

**Smaller but not the same: performance management in high-
growth SMEs**

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Declaration

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



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JOURNAL SELECTION MOTIVATION LETTER

The selected journal is Employee Relations published by Emerald and has a wide coverage of topics focussing on understanding employment and HR challenges. Relevant topics to the present article include management of performance and rewards, the management of talent and quality of working life. The journal also addresses alternative strategies to cultivate positive relationships between managers and employees.

This article joins the debate on performance management in SMEs and references four articles within the journal (Obeidat, Mitchell & Bray, 2016; Doherty & Norton, 2014; Marlow & Patton, 2002; Plester & Hutchison, 2016) discussing the various practices and challenges that SMEs encountered within the employee performance development milieu.

The Academic journal guide rates Employee Relations as a two, and is accredited by ISI and Scopus in 2019.

This journal article follows the journal author guidelines as published by Emerald Publishing.

Based on the relative contribution from the authors, the proposed author sequence is Pretorius, C. and Pearson, H., which is supported by the traditional inference of the last author position being reserved for the supervisor.



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CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE STUDY

2.1. Performance Management

Aguinis (2019) defined performance management (PM) as a “continuous process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and teams and aligning performance with the strategic goals of the organization” (Aguinis, 2019, p. 4), which accentuates alignment of PM practices and Human Resource (HR) development with the strategy of the organisation. Cascio and Aguinis (2019) explained that PM systems could function as vehicles for personnel development and is vital to improve individual and team performance. PM and reward systems can stimulate the development of individuals and provide powerful messages on what the firm values (Swart & Kinnie, 2013). Cascio (2014) proposed that PM ought to be an integral part of a high-performance culture and should not only be considered during annual review periods (Biron, Farndale, & Paauwe, 2011; Cascio, 2014; Folan & Browne, 2005).

Recent research in PM with the emphasis on how it affects employee engagement (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Sheehan, 2014; Zhong, Wayne, & Liden, 2016), links effective PM of individuals to management innovation and organisational performance (Li, Wang, Van Jaarsveld, Lee, & Ma, 2018; Walker, Damanpour, & Devece, 2011).

Biron et al. (2011) studied lessons from world-leading firms that used regular conversations on performance and development, and focussed on personal growth and short term goals as intrinsic rewards. However, in terms of accountability, formal feedback on appraisals was found to be essential to keep individuals accountable (Biron et al., 2011; Mero, Guidice, & Brownlee, 2007). These practices mentioned form a combination of both informal and formal practices and could be applied in both small and larger firms (Sheehan, 2014).

2.1.1. High-performance work practices

Due to limited material and financial resource availability, SMEs often depend on their highly motivated, competent and qualified employees in order to provide a competitive advantage as per resourced based theory (Doherty & Norton, 2014; Fu et al., 2017; Sheehan, 2014). This high dependence on employees requires

companies to strategically manage their employees in order to ensure competence, motivation, and opportunity for firms to prosper (Kundu & Gahlawat, 2018).

Literature on personnel management has moved away from control-based management practices to practices that support employee engagement namely high commitment work practices (Allen, Ericksen, & Collins, 2013; McClean & Collins, 2011; Obeidat, Mitchell, & Bray, 2016), high involvement work practices (Li et al., 2018) and high performance work practices (Bendickson, Muldoon, Liguori, & Midgett, 2017; Chang & Chen, 2011; Chang, 2016; Fu et al., 2017; Posthuma, Campion, Masimova, & Campion, 2013; Zhong et al., 2016). Allen et al. (2013) indicated that the performance of small firms could be increased by increasing employee involvement utilising a set of commitment based work practices, that include autonomy and informal control, recruitment based on culture fit and increased employee to firm attachment utilising relationships and company identity.

Brown *et al.* (2019) identified a gap in the current literature examining PM practices in less developed areas of the world with specific mention to the African context with only three recent studies found in Africa (Gyensare, 2012; Ogunyomi and Bruning, 2016; Omolo et al., 2012). Deductive studies conducted, in Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya on SMEs partially supported hypotheses developed with key high-performance Human Resource Management (HRM) constructs to test the relationships between HR practices and firm performance (Gyensare, 2012; Ogunyomi and Bruning, 2016; Omolo et al., 2012). These African country studies considered recruitment and selection, training and development, employee voice, performance evaluation, promotion practices and compensation. Conflicting results were found between which practices had a relationship with organisational performance. To date, no standard set of HR practices or measures has been developed for evaluating the effect of HR practices on organisational performance (Ogunyomi and Bruning, 2016).

