledge workers. Despite that, 100% of employees reported maintaining positive work motivation.

Regarding lifestyle adjustments and time management themes, Kelliher and Anderson (2010) stated that employees with flexible work options demonstrated increased motivation and job satisfaction, contributing to enhanced output and efficiency. When management replaced flexible working arrangements with return-to-office directives, their lifestyle and daily routines were disrupted. They had to forego the benefits of work-life balance, that is quality time with family, and autonomy towards their managing their work schedule. Consequently, their time management and routine were adversely impacted, they were compelled to change their daily routines and to fit in commuting times. With commuting, they inevitably lose about two hours of productive time each day they had to commute to work, and bear the cost associated with it.

The return-to-office policies often inadvertently impact employees' attitude towards work and engagement negatively, both of which were essential for sustained performance as asserted by Trevor and Holweg (2022). The study results supported their view, as participants confirmed a decline in productivity, heightened discontent and a negative attitude towards their work.

6.3 Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ2

What are the benefits and drawbacks of flexible working arrangements for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?

The summary of the key findings for Research Question 2 are delineated and discussed below, based on the two focal themes that emerged: work-life balance and communication effectiveness.

6.3.1 RQ2 Theme 1: Work-life Balance

Regarding the work-life balance theme, employees indicated that flexible working arrangements afforded them more quality time with their families and allowed them to fit in some other personal

hobbies, chores and errands during the workweek, which was positive for employees. They could also take their kids to school and back and keep an eye on them while working.

6.3.2 RQ2 Theme 2: Communication Effectiveness

Regarding the theme of communication effectiveness, employees acknowledged facing significant challenges in communicating with their managers and counterparts when working from home. More often than not, when they needed assistance with something or wished to soundboard an idea, they found it difficult to reach the other person. In contrast, with office setting, one could easily approach that person's workstation and ask them. The study revealed that employees experienced an absence of collaboration and teamwork in flexible working arrangements and felt that communication was confined to online platforms, thereby limiting face-to-face interactions among them.

6.3.3 Literature on Research Question 2 Results

Research conducted by Ballentine et al. (2022) and Kelliher and Anderson (2010) identified work-life balance as a dominant advantage of flexible working arrangements for employees because it assisted employees in better balancing their work and family commitments. Participants in the study perceived work-life balance as a critical factor contributing to their overall well-being, as it enabled them to multitask effectively between professional responsibilities and personal pursuits. Several employees indicated that they could engage in their hobbies during the morning or afternoon, as they were relieved from the necessity of commuting and could maintain punctuality in their professional commitments via online platforms.

In examining the communication effectiveness theme, Trevor and Holweg (2022) noted that a significant drawback of flexible working arrangements was their potential to diminish employees' face-to-face interactions, thereby negatively impacting the organisation's culture. Furthermore, the authors emphasised that creative collaboration and teamwork posed considerable challenges in such flexible frameworks. Synchronous communication was constrained by flexible working arrangements, which impeded employees' ability to exchange and interpret complex information and cultivate relationships (Chafi et al., 2021). These findings aligned with the existing literature on the subject. The research outcomes were consistent with theoretical perspectives, as highlighted by Trevor and Holweg (2022) and Chafi et al. (2021).

6.4 Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ3

What are the benefits and drawbacks of return-to-office directives for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?

The data revealed two key themes related to Research Question 3: the effective working environment and organisational challenges.

6.4.1 RQ 3 Theme 1: Effective Working Environment

The first theme focused on the creation of an effective working environment. Following the introduction of return-to-office directives, employees experienced benefits such as heightened collaboration and stronger interpersonal relationships, which led to spontaneous idea generation and instant problem-solving. Participants noted enhanced engagement during in-person interactions. The findings also depicted that response times, decision making, and the ability to complete collaborative tasks compared to when team members worked remotely improved significantly.

6.4.2 RQ3 Theme 2: Organisational Challenges

The second theme highlighted organisational changes, where employees recognised the drawbacks of being office-based, particularly the necessity of commuting, which detracted from productive time. Notably, all managers (100%) and most employees asserted that they preferred flexible working arrangements, with only two employees (14%) who preferred office-based settings. Nevertheless, 12 out of 14 employees (86%) stated that they would not have chosen to leave the organisation even if mandated to return to a full-time office schedule of five days a week, indicating their confidence in adapting to an entirely office-based setting.

When triangulating this finding with the results from RQ1, where all participants (100%) reported that their motivation levels remained stable despite the transition from flexible working arrangements to office-based settings, the RQ1 finding was further substantiated by this evidence. Notably, 86% of employees expressed their intention to remain with the organisation even if required to return to a full five-day work week, suggesting the change from flexible working arrangements to full return-to-office settings had no significant effect on employees' motivation.

6.4.3 Literature on Research Question 3 Results

The literature and research data indicated that the benefits of returning to the office were essentially a response to addressing the drawbacks of flexible working arrangements; hence, these two constructs are at odds with each other. The drawback of working flexibly is that employees often felt lonely and isolated from the rest of the colleagues as asserted by Green et al. (2020). Participants cited the unavailability of managers and colleagues online when they needed them for assistance or to bounce off ideas as the most counterproductive experience in flexible working arrangements. This finding was congruent with Chafe et al.'s (2021) findings that employees experienced a lack of support in decision-making and progress feedback on work in a remote work setting. In addition, Trevor and Holweg (2022) argued that flexible working arrangements diminished water cooler encounters that sparked innovation, when working flexibly.

With return-to-office settings, all these issues are highly improbable to happen since all employees and managers are present in the office. This suggested that directives for returning to the office were more effective in promoting team collaboration, driving innovation, enhancing interpersonal communication, facilitating social interaction, and fostering overall workplace dynamics.

The next section provides the key summary of Research Questions 4 and 5 findings. These questions which were posed to the managers of knowledge workers mandated to transition from flexible working arrangements to office-based environments.

6.5 Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ4

What perceptions does management hold about their staff motivation towards work after implementing return-to-office directives?

The only theme that emerged from Research Question 4 was 'management's perspective'. The theme outlined two different perspectives on how managers viewed their staff's attitude and motivation towards work after implementing return-to-work directives.

6.5.1 RQ 4 Theme 1: Management Perspective

Managers identified two distinct groups when assessing employees' attitudes toward work following the introduction of return-to-work directives. The first group comprised employees who

exhibited ambivalent sentiments regarding the transition, cautiously approaching it. Conversely, the second group included employees who displayed enthusiasm and eagerness to resume office work.