To understand the strategic relevance of high-performance work practices (HPWP), the ability, motivation, and opportunity (AMO) framework were utilised (Kundu & Gahlawat, 2018; Obeidat et al., 2016). In terms of the AMO framework, ability-enhancing practices included HR practices to acquire skills or improve skills and includes sophisticated recruitment practices, or training and development of existing personnel. Motivation enhancing practices included HR practices that motivate specific employee behaviour and formal performance appraisal and rigorous

compensation systems. Performance incentives resulted in individuals who felt being treated fairly and subsequently responded positively with increased performance.

Lastly, opportunity enhancing practices included HR practices that involved personnel in substantive decision-making and provided more autonomy and opportunities to increase their confidence such as information-sharing, flexible work-schedules and effective-communication (Obeidat et al., 2016). Fu et al. (2017) noted a strategic function of high-performance work practices (HPWP) as these practices contributed to organisational capital, such as structure, systems, culture, and processes.

Research in various industries has found that HPWP has a positive effect on organisational-performance and supported the above AMO model with HPWP that included careful recruitment selection, comprehensive training and development, competitive compensation and an open communication culture (Fu et al., 2017; Obeidat et al., 2016). Thus well established high-performance work practices could provide the vital organisational performance required for the continued survival of the organisation (Behrends, 2007; Fu et al., 2017). However, more theory-based research is called for on the processes and pressures that persuade firms to adopt their formation of HPWP (Posthuma et al., 2013).

2.1.2. Informal and Formal PM practices

Marlow and Thompson (2008) provided insight with a qualitative research study of formal and informal approaches to labour management in growing, medium-sized firms. Findings from the study proposed that smaller firms are more likely to adopt an informal approach to managing individuals facilitated by the proximity of workforce, flatter structures, personal intervention by firm's owners, a limited presence of HR personnel and a presumption of shared ambition (Marlow & Thompson, 2008). As firms grow, it is envisaged that formality would develop due to the increasing complexity of the firm. Marlow and Thompson (2008) found that medium firms showed an uncertainty to engage willingly and consistently with the formal approaches, due to reluctant delegation of authority from the owner, as well as resistance from individuals to formality, if this challenge established social networks. The dynamic nature of the adoption of formality is of particular interest where informality was extended and adapted to fit the requirements of the firms due to both inexperience and habits (Marlow & Thompson, 2008; Sheehan, 2014).

In the context of the European Union (EU), legal and regulatory requirements resulted in a more formal approach for HR practices in SMEs (Sheehan, 2014). Similarly, regulation and government policies in South Africa such as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) and the basic conditions of employment requirements, as well as pressures from key customers to adopt more formal approaches, are expected to influence the adoption of formal approaches in SMEs operating in South Africa. However, even if SMEs have these formal approaches in place, many see it as merely a reflection of compliance with regulation and used as a last resort after the informal practices failed (Marlow & Patton, 2002; Sheehan, 2014).

An alternative view is that formal processes have significant costs associated, and to follow formal PM best practices in SMEs could lead to a reduction in flexibility as well as reduced financial resources (Doherty & Norton, 2014). In the changing environments where SMEs operate, formal procedures could also hinder speedy responses which are often a source of their strategic competitive advantage (Doherty & Norton, 2014; Marlow & Patton, 2002). Doherty and Norton (2014) proposed that rather than to implement HR prescriptions from larger firms, SMEs should concentrate on how to counter current HR problems and business priorities. This dynamic approach supports the comprehensive approach to PM in firms proposed by Nolan and Garavan (2016) to align the practices to the strategy of the SME instead of implementing a set of procedures found in current literature (Brown, O'Kane, Mazumdar, & Mccracken, 2019; Nolan & Garavan, 2016). Another benefit of informality as proposed by Sheehan (2014) was that informal interaction between employees and HR systems contributed to a positive organisational culture and as a result improve performance (Sheehan, 2014)