After implementing return-to-work directives, managers noted an absence of significant variation in motivation levels on their employees. This outcome aligned with the findings of Research Question 1, which indicated that the motivational levels of employees remained unaffected by these changes. Consequently, the finding of Research Question 4 regarding employee motivation corroborated the RQ1 results related to employee motivation.

Managers were vague about the long-term benefits of the return-to-work directive. They were all (100%) very clear and decisive in their view that a full 5-day week return-to-work directive would result in employees leaving the organisation. This view contradicts the view of the majority of employees on retention.

In summary, according to managers, employees' motivation did not change due to the rollout of return-to-office directives. However, the attitude towards work did change for the 58% of the participants, accentuating discontentment with the revocation of flexible working arrangements and the loss of benefits realised from flexibility.

6.5.2 Literature on Research Question 4 Results

Managers reported not having observed any changes in employee motivation when return-to-office directives were implemented to replace flexible working arrangements. Employees accentuated that flexible working arrangement is not the primary reason they are employed with the company. They further asserted that, pre-Covid 19 lockdowns they were exposed to a five-days week in office and does not see why it would be an issue if the organisation mandate them to pre-Covid 19 work set up. In both pre and post Covid 19 aera they delivered great performance for the company. As such the transition to office centric setup, did not cause any change in their motivational level towards work.

The study result shows that the participants were always motivated to do what needs to be done, whether at home or in the office. This sentiment contradicts the literature, particularly a survey conducted by Leger (2021) on employees in Canada and United States of America, found that 35% of employees surveyed indicated that they would seriously consider leaving their employers if management revoked flexible working arrangements and were mandated to return to traditional

office settings. This contradiction between employees based in North America and those based in South Africa can be justified when considering employment rate in these countries.

The employees based in the USA and Canada who are reported by Lager (2021) to oppose return-to-office directives aggressively and considering leaving their organisation if flexible working arrangements were to be revoked face an unemployment rate of about 4.1% and 5.4% (StatCan, 2024) in their respective countries. In contrast, South African employees face a very different labour market characterised by high unemployment rate of about 32% (StatSA, 2024).

All managers, 12 out of 12 expressed strong scepticism regarding the potential impact of a mandatory five-day return-to-office directives, insisting that such a measure would likely have resulted in staff departures. This conclusion starkly contrasted the findings of Research Question 3, where 86% of employees indicated, they would not consider leaving the organisation, even if required to adopt a full-time in-office schedule of five days per week. This discrepancy was noteworthy. Green et al. (2020) and other academics contended that, within competitive labour markets, many high-potential candidates regarded job flexibility as a pivotal element influencing their employment choices. The perspectives presented by Green et al. (2020) and the findings from Leger (2021) regarding employee retention in the context of return-to-office policies were consistent with the views of managers of knowledge workers. However, they diverged from the sentiments expressed by employees.

6.6 Summary of Key Findings and Discussion for RQ5

What perception does management hold about their staff's motivation should flexible working arrangements be retained?

6.6.1 RQ 5 Theme: Future World of Work

The salient theme that emerged from Research Question 5 findings was “future world of work”, shedding light on managers' perspectives regarding employee motivation in the context of flexible work arrangements. Consistent with the findings of Research Question 4, unanimously, all 12 managers surveyed inferred that their employees' motivation would be enhanced if flexible working arrangements were sustained. This suggests a clear preference among employees for flexibility over traditional office centric settings, as perceived by managers.

While management posited that flexible working arrangements align with employee preferences, the findings from RQ1 indicate that the removal of such arrangements would not diminish employees' motivation levels. Furthermore, as highlighted in RQ3, 86% of employees indicated that they would not be inclined to leave the organisation due to removing flexibility. It is noteworthy that these findings, when considered collectively, highlight maintaining flexible working arrangements, would enhance employees' attitude and team morale towards work but not necessarily affect their motivation.

6.6.2 Literature on Research Question 5 Results

For managers, reinstating flexible work arrangements is anticipated to bolster employee morale, enhance productivity, elevate performance, and improve work-life balance. This is congruent with the findings of Ballentine et al. (2022), Kelliher and Anderson (2010), and Mwando et al. (2021) that flexible work arrangements enhance employee morale and job satisfaction, which results in high productivity and quality outcomes. Employees who work flexibly save on commuting time as Alkhawaldeh et al. (2023) posited and will be less distracted by small talk and coffee breaks, which are common in the office environment, thus improving their productivity and time management.

Managers hold a pivotal role in shaping an organisation's strategic direction. According to the data collected during this research, of all surveyed managers, 12 out of 12 preferred a hybrid working model for their respective teams. This preference is founded on the belief that such a model offers a balanced approach, integrating the advantages of flexible working arrangements with those associated with traditional office settings.

6.7 Conclusion

This section aims to integrate high-level findings with the literature by comparing their similarities and differences. It then states whether each finding addresses the research questions and whether the findings contribute to, extend, or contradict the current body of knowledge.

6.7.1 The impact of implementing return-to-office directives on employee motivation

Regarding the findings of Research Question 1 (RQ), which aimed to establish whether implementing return-to-office policies affected employees' motivation and attitude towards work,

this research found that employees' motivation did not change when management implemented return-to-office policies. Even though fewer participants indicated that they had been discontented with the change, it negatively affected their attitudes towards work but not motivation.

In contemporary academic literature, Kelliher and Anderson (2010), Mwando et al. (2021), and other esteemed scholars asserted that implementing flexible working arrangements beneficially affects employee motivation, enhancing organisational culture that prioritises supportive environment and work-life balance, employee morale, job satisfaction and productivity which translate to better financial performance. The notion of return-to-office mandates is a relatively emerging topic within scholarly literature. RQ1's aim was to explore its effect on employees' motivation.

The RQ1 was sufficiently addressed, asserting that introducing return-to-office directives does not affect employee motivation. Therefore, this finding added to the body of knowledge.

6.7.2 Implications of the Benefits and Drawbacks of Flexible Working Arrangements on Employees' Motivation

The RQ2 aimed to outline the benefits and drawbacks of flexible working arrangements, and the two emerging themes highlighted the most pertinent benefits and drawbacks and their implications on workplace motivation. The first theme was work-life balance, which was regarded as the most important benefit of flexible working arrangements by employees. In the literature, work-life balance is considered the most valuable incentive for employees to choose flexible working arrangements (Ramakrishnan & Arokiasamy, 2019). With work-life balance, employees could fulfil their personal and work obligations without compromising each obligation. The primary limitation of flexible working arrangements, as highlighted by Green et al. (2020), Wadhawan (2019), Trevor and Holweg (2022), and other scholars, was that flexible working arrangements could lead to diminished interpersonal connections and reduced social interactions among employees. Furthermore, synchronous communication tended to be inhibited, leading to delayed feedback and hindering progress.