2.1.3. Management's role in PM practices

The literature highlighted that management in SMEs usually behaves reactively with poor strategic management and limited planning, responding to emerging problems with usually short term solutions (Ates, Garengo, Cocca, & Bititci, 2013; Garavan, Watson, Carbery, & O'Brien, 2016). Management practices in SMEs were also found to correlate to the skills and the characteristics of the entrepreneur often focussing on operational and strategic functions and neglecting managerial issues (Ates et al., 2013; Sheehan, 2014).

Due to limited resources and time constraints of owner-managers, SMEs often spend less on training and development of managers than larger firms, and their management skills are usually linked to the characteristics of the entrepreneur and the manager's skills (Ates et al., 2013). According to Agency theory, the goal is to align the individual management goals with organizational goals (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014). When considering SMEs, management often lacks the required training in PM practices in addition to performing numerous roles and focussing on both strategic and operational duties (Ates et al., 2013; Garavan et al., 2016). The lack of attention from management, combined with the agility and responsiveness, risk-taking and opportunity creation characteristics of the SME, resulted in unstructured management practices (Ates et al., 2013).

2.1.4. Performance Appraisals

Appraisal and evaluation of employee performance is a fundamental component of PM (Aguinis & Bradley, 2015; Gruman & Saks, 2011). Individual feedback on performance offered a mechanism for accountability, and by rewarding performance and specific behaviours, individuals can be motivated to achieve a common goal (Ates et al., 2013; Gruman & Saks, 2011).

Performance appraisal has evolved from an annual review with ratings to continuous feedback and coaching with informal check-ins and incremental goal-setting (Cascio, 2014; Posthuma et al., 2013). Traditional bell-curve distribution of promotions models was replaced by higher levels of compensation for star performance, moving more towards pay for performance philosophy (Aguinis & Bradley, 2015; Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014; Cascio, 2014; Cespedes & Mattson, 2017). Multi-source feedback or 360° feedback systems was found to increase trust by reducing the subjectivity from performance appraisals to increase organisational justice and thereby enhanced employee engagement (Cascio & Aguinis, 2019; Gruman & Saks, 2011).

Several related HR practices have been identified for high-growth firms of which performance reviews, promotion and incentive reward schemes that recognise and reward high performance forms central discussion points (Cascio, 2014; Demir, Wennberg, & McKelvie, 2017). These practices are an obvious answer to PM in larger firms, however, taken into consideration the flexible, dynamic, risk-taking and informal manner of SME operations, the pragmatism of this formal structure of PM in SMEs should be further investigated.

2.1.5. Accountability

Accountability can be seen as a control mechanism designed to direct the behaviour of individuals to maximise goal achievement (Hall, Zinko, Perryman, & Ferris, 2009). Emphasis is regularly placed on the monitoring of individuals to ensure accountability (Hall & Ferris, 2011; Hall, Frink, & Buckley, 2017). This accountability to peers and to self could hold individuals accountable in the absence of explicit monitoring (Hall & Ferris, 2011). Mahapa (2018), thus suggested that SMEs can drive accountability without formal systems, and an individual's perception of accountability plays a significant role in performance.

Informal accountability comprises of various mechanisms within firms and includes the norms and values of the firm that forms the organisational culture as well as the relationships within the firm (Pearson & Sutherland, 2017). Accountability to peers was identified as a form of informal accountability that transpires on a peer-to-peer or horizontal level (Pearson & Sutherland, 2017). Horizontal accountability was encouraged by a sense of responsibility and implied accountability internally to meet the firm's goals (Bradford, Luke, & Furneaux, 2018). Formal accountability, on the other hand, could use objective standards to compare results and demonstrates accountability. Informal accountability focused on softer, unseen influences and was generated within informal spaces of a firm where a sense of shared purpose exist and lacking power differences (Bradford et al., 2018; Pearson & Sutherland, 2017). Bradford et al. (2018) noted that informal accountability is more likely to be exercised where there is a high trusting relationship between the supervisor and the employees. Thus resulting in a collaborative and informal relationship where individuals work together with the freedom to act according to their ideas (Hall et al., 2017).

2.1.6. Performance-based incentives

Non-performance based incentives or longevity-based promotion, where performance was not intentionally rewarded was unlikely to motivate star performers (Aguinis & O'Boyle, 2014). However pay, and compensation structures that incentivised performance showed the ability to increase productivity (Bendickson et al., 2017; Chang & Chen, 2011; De Spiegelaere, Van Gyes, & Van Hootegeem, 2018; Fu et al., 2017; Zhong et al., 2016).

More recently, a study in manufacturing firms showed that Performance Related Pay (PRP) should be based on both collective and individual performance which improved communication and innovative work behaviours (De Spiegelaere et al., 2018).

2.1.7. Performance management in teams

SMEs relied on strategic partnerships through networking, project-specific co-working environments and collaboration (Busi & Bititci, 2006). These collaborations were often found in virtual settings in different locations and work teams, which added additional complexity to these managements (Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005). When considering PM in these virtual teams, leadership, communication, motivation, and knowledge management were considered the critical aspects of PM in teams (Hertel et al., 2005).

In addition to partnerships, Cardon (2003) proposed that SMEs could benefit from contingent labour with specific experience and knowledge, due to the firm's lack of resources, legitimacy and time to focus on HR issues. This integrational management would also add to the complexity of the operations of smaller firms (Cardon, 2003).

To assure the strategic alignment and required performance of partners in collaborative networks, "Adequate technologies and supporting infrastructures, proper management tools, and performance measurement solutions" were required (Sena Ferreira, Shamsuzzoha, Toscano, & Cunha, 2012, p. 675).

2.1.8. Negative effects of PM

Cascio and Aguinis (2019) identified the PM dilemma where PM was broadly accepted as a potentially useful tool, but political and interpersonal barriers often cripple its successful implementation.

PM in firms was troubled with negative perceptions, and the majority of these perceptions were grounded in subjective, bias evaluations and unfair, forced distribution of high performing teams (Brown et al., 2019). Prior cues about the preferred outcome of an appraisal review could affect the accuracy of the outcome if managers considered to be accountable for their decisions (Mero, Guidice, & Werner, 2014).

When the focus of performance evaluation was on diving competitive, individualistic behaviours, it affected the team dynamics negatively (Busi & Bititci, 2006; Chen, Wu, & Leung, 2011; Sena Ferreira et al., 2012). Hence co-operative goals could negate the adverse employee reaction toward their teams.

2.2. High growth SMEs

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition of high-growth firms is “enterprises with average annualised growth greater than twenty percent per annum, over three years, and with ten or more employees at the beginning of the observation period” (Audretsch, 2012, p. 3). A high-growth firm should show significant growth in turnover and is independent of the age of the firm. High-growth firms in the UK and USA on average had higher levels of human capital and skills compared to firms with lower growth rates (BERR, 2008). It is therefore critical to increase the effectiveness of PM in order to develop these higher levels of employee experience and skills required for higher firm growth rates (Audretsch, 2012; Demir *et al.*, 2017; Nicholls-Nixon, 2005).

If one considered a resource-based view of a firm, the growth path resulted from entrepreneurial decision making where a profitable opportunity is perceived and adequate resources allocated in order to create the most value (Hamilton, 2012). In this model, opportunity tension within the firm, co-development of the unexploited market potential and the strategic decision to commit resources to create value contributed to the growth of the firm. Often this was seen as significant growth episodes followed by a growth plateau and is dependent on the external market environment.

Potential high-growth firms identified that the economy, access to finance, cash flow and their management skills as areas preventing them from reaching their high growth potential (Lee, 2014). These management skills could be developed by effective PM practices (Ates et al., 2013).