Therefore, RQ2 was sufficiently addressed, demonstrating that the advantages of flexible working arrangements improve employee motivation, while the disadvantages have no effect on it. Consequently, the findings regarding Research Question 2 (RQ2) were consistent with the existing literature on this topic.

6.7.3 Implications of Benefits and Drawbacks of Return-to-Office on Employees' Motivation

Research Question 3 (RQ3) aimed to outline the benefits and drawbacks of return-to-office directives, and two themes emerged to highlight these directives' benefits and drawbacks and their implications for workplace motivation. The first theme was the effective working environment, which had been the outcome of return-to-office directives. It emphasised that with return-to-office directives, employees experienced improved collaboration, interpersonal communication, and effective problem-solving as benefits. The second theme outlined the primary drawback, which was organisational challenges, underscoring the employees' preference for flexible working arrangements contrary to return-to-office directives, due to extensive commuting which inadvertently lessens employees' productive time. These themes were congruent with the literature.

6.7.4 The Impact of Flexible Working Arrangements and Return-to-Office Directives on Employee Turnover

However, regarding job retention in the absence of flexibility, this finding contradicted the literature, indicating that some 86% of knowledge workers asserted that they would not consider resigning should the organisation compel them to return to the office five days a week. When assessing whether employees would stay or leave the organisation should the flexible working arrangements be removed, this development brought to the forefront new insight that flexibility was not all and sundry for all employees, as portrayed in literature. The findings underscored that whether it was there or not, employees' motivation was not affected, nor was their need to change jobs. This contradicted the current literature, which posited that flexibility was integral to employees' consideration of employment opportunities (Green et al., 2020).

Research Question 3 was sufficiently addressed. It demonstrated that return-to-office directives have been shown to create an effective work environment. However, research data demonstrated that both advantages and disadvantages have no effect on employee motivation, further reinforcing the findings of RQ1. Therefore, these findings add to the current body of knowledge.

6.7.5 Managements' perception of staff's motivation level post implementation of Return-to-Office Directives

The findings of RQ4, which aimed to explore management's views on how return-to-office directives affected their staff's motivation and attitudes towards work, revealed that

'management's perspective' was the only theme that emerged. Managers identified two distinct groups: one with employees who displayed ambivalent sentiments, cautiously approaching the transition to return to the office. The second group consisted of employees who exhibited excitement, enthusiasm, and eagerness to return to the office.

Both groups exhibited a consistent level of motivation towards their work pre and post implementation of return-to-work directives. The findings from Research Question 4, as reported by the managers, indicated that the introduction of return-to-office directives did not affect employees' motivation. These results agreed with Research Question 1, demonstrating that motivation remained unchanged after implementing these directives.

Therefore, RQ4 effectively illustrated that return-to-office directives did not cause employee motivation to vary. This finding thus contributed to the existing body of knowledge on the subject.

6.7.6 Employee retention

Regarding employee retention, management's views aligned with existing research, suggesting that reducing flexibility could have greatly raised the chances of employee turnover. However, this conclusion conflicted with the findings from RQ3, which showed that 86% of employees indicating their intention to stay with the organisation, even if it reverted to pre-COVID-19 traditional 5-day workweek. This finding contradicts current literature and add suggest that future studies should take into account the context and dynamics of the country where research is done.

6.7.7 Managements' perception of staff's motivation level if flexible working arrangements are retained

In relation to Research Question 5, which sought to investigate management's perspective on employee motivation in the context of retaining flexible working arrangements, a prominent theme that emerged was the concept of the 'future world of work.' Management's findings and insights correspond with the perspectives of Ballentine et al. (2022), Keller and Anderson (2010), and Mwando et al. (2021), indicating that flexible working arrangements will enhance employee morale, increase productivity and performance and contribute positively to work-life balance. Consequently, it improves employees' motivation towards work.

Hence, RQ5 has been thoroughly examined, illustrating that the benefits of flexible working arrangements significantly enhance employee motivation. Thus, the findings of RQ5 align with those of RQ2, reaffirming that the advantages of flexible working arrangements positively

influence employee motivation. Consequently, these findings support the existing academic discourse on the subject.

The empirical evidence shows that implementing return-to-office directives does not affect employee motivation levels and that implementing flexible working arrangements improves employee motivation.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 era, many organisations adopted flexible working arrangements on an unprecedented scale to circumvent the restrictions and lockdowns imposed by governments to mitigate the spread of the virus disease. This qualitative exploratory research aimed to explore the paradox of flexible working arrangements initiated by employers to circumvent business challenges during the COVID-19 era and the new emerging concept known as return-to-office directives, where employers are now mandating employees to adopt pre-COVID-19 office-centric setups. The study aimed to understand the dichotomy of employer-initiated flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives and their effect on knowledge workers' motivation.

Flexible working arrangements are extensively recognised in academic literature as a significant organisational strategy that has contributed to the sustainability of most organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they have been shown to inhibit a collaborative spirit that organisations aim to cultivate. Flexible working arrangements are inherently designed for individuals to enhance their autonomy. Nevertheless, they risk undermining the social fabric that underpins effective teamwork and collaborative ideas that foster innovation. In the aftermath of COVID-19 restrictions, many organisational leaders began to reassess their workplace policies; as a result, the return-to-office directive emerged as an alternative. Many organisations began to call their workers back to the office.

The impact of the interplay of these constructs is felt worldwide, creating an upheaval in the workplace. Some employees advocate for continuing flexible working arrangements, while others want to return to the office.

The research problem is premised on the management's encounter with this paradoxical dilemma: persisting with flexible working arrangements or instituting return-to-office directives. The challenge for managers lies in the fact that choosing to enforce return-to-office directives may provoke resistance from employees, thereby posing a risk of losing essential talent and subverting the overall organisational performance. Conversely, continuing flexible work arrangements may hinder innovation, diminish competitive advantage, and compromise organisational culture. In either scenario, it is imperative for management to comprehend the potential repercussions of their decisions.

This chapter articulates the study's conclusions by summarising the key findings and highlighting their implications for academic discourse and business practice. A comprehensive framework is presented to elucidate the effects of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives on knowledge workers' motivation and resulting outcomes. Furthermore, the framework delineates the influence of these constructs on productivity and overall workplace effectiveness.

7.2 Summary of the Research Findings and Framework

All five research questions were thoroughly addressed. Consequently, the findings from these questions corroborated the existing literature and offered further insights into the body of knowledge. Therefore, it can be posited that overall, the research yielded new insights, particularly regarding the new concept of return-to-office directives.