2.2.1. Entrepreneurial Influence

Initially, the entrepreneur was the primary driver of a start-up firm’s performance, and as a start-up firm grew, the impact of employee performance started having a more substantial impact on the firm’s performance (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). A unique feature of high-growth firms was the need for recruitment of new employees in a

short time frame which introduced challenges and complexity in the HR practices of such firms (Demir et al., 2017). It was crucial for high-growth firms to secure the right talent and to embed the firm's culture in new employees. The literature consistently raised employee selection, training and retention practices as essential for high growth (Demir et al., 2017; Langwell & Heaton, 2016). Due to strong entrepreneurial focus in high-growing firms, these companies often have creative approaches to recruiting, hiring and training (Cespedes & Mattson, 2017).

SME studies dominate the research in the high-growth firm literature as the entrepreneurial nature of these firms shows high growth potential (Demir et al., 2017; Lee, 2014; Nelson, Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Ramsay, 2007; Nicholls-Nixon, 2005).

2.2.2. Small versus Medium-firm HR practices

There is a perceptible tendency towards informal processes within the HR practices in SMEs with formality increasing with organisational size in terms of employee numbers and financial performance (Marlow & Thompson, 2008). The spatial and social proximity between the employers and employees, as well as the entrepreneurial and rapidly changing environment within the SME's business environment, supported the application of informal practices (Jack, Hyman, & Osborne, 2006). Such informality can help with the organisational culture as well as the development of employees who had the opportunity to expand their role as the firm grows (Jack et al., 2006).

High-growing companies outgrew their systems and procedures or structures that are in place to manage these activities, and they had to adapt to continuous organisational changes that accompany rapid growth (Nicholls-Nixon, 2005). This continuous adaption resulted in a dynamic balance between informal and formal processes where the firms continuously adapted to the changing internal and external environment to build a competitive advantage (Sheehan, 2014).

2.3. Strategic Human Resource Management

2.3.1. Resource-based view

The strategic resource-based view (RBV) of an organisation proposed that a firm's resource base (if valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable) is used to sustain a competitive advantage (Barney, 1999). This view emphasised the internal workings

of the organisation, such as the selection and development of resources and not only on its strategic positioning in the market (Lockett, Thompson, & Morgenstern, 2009).

In a competitive environment, managers attempt the use of the resources at their disposal to advance the firm's performance (Lockett et al., 2009). The RBV was further developed into a dynamic capability theory, which argued that a firm maintained its competitive advantage through its ability to develop, redesign and align internal and external resources and competencies in order to exploit market opportunities or build innovation capabilities to address the changing business environment (Fu et al., 2017; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997).

RBV describes what firms are without a large number of constricting assumptions and hence, can be combined with other theories to explain the strategic behaviour of a firm (Lockett et al., 2009). One such theory is Complexity theory which described complex adaptive systems. The dominant concept of the complexity theory is self-organisation, where inter-relationships of a system's parts formed patterns through feedback loops in an interconnected network (Mason, 2007). Mason also described that no single outside party or manager could control this process and the system self-organised through bottom-up inter-relationships of the parts of the system as it adapted to its external environment.

2.3.2. Complex resource-based theory

Colbert (2004) proposed a complex resource-based theory approach to strategic human resource management (SHRM) in order to evaluate the difficult aspects through the lens of complexity. By using complex adaptive systems, complicated aspects such as causal ambiguity and social complexity could be reframed to gain a different interpretation by considering the interaction of parts in a social system (e.g., intentions, actions, and choices) instead of the results of distinct HR practices (e.g., recruitment strategies and performance appraisals) (Colbert, 2004). The complex RBV proposed that informality may present a strategic resource and is more than just an evitable characteristic of HR practices in SMEs but rather a strategic choice as it served a specific purpose to strengthen its competitive position (Marlow & Thompson, 2008; Nolan & Garavan, 2016).

Doherty and Norton (2014) support the complex RBV by describing that informal procedures enable SMEs' strategic competitive advantage of flexibility and quick responses in order to deal with the changing business environment. The complex

RBV suggests that a firm would continuously revise and rearrange its practices as it gains experience through feedback loops initiated by interactions between the managers and employees in the firm. Sheehan (2014) proposed that formality and informality of HR processes are likely to be dynamic, adapting to internal and external contingency factors. The complex RBV explains why informal PM could serve the needs of SMEs as it strengthens its strategic position (Nolan & Garavan, 2016).

2.4. Conclusion

SMEs are dependent on highly motivated, competent and qualified employees in order to provide a competitive advantage (Doherty & Norton, 2014; Sheehan, 2014). PM systems and practices can stimulate employee development, improving individual and team performance (Cascio & Aguinis, 2019). Implementation of a set of high-performance work practices could provide adequate organisational performance for SMEs to ensure the continued survival of the firm (Behrends, 2007). Sheehan (2014) found that the dynamic nature of adoption of formality within SMEs develop by extending informal practices and adopting these as these firms grow. This dynamic approach supports a holistic view to PM proposed by Nolan and Garavan (2016), where practices align with the strategy of the firm.

Considering the current literature, a clear gap has been identified. An investigation into the informal aspects of PM within SMEs is warranted. The particulars of PM in high-growth firms and the reasons how these practices support firm growth should be explored. The research aimed to present potential best practices for managing performance within SMEs.

2.5. Research Questions

The research objective is to evaluate the employee PM strategies of high-growth SMEs with specific emphasis on formal and informal processes and how these are used to maximise employee output.

The researcher investigated the following research questions.

1. How do SMEs manage performance during high growth periods?
2. What performance management practices in high-growth firms are perceived to have the highest impact on employee performance?
3. How do informal and formal performance management practices align and fit with the organisational strategy in high-growth firms?

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

A research methodology was developed in order to answer the research questions. This explains the selected methodology in terms of research design, sample selection and data sampling and analysis techniques used to support the proposed approach.

Due to the limited research in PM in SMEs, qualitative research was used to understand the specific phenomenon by focussing on participants' perceptions and experiences (Brown et al., 2019). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that by using a basic qualitative research method, the researcher could construct the world as he/she is interpreting or experiencing it. Data was collected from interviewing multiple individuals over a short-time period in a cross-sectional research design. Thus a phenomenon was studied within its actual context (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). This design was selected to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and not necessarily a change in time as is with longitudinal studies. From this research methodology, a framework was developed through the analysis of the collected data (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

4.2. Research design

4.2.1. Rationale for the proposed method of research

The research was based on a complex system with various actors, where different interpretations were possible, and therefore, pointed towards interpretivism (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The nature of the research was analysed as the researcher strived to understand a complex problem for which a precise and systematic answer did not exist as every firm and individuals within the firms approach PM differently (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

This paradigm is based on multiple socially constructed truths and is concerned with exploring particular subjective realities in the experience and opinion of actors in the phenomenon (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). This research intended to understand people's interpretation of their experiences and the meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This provided a deeper insight into how the individuals

understood the phenomena in a specific context and therefore aided in a greater understanding of how high-growth firms manage performance.

As established in the literature study, the PM practices applied in SMEs are different from the formal and often ridged practices that large firms apply (Nolan & Garavan, 2016; Sheehan, 2014). The literature also placed a dominant emphasis on formal practices with limited information on the informal approaches that SMEs used to manage performance (Nolan & Garavan, 2016). This gap in the literature supported an exploratory research method where the researcher aimed to identify new insights into why and how informal practices are used in SMEs (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

Inductive research uses specific observations of patterns or recurring phenomena to develop general conclusions or theories (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The researcher could focus on a multifaceted understanding of a research phenomenon. To understand the different complexities behind what specific practices SMEs utilised to manage the performance of their limited resources successfully, and why and how these practices aligned with their business strategy. The research design allowed for a flexible structure to permit the researcher to change focus as the research progressed. Inductive research provided this flexibility to the researcher to identify patterns within the data through common themes identified within the interview process in order to present general conclusions (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

Literature also suggested that by implementing high-performance work practices, the performance of smaller firms could be improved (Bendickson et al., 2017; Sheehan, 2014). By narrowing the research only to consider high-growth SMEs, the specific characteristics of their PM practices were investigated to gain a deeper understanding of how these practices are used within the context and complexity of their reality.