The findings showed that implementing return-to-office directives does not affect employees' motivation. Based on empirical evidence, although there are noted elements of discomfort, inconveniences, and challenges in dealing with the transition that employees experienced, their level of motivation remained unaffected.

Flexible working arrangements have been demonstrated to enhance employee motivation, especially regarding their perceived benefits. Empirical research data collected from both employees and managers corroborated this increase. Furthermore, cross-referencing these findings with existing literature revealed consistent results, reinforcing the initial observations.

On employee turnover, literature and management support the notion that employees are likely to leave the organisation if flexible working arrangements are removed. However, imperial evidence from employees contradicts this view.

7.3 Framework for understanding the effects of FWA and RTO on employees' motivation

The framework in Figure 7.1 illustrates the effect of each construct, that is, flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives, on different organisational contexts, which are motivation, productivity, and workplace effectiveness, and provides the outcomes produced for each context.

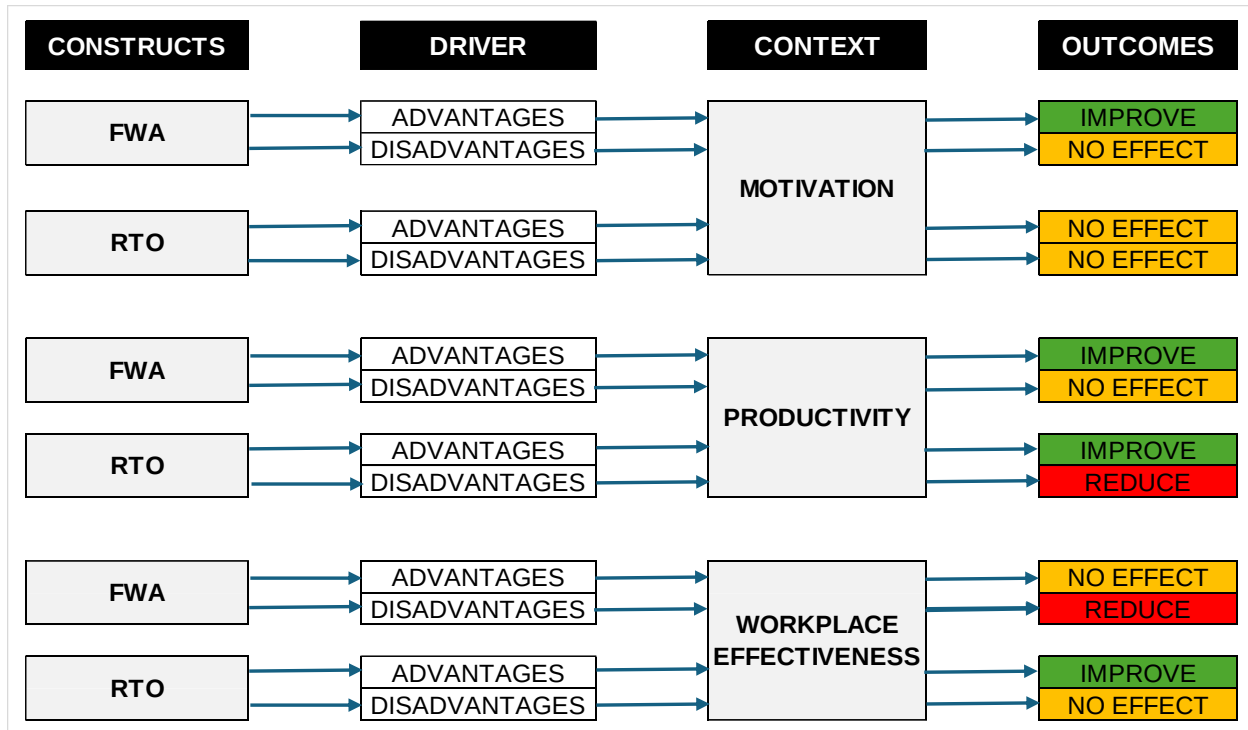


Figure 7.1. Framework for understanding the effects of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives in a context of motivation, productivity and workplace effectiveness.

7.3.1 Framework Interpretation and impact on Stakeholders

This framework is based on empirical data. Its purpose is to elucidate the effect of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives on the organisation. It is intended to help business leaders make informed decisions about workplace policies and better understand the repercussions of these arrangements on motivation, productivity, and workplace effectiveness.

The following section explains the framework and discusses the framework's contribution to stakeholders.

7.3.2 Motivation

Based on empirical evidence, the framework depicts that flexible working arrangements, particularly their advantages, enhance employee motivation at work. However, their disadvantages have no impact on motivation levels. Contrary to the return-to-office directives, neither the advantages nor the disadvantages affect employee motivation levels.

This finding is particularly significant for business leaders when contemplating to implement or to revoke flexible working arrangements or return-to-office directives. This insight will be valuable in guiding their decisions regarding which workplace policy will best suit their environment in terms of employee motivation. It is critical to consider where each type of job can be performed. Some jobs can only be carried out in the office, while others can be done either remotely or in the office. As empirical data highlights, business leaders must consider each employee's circumstances, whether they can effectively work remotely or face challenges working from home.

Scholars alike stand to benefit from this empirical evidence in academic discourse. The concept of return-to-office, which is less popular, has been brought to the forefront of academic discourse. This research paper hopes to entice and encourage other scholars to study this concept in more detail, further broadening and expanding the body of knowledge.

7.3.3 Productivity context

In the business context, discussing flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives and their effect on motivation without considering their impact on productivity will render the study futile to the business fraternity. Based on empirical evidence, the framework highlights flexible working arrangements, specifically their advantages, to positively affect productivity. Implementing flexible working arrangements improves productivity in the organisation. The framework depicts the disadvantages of flexible working arrangements as having no effect on productivity, meaning they neither improve nor reduce productivity.

The return-to-office directives, particularly their advantages, are depicted in the framework as positively impacting productivity. This is supported by empirical evidence showing that when employees are gathered in one location, they can collaborate, bounce ideas off each other, and make quick, effective decisions compared to when they are working remotely. The disadvantages of returning to the office are shown to affect productivity negatively. This conclusion is based on research data indicating that employees reported losing a considerable amount of productive time, mainly due to commuting to the office and disruption from the office.

Concerning stakeholders' implications, this framework and its insights regarding productivity impact will empower business leaders to utilise these findings and investigate various scenarios to identify the best policy to support their organisation in achieving its objectives and targets. Additionally, the framework and its findings will serve as a foundation for scholars to comprehend these concepts and their interrelationships with productivity for further studies.