4.3. Population

By narrowing the research and selecting samples in high-growth firms, the specific characteristics and competitive strategy were utilised to gain a deeper understanding of the complex nature of PM practices that these firms implemented (Brown et al., 2019; Nolan & Browne, 2005). Therefore, high-growth SMEs were selected as the sampling frame and firms meeting the definition of high-growth SMEs the sampling unit. The sampling element was defined as the business owner or individual within

the firm who is in a position to make decisions with regards to PM strategies (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

Individuals were purposefully selected based on a homogeneous sampling technique with individuals selected based on their knowledge of PM practices within high-growth SMEs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Different high-growth SMEs were selected in order to have sufficient diverse characteristics to provide the maximum variation possible within the data. This provided patterns of particular interest and value that resulted in relevant themes identified within the data (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

4.4. Sampling method and size

A non-probabilistic sampling method was used in order to collect meaningful data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample was purposeful and selected based on the person's unique experience and competence. Patton (2015) described that the logic and power of purposeful sampling was derived from the subject's in-depth understanding of specific cases which contributed to the key issues that were identified. Purposive sampling ensured that specific categories of samples were presented in the project sample (Robinson, 2014). Based on the researcher's theoretical understanding of the research topic, the researcher assumed that different groups of individuals might have unique and different perspectives and the researcher ensured that these categories were included in the sample (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Robinson, 2014)

A quota sampling technique was used where the sample was divided into sub-groups. Adequate representation of the specific sub-groups in the sample was ensured to evaluated individuals interpretations that shared a specific experience with-in the subgroups (Górny & Napierała, 2016). Specific characteristics defined the sub-groups, and a minimum number of samples were selected from each sub-group ensuring that key groups were represented in the sample (Górny & Napierała, 2016; Robinson, 2014; Yang & Banamah, 2014). The selection criteria were developed for the sub-groups based on the attributes of the study and the quota samples comprised of individuals that conformed to the following criteria.

Firstly, the firms should comply to the OECD definition of high-growth firms with a minimum year on year growth of 20% in revenue and more than ten employees (Audretsch, 2012; Lee, 2014), secondly the South African definition of SME was used in relation to maximum revenue and employees in the firm (The Small Business

Institute, 2019). Two sub-groups were defined, small companies with 10 to 49 employees and larger companies with 49 to 200 employees. These sub-groups were explicitly defined to investigate if the size of the firm would influence the level of informal versus formal PM practices that the firm applied as proposed by previous research (Marlow & Thompson, 2008; Sheehan, 2014).

A few key participants that met the criteria were identified from the researcher's network, and during the interviews, referrals were requested from the participants. More companies were identified from secondary data meeting the criteria such as business magazines and news articles (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These criteria resulted in a sample with specific characteristics and were considered as a homogeneous sample. This technique allowed the characteristics of these typical firms to be explored in greater depth (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

The goal of the research was to gather information and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) advised that sampling should be terminated when saturation is reached, and no new data was collected from additional interviews. The analysis, therefore, was performed in conjunction with the interview process in order to identify the saturation point (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The participants were identified based on the size of the organisation, six from small firms with 49 employees or less and six from larger firms with more than 49 employees resulting in a total of twelve interviews.

Table 3: Categorisation of participants by SME size, industry and position

Interview reference	Gender	Title	Industry	Number of Employees
SMEs with less than 50 employees				
A2	Female	Financial Director	Logistics	40
A4	Male	COO	Investment	30
A5	Male	CEO	Investment	30
A7	Male	Team leader	Software	20
A9	Male	Director	Management Consulting	17
A12	Female	Project manager	Software	12
SMEs with more than 50 employees				
A1	Male	CEO	Construction	120
A3	Male	COO	Consulting Engineering	60
A6	Male	Manager	Fuel logistics	120-200
A8	Female	Director	Consulting Engineering	60
A10	Male	Manager	Construction	70
A11	Male	Manager	Construction	120

4.5. Unit of analysis

The high-growth firms' PM practices were researched by interviewing key personnel working at these firms. The unit of analysis was the perceptions and opinions of individual owners and managers of high-growth firms in relations to the research questions, and the unit of measurement was the key personnel identified to have a clear understanding of how performance was managed at the specific organisation (Salkind, 2010). This methodology provided multiple perspectives from the different types of people being interviewed with the intent to identify as many factors as possible involved in the phenomenon in order to provide a holistic account (Creswell, 2014; Salkind, 2010).