7.3.4 Effective Work Environment

Empirical evidence suggests that the advantages of flexible working arrangements have no significant impact on workplace effectiveness. However, the disadvantages of flexible working arrangements have detrimental effects on workplace effectiveness. This outcome aligns with the research findings and literature that flexible working arrangements reduce collaboration, interpersonal relationships, delayed response time when it comes to decision making, diminishes the water-cooler ideation encounters, and in turn erode organisational culture.

On the contrary, the advantages of return-to-office directives have been shown to positively affect workplace effectiveness, improving the overall workplace effectiveness. Research data indicates that physical presence in an office environment enhances collaboration, fosters innovation, facilitates swift problem-solving, and cultivates a stronger sense of employee connectivity. However, the disadvantages associated with returning to the office appear to have no impact on workplace effectiveness.

This framework can assist business leaders to enhance their decision making when motivation, productivity and workplace effectiveness are a key priority in deciding which workplace policies policy to adopt. This insight proves particularly valuable when making decisions concerning workplace design and workplace policy development, it allows business leaders to make informed decisions and highlights the repercussions for each decision to be made.

Regarding the contribution to stakeholders, it is hoped that the framework will enhance academic discourse and business by elucidating how flexible work arrangements and return-to-office directives influence employees' motivation and how these concepts manifest in real life, particularly when key organisational matrices such as productivity and workplace effectiveness are considered.

7.4 Recommendations for Business when considering changing Workplace Policies

Business leaders should carefully evaluate the potential impact of workplace policy changes on employee motivation, productivity, and overall workplace effectiveness. Understanding the various types of flexible working arrangements as identified by Avgoustaki and Bessa (2019) is crucial. For example, adopting employee-centred flexible working arrangements can significantly enhance employee satisfaction, promote health, and promote a better work-life balance.

Conversely, if flexible arrangements are primarily employer-centred, they may prioritise the organisation's interests over those of employees. To avoid future conflicts, leaders should take time to clarify and align with employees prior to implementing flexible working arrangements in the organisation.

According to the literature, many organisations rushed to implement flexible working arrangements (Franken et al., 2021) without considering which jobs were suitable for such working conditions. In the post-pandemic, it is recommended that organisations revisit and revise these policies to align with their strategic objectives. Furthermore, leaders must evaluate each job for remote work eligibility, considering the individual circumstances of those who are able to work remotely.

It is recommended that management desist the temptation of implementing rigid policies concerning flexible working. Empirical evidence supported by literature indicates that overly strict policies can lead to increased absenteeism; for example, if an employee cannot be permitted to take off an hour or two during working hours to attend to personal matters, there is a strong possibility that they will call in sick or take a whole day's leave of absence.

Furthermore, it is recommended that management ensure that the reintroduction of office-based work aligns with the organisation's overall strategic objectives. It is essential to engage meaningfully with employees during this transition to allow adequate time for them to adapt to the return to an office environment. Existing literature and empirical studies indicate that many individuals have adjusted their lifestyles to embrace flexibility; for example, parents may currently be able to drop their children off at school and pick them up afterwards. However, the implementation of return-to-office policies necessitates employees to find alternative arrangements for childcare.

It is imperative that management also prioritises effective change management and support for employees transitioning back to office work. Management should make concerted efforts to ensure that employees receive sufficient support during this transition to office environments and demonstrate a willingness to listen to their concerns actively.

7.5 Recommendations for Future Studies

7.5.1 Adopt longitudinal design

The current study employs a cross-sectional qualitative research design. It is suggested that future researchers consider this paper as a groundwork for future work. Longitudinal qualitative research is recommended for upcoming studies, as it allows for a comprehensive exploration of how experiences, behaviours, attitudes, or phenomena change over time, highlighting the transitions in participants' lives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These studies would improve validity by triangulating data collected over time, strengthening the conclusions and uncovering any unexpected insights. The detailed data gathered from longitudinal qualitative studies at various stages can significantly aid in developing and refining research literature in this area.

7.5.2 Expand Sample Scope

The current study used a purposeful sampling technique to draw participants from the researcher's professional network. The total number of participants was 26, of which 14 were employees, and 12 were managers. To enhance the generalisability of the study, it is recommended that future studies expand the sample scope by broadening the participants' pool to include more diverse organisations, geographic regions, demographic populations, and cultures (Saunders & Lewis, 2017).

7.5.3 Explore understudied themes

Future studies should explore the unaddressed themes from the current study, including areas where research data is incongruent with existing literature, by expanding the sample to other corporations in multiple geographical regions.

7.5.4 Employ mix method

Current research centres on the emerging concept of the return-to-office directive, which has not been comprehensively studied. Therefore, further investigation is required to understand this phenomenon to a greater degree. Additionally, it is advisable for future studies to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods to achieve a better understanding of the subject.

7.6 Study Limitations

Although the critical issues explored and discussed in this study are peculiar or have not been extensively researched, the study has limitations. Earlier chapters briefly discussed the study's importance, limitations, and scope. In this section, the study's limitations are outlined in detail.

The study focused on only one type of participant category: knowledge workers. In addition, the sample size was trivial; consequently, the results and conclusions may not be used to make general conclusions on the phenomenon under study (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). As such, the findings and conclusions only reflect the lived experiences and perceptions of the sampled individuals.

The study could not establish with absolute certainty the impact of flexible working arrangements and return-to-work directives on employee motivation or attitude towards their work duties, due to limitation in sample and methodology. More studies of this nature are recommended to address missing gaps in the literature and yield conclusive and comprehensive insights on the topic.

The sample was drawn from the researcher's professional network within a single organisation, which lacked sufficient diversity to encompass a wider array of perspectives, thereby raising the likelihood of potential sampling bias.

The study's application of non-probability sampling precludes the ability to draw statistical inferences, as the sample did not represent the entire population (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). The study employed non-probability purposive sampling techniques to gather data from knowledgeable individual participants. Consequently, the results may not accurately reflect a broader population, which limits their generalizability.

The research adopted a mono-method qualitative design, which limited the diversity of data collected since it excluded alternative methodologies that could have enhanced the richness and quality of the data collected (Saunders & Lewis, 2017).

Qualitative research relies heavily on participants' recall of events and their willingness to express their experiences accurately (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). Consequently, social desirability bias may affect the narratives of knowledge workers and managers, potentially leading them to adjust their responses to fit expectations.

Data was collected through virtual semi-structured interviews using Teams, which made it difficult for the researcher to build rapport and trust with interviewees. This, in turn, may have affected the depth and authenticity of the responses.

The non-verbal cues may have been missed or misinterpreted during the virtual semi-structured interviews. These interviews rely on a strong and stable internet connection; however, network and power outages are common in South Africa and can negatively affect audio and video quality, limiting the flow and depth of conversation.

In virtual interviews, some participants had to stop the session exactly at the end of the scheduled time to attend to other commitments. This situation had a limiting effect on probing and resulted in less depth compared to in-person interviews.

The findings of this study may lack robustness due to the researcher's limited experience in conducting research. This deficiency in expertise could compromise previous methodologies, subsequently affecting the study's capacity to yield thorough results and conclusions.

7.7 Conclusions

This qualitative study used an exploratory inductive approach to explore the impact of employer-initiated flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives on knowledge workers' motivation in a contemporary workplace post-COVID-19. The main purpose was to understand how management can effectively balance the implementation of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives within the current business landscape in the post-pandemic area by contrasting these two constructs and examining their resulting impact on employee motivation, especially in the knowledge workers' roles.

The empirical data led to a framework (Figure 7.1) development that illustrates the effects of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office directives on employees' motivation, organisational productivity, and effective workplace environment. Furthermore, the framework provides the anticipated outcomes for each decision management takes on workplace design.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to academic discourse and business practices in organisations, enhancing understanding of how the implementation of flexible working arrangements and return-to-office policies affects employees' motivation, productivity, and workplace effectiveness and their repercussions.

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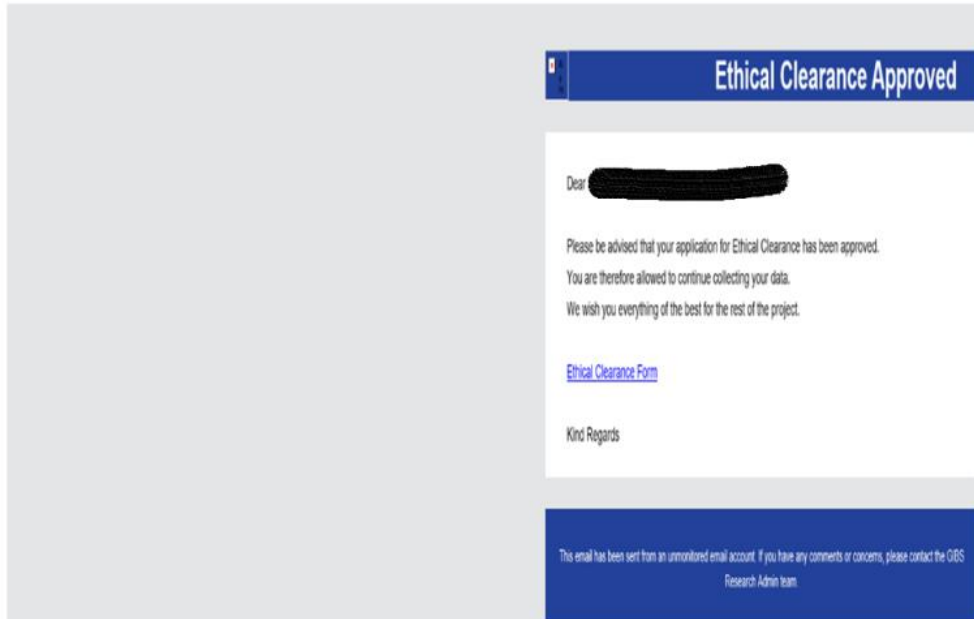
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPROVAL

From: Masters Research <MastersResearch@gibs.co.za>
Date: Thu, 8 Aug 2024 at 19:34
Subject: Ethical Clearance Approved
To: [REDACTED]@gibs.co.za
Cc: Masters Research <MastersResearch@gibs.co.za>



APPENDIX B: PERMISSION LETTER

24 July 2024

Dear [REDACTED],

REQUEST TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS TO FULFIL MBA QUALIFICATIONS.

I refer to your request sent on 22 June 2024 to collect data for your MBA Research through semi-structured interviews with [REDACTED] employees.

After reviewing your request, I am pleased to inform you that the company has approved it. However, the approval is subject to certain conditions. You must:

- Safeguard the confidentiality of the company and its employees
 - Do not include any names
 - Store data without identifying information
 - Only report aggregated information
- Preserve and respect the rights, freedom, and well-being of stakeholders and participants connected to your research project.

Participants must consent to being interviewed, understand the study's purpose, appreciate their role, and know their right to withdraw without penalty. This requires a signed consent form from the researcher and participant.

Over and above this minimum requirement, you must also adhere to your university's specific regulations.

Should you require any clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me. We wish you success in your research project and look forward to collaborating with you.

Kind regards,



Senior Human Resources Manager

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Dear Participant,

I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science, completing my research in partial fulfilment of an MBA.

I'm researching how managers can effectively balance the dichotomy of flexible work arrangements and employees returning to the office directives in the current business environment, especially after the pandemic. I'll compare the two approaches and examine how they affect employees' motivation, especially in knowledge-based roles. Our interview is expected to last about an hour to help me understand how employees' motivation is affected and how managers should best approach this contradiction. **Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.** All data will be reported without identifiers. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

	Researcher	Researcher Supervisor
Name	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Email	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

SECTION A		
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	
	Gender	Male, Female
	Age	20-29; 30-39; 40-49, 50+
	Current level	Professional/Supervisor, Middle Manager, Senior Manager, Executive
	Highest level of education:	Matric, Certificate, Diploma, Degree, Higher Diploma, Masters, PhD
	Years in the current company	0-2, 3-5, 6-9, 10+

SECTION B	
Research Questions 1 to 3 are directed at knowledge workers who were working flexibly, but have now been recalled to the office	
RQ 1. How has implementing return-to-office directives changed knowledge workers' motivation and attitude towards work	○ How did you feel when you first heard about the decision to return to the office? ○ How do you currently feel about being back in the office? ○ How has this transition affected your motivation at work? ○ How would you compare your level of motivation now to when you were working flexibly?
RQ 2. What are the benefits and drawbacks of flexible working arrangements for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?	<u>Positive experience with flexible working arrangements</u> 2.1 Can you share specific examples of how flexible working has positively impacted your work performance or productivity? 2.2 How has flexible working influenced your work-life balance? 2.3 Were there specific improvements in your personal life due to flexible working? If so, please describe how. 2.4 What have been the main benefits of flexible working arrangements for you personally? 2.5 Can you share any moments or experiences that have highlighted the benefits of flexible working for you?

	2.6 What specific factors related to flexible working arrangements have influenced your motivation positively? <u>Drawback experience with flexible working arrangements</u> 2.7 What challenges have you encountered while working flexibly? 2.8 How have these challenges affected your ability to perform your job? 2.9 How has flexible working impacted communication and collaboration with your colleagues and managers? 2.10 Have there been any difficulties in maintaining effective teamwork while working flexibly? 2.11 Have you experienced feelings of isolation or disconnection from your team or the Organisation while working flexibly? If so, how did these feelings affect your work and motivation? 2.12 What specific factors related to flexible working arrangements have negatively impacted your motivation?
RQ 3. What are the benefits and drawbacks of return-to-office directives for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?	<u>Positive experience with return-to-office directives</u> 3.1 What have been the main benefits of returning to the office for you personally? 3.2 Can you share specific examples of how returning to the office has positively impacted your work performance or productivity? 3.3 How has returning to the office affected communication and collaboration with your colleagues and managers? 3.4 Have there been improvements in teamwork and project coordination since returning to the office? 3.5 How does the office environment contribute to your motivation and job satisfaction? 3.6 Are there aspects of the office setting you missed while working flexibly?

	3.7 Since returning, do you feel more connected to your colleagues and the organisation? Why or why not? 3.8 What specific factors related to returning to the office have influenced your motivation positively? <u>Drawbacks experience with Return-to-Office Directives</u> 3.9 What challenges have you faced since returning to the office? 3.10 How have these challenges affected your ability to perform your job and maintain your motivation? 3.11 How has returning to the office impacted your work-life balance? 3.12 How has commuting impacted your motivation or energy levels at work? 3.13 What specific factors related to returning to the office have influenced your motivation negatively? 3.14 How has the directive for returning to the office impacted team communication, collaboration, or project coordination? 3.15 Have you considered leaving the organisation because of the return-to-office directives?
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SECTION C

Research Questions 4 and 5 are for managers implementing return-to-office directives and overseeing flexible working direct reports.

<u>RQ 4.</u> What perceptions does Management have about their staff's motivation toward work after	4.1 How have the return-to-office directives impacted your staff's motivation levels? 4.2 Can you provide specific examples or observations that support your view? 4.3 What feedback have you received from employees regarding the return-to-office directives?
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implementing return-to-office directives?	4.4 How has this feedback influenced your understanding of their motivation and engagement? 4.5 How has the return to the office impacted the company's culture, sense of belonging and collaborative innovation within your team/organisation? 4.6 Could you share your observations on any changes in staff productivity and performance since implementing return-to-office and how these changes relate to their motivation levels? 4.7 Do you think you might lose key talent due to return-to-office directives? Why or why not? 4.8 Do you think returning to the office is beneficial in the long term? Why or why not? 4.9 What suggestions do you have for improving the return-to-office experience to support motivation and productivity better?
RQ 5. What perception does management hold about their staff's motivation? Should flexible working arrangements be retained?	5.1 How do you anticipate retaining flexible working arrangements would affect your staff's motivation levels in the long term? 5.2 Can you share any specific reasons for your expectations? 5.3 Based on your experience, what would be your preferred work environment (fully flexible, fully office-based, or a hybrid model)? 5.4 How would this preference affect your motivation and job performance?

APPENDIX E: ON-LINE MEETING INVITATION

File Meeting Scheduling Assistant Tracking Insert Draw Format Text Review Help Tell me what you want to do

Cancel Meeting → Forward Calendar Join Teams Meeting Meeting Options Send to OneNote Contact Attendees Address Book Check Names Response Options Show As: Busy Recurrence Reminder: None Categorize High Importance Low Importance Tags Private

Attendee responses: 1 accepted, 0 tentatively accepted, 0 declined.

GBS

Send Update

Title Research Data Collection/ Interviews with S...

Required [Redacted]

Optional

Start time Thu 8/29/2024 12:00 PM All day Time zones

End time Thu 8/29/2024 1:00 PM Make Recurring

Location Microsoft Teams Meeting

Consent Statement - 27467393.pdf 103 KB

Good day, [Redacted]

Thank you for your support and for agreeing to take part in my research study, which will help me complete my MBA.

Our interview will be online. In line with the University protocols, would you please to sign the consent form attached and send it back to me.

Should this proposed time be unsuitable for you, please do not hesitate to suggest alternative time slots that would better accommodate your schedule. I am looking forward to our upcoming meeting.

Regards,
[Redacted]

Microsoft Teams [Need help?](#)

[Join the meeting now](#)

APPENDIX F: LIST OF RESPONDENTS

EMPLOYEES' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Participant (Alias)	Gender	Age group	Employment Level	Level of Qualification	No. yrs in the Organisation
E1	Female	40-49	Professional	Bachelor's degree	6-9
E2	Female	+50	Professional	National Diploma	+10
E3	Male	40-49	Professional	Master's degree	+10
E4	Female	40-49	Professional	National Diploma	+10
E5	Female	40-49	Professional	Honours degree	6-9
E6	Male	+50	Professional	National Diploma	+10
E7	Male	40-49	Professional	Bachelor's degree	10
E8	Male	30-39	Professional	Master's degree	6-9
E9	Male	40-49	Professional	Bachelor's degree	+10
E10	Male	+50	Professional	Master's degree	+10
E11	Male	30-39	Professional	Master's degree	3-5
E12	Male	30-39	Professional	Bachelor's degree	0-2
E13	Male	40—49	Professional	Bachelor's degree	+10
E14	Male	+50	Professional	Bachelor's degree	+10

Source: Research data (2024)

MANAGERS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Participant (Alias)	Gender	Age Group	Employment Level	Level of Qualification	No. yrs in the Organisation
M1	Female	40-49	Senior Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M2	Female	+50	Senior Manager	Honours degree	+10
M3	Male	40-49	Middle Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M4	Female	30-39	Middle Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M5	Female	+50	Middle Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M6	Female	+50	Middle Manager	Master's degree	+10
M7	Male	+50	Senior Manager	Master's degree	+10
M8	Male	Unknown	Senior Manager	Unknown	Unknown
M9	Female	40-49	Senior Manager	Honours degree	6-9
M10	Female	Unknown	Senior Manager	Unknown	Unknown
M11	Male	+50	Senior Manager	Bachelor's degree	+10
M12	Female	40-49	Senior Manager	Master's degree	+10

Source: Research data (2024)

APPENDIX G: CONSISTENCY MATRIX

A consistency matrix is a tool used in qualitative research to ensure alignment between research questions, objectives, theoretical framework, and data collection methods. It helps maintain coherence and rigour throughout the study. Here is how to develop a consistency matrix:

Research Questions	Objectives	Sections in the Literature Review	Data collection tools & source	Analysis technique
<u>RQ 1.</u> How has implementing return-to-work directives changed (or will change) knowledge workers' motivation and attitude towards work?	To explore employees' perception of return-to-work directives regarding their motivation towards work.	Kong et al. (2022) study revealed that more employees are inclined towards remote work and prefer it post-COVID. A study by Leger (2021) showed that 35% indicated they would resign if forced back into office.	<u>Tool:</u> Semi-structured interviews. <u>Data source:</u> Knowledge Workers	Thematic Analysis
<u>RQ 2.</u> What are the benefits and drawbacks of flexible working arrangements for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?	To weigh employees' views about the benefits and drawbacks of flexible working arrangements and their implications on their motivation.	Employees demonstrate enhanced work-life balance, employee wellness and autonomy over work schedule. (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Improved job performance (Green, 2020). Employees benefit from reduced commuting time and cost. (Kong et al., 2022)	<u>Tool:</u> Semi-structured interviews. <u>Data source:</u> Knowledge	Thematic Analysis
<u>RQ 3.</u> What are the benefits and drawbacks of return-to-work directives for knowledge workers and their implications for workplace motivation?	To weigh employees' and management's views about the benefits and drawbacks of returning to work and their implications on their motivation.	Improved collective collaboration, reduced siloed working environments and isolation, increased employee engagement, and generated innovative ideas (Chafi et al., 2021).	<u>Tool:</u> Semi-structured interviews. <u>Data source:</u> Knowledge	Thematic Analysis

		Leger's 2021 study shows that 20% of the employees indicated a desire to return to the office daily.	Workers and Managers	
<u>RQ 4.</u> What perceptions does management hold about their staff's motivation towards work after implementing return-to-work directives?	To explore management's views on how return-to-work directives affect their staff's motivation towards work.	Management will provide input critical to the development of theory. Motivation Theory. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs	<u>Tool:</u> Semi-structured interviews. <u>Data source:</u> Managers	Thematic Analysis
<u>RQ 5.</u> What perception does management hold about their staff's motivation should flexible working arrangements be retained?	To explore management's views on how flexible working arrangements affect their staff's motivation towards work.	Management will provide input critical to the development of theory. Motivation Theory Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs	<u>Tool:</u> Semi-structured interviews. <u>Data source:</u> Managers	Thematic Analysis

APPENDIX H: CERTIFICATE OF DATA ANALYSIS SUPPORT

CERTIFICATION OF DATA ANALYSIS SUPPORT

(Additional support retained or not - to be **completed by all students**)

Please note that failure to comply and report on this honestly will result in disciplinary action

I hereby certify that (please indicate which statement applies):

- *I DID NOT RECEIVE any additional/outside assistance (i.e. statistical, transcriptional, and/or editorial services) on my research report:*
.....

- *I RECEIVED additional/outside assistance (i.e. statistical, transcriptional, and/or editorial services) on my research report:*

Editorial Services
.....

If any additional services were retained– *please indicate below which:*

☐ *Statistician*

☐ *Transcriber*

☒ *Editor*

☐ *Other (please specify.....)*

Please provide the name(s) and contact details of all retained:

NAME: Prof. Maurice Oscar Dassah
.....

EMAIL ADDRESS: dassabie@yahoo.co.uk
.....

CONTACT NUMBER: +233 30 3387569
.....

TYPE OF SERVICE: Editing
.....

NAME:

EMAIL ADDRESS:

CONTACT NUMBER:

TYPE OF SERVICE:

NAME:

EMAIL ADDRESS:

CONTACT NUMBER:

TYPE OF SERVICE:

I hereby declare that all statistical write-ups and thematic interpretations of the results for my study were completed by myself without outside assistance

NAME OF STUDENT:
MOLOTSI NTSIENG HENDRICK MOFOKENG

SIGNATURE: 

STUDENT NUMBER:

27467393

STUDENT EMAIL ADDRESS:

23467393@mygibs.co.za

APPENDIX I: CODE BOOK

- Work-form-home
- COVID-19 pandemic
- Lockdowns
- Social distancing
- Flexible working arrangements
- Objectives
- Contemporary workplace
- Workplace policies
- Remote work
- Adaptation
- Business sustainability
- Strategic approach
- Freedom
- Autonomy
- Inflexible structures
- Work-life Balance
- Employee satisfaction
- Productivity
- Commuting
- Disruption
- Navigate
- Complexities
- Home
- Traditional workplace
- Personal life
- Mental wellbeing
- Isolation
- Staff
- Return-to-office directives
- Efficacy

- Post-COVID-19
- Collaboration
- Culture
- Interpersonal connections
- Performance
- Innovation
- Physical present
- Non-routine activity
- In-person check ins
- Social relationships
- Communication
- Social isolation
- Exclusion
- Loneliness
- Social disconnect
- Back-to-back / Consecutive meetings
- Effective teamwork
- Collaborative innovation
- Ideation
- Problem-solving
- Upheaval
- Workplace motivation
- Office-centric
- Collaborative workplace
- Corporate culture
- Customer services
- Sense of connectivity
- Traditional office
- Juxtaposition
- Employee motivation and engagement
- Face-to-face interaction
- Interpersonal relationships
- Work practice

- High skilled
- High paid
- Paradoxical imperative
- Employees pushback
- Competitive advantage
- Revocation
- Perception
- Knowledge-worker
- Cognitive ability
- Proficiency
- Extrinsic
- Intrinsic
- Traditional theories
- Contemporary theories
- Justice
- Physiological
- Safety
- Belonging
- Esteem
- Self-actualisation
- Expectations
- Desirability
- Hard work
- Evaluation
- Behaviours
- Psychological
- Needs
- Dynamic
- Human behavior
- Business continuity
- Digital communication
- Self-respect
- Unmet needs

- Influence
- Encourage
- Perception
- Commitment
- Performance
- Desired goal
- Direction
- Self-driven
- Highly engaged
- Productive
- Accountable
- Outcomes
- Insight
- Concepts
- Incentives
- Training
- Workplace dynamics
- Non-standard hours
- Compressed workweek
- Reduced work hours
- Location based flexibility
- Time flexibility
- Teleworking
- Contractual flexibility
- Employee-centred flexible working arrangements
- Employer-centred flexible working arrangements
- Formal flexible working arrangements
- Informal flexible working arrangements
- Office based work model
- Top talent
- Leadership support
- Technological infrastructure
- Leadership commitment

- Financial performance
- Employee retention
- Customer
- Travel costs
- Team diversity
- Absenteeism
- Conventional office settings
- Employee lifestyle
- Hybrid model
- Future of work
- Employee connections
- Always on-culture
- Employees morale
- Self-efficacy
- Onsite presence
- Office based work
- Real time problem resolution
- Multitask
- Availability