4.6. Measurement instrument

A general interview guide was developed in order to answer the research questions and used in semi-structured interviews, where the researcher controlled the discussion to ensure the discussion focussed on the relevant topics (Turner, 2010). The questions were semi-structured and were adapted by the researcher to allow for exploration with follow-up questions (Creswell, 2014). This format allowed the researcher to develop a rapport with the interviewees and explored a more personal approach to each interview (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007; Turner, 2010). The interviews were based on a list of questions or issues to be explored, and the interviewer used a conversational style to build on themes where the interviewee showed relevant knowledge or experience (Creswell, 2014). The questions were open-ended and neutral, preventing influencing the answers. One question was asked at a time and worded clearly without ambiguity (Turner, 2010).

The guide was used to give some structure to the interviews in order not to get lost in a sea of divergent viewpoints or unconnected information (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recurring patterns or themes that were supported by the collected data were identified and discussed in the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Person-to-person interviews from the different firms were held to allow in-depth discussions about the person's experiences, opinions, knowledge, and feelings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The interviews were conducted with a mixture of top-level executives or business owners that have responsibility for the firm with supervisory and strategic responsibilities as well as key individuals that have been with the company for at least two years and were familiar with the firm's practices and culture (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). These criteria resulted in a sample with specific characteristics and were considered a homogeneous sample with similar defining characteristics. This technique allowed the characteristics of these typical firms to be explored in greater depth (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

In preparation for the interviews, a pilot interview was conducted and analysed to determine the defects, limitations and other weaknesses of the interview. The guide was adapted accordingly before the majority of the interviews were conducted (Turner, 2010). The pilot interview was also used to develop initial codes to ensure insights could be identified that are aligned with the research questions (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

4.7. Data collection process

The interviews were recorded, and the researcher compiled field notes during the interviews (Creswell, 2014; Creswell et al., 2007). The field notes assisted the researcher to become familiar with the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher used probing techniques to clarify and expand, ensuring a greater understanding during the interview (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

The recordings were transcribed using software and verified by the interviewer for transcription errors. The transcripts were compared against the field notes and any notes taken after the interview. The transcription and checking of data were conducted in conjunction with the interview process to assist with data familiarity and possible codes and theme identification (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Turner, 2010).

4.8. Analysis approach

For data analysis, a qualitative content analysis method was used with an attention on the contextual meaning of the responses and information obtained in the interviews (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Schreier, 2014). The information was categorised into themes by subjective interpretation of the content of the data classifying the data into codes in order to identify themes and patterns (Creswell, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2014).

The information was categorised into themes by subjectively interpreting the content of the data classifying the data into codes in order to identify themes and patterns (Creswell, 2014).

Creswell (2014) defined six steps that were followed in the analysis of this qualitative data. The first step was to organise and prepare the data and included transcribing the interviews and comparing this against the field notes. The second step entailed studying the data for an overall view of the information while reflecting on the deeper meaning of the data. Thirdly, the data was organised into categories which were further sorted into descriptions with codes and sub-categories in step four. Themes were developed into the main findings and demonstrated the multiple perspectives that were supported by specific evidence and quotations. Step five included a narrative description of the findings with an in-depth description of the themes, sub-themes and multiple perspectives. The analysis (step six) concluded with the

interpretation of the findings, and the results were described to either confirm or deviate from findings in past research studies and theories on the topic (Creswell, 2014).

4.9. Validity and Reliability

Multiple approaches could be used to enhance and prove the validity of the findings for the research to be considered trustworthy and credible (Creswell, 2014). Four techniques were employed in this research to prove validity and reliability. First, the researcher developed a detailed account of the focus and context of the study, and the basis of selection of the samples, in order to provide a basis for transferability for comparison by other researchers if they repeat the study in a similar environment (Shenton, 2004).

Secondly, multiple data sources of data gathering, including interviews, observations, and documents, strengthened the reliability and validity of the study. Themes were established by converging several data sources and different viewpoints from participants adding legitimacy to the study (Creswell, 2014).

Thirdly, a detailed account of the data gathering and strategy offered an accurate description of the approaches used in the study. The fourth and final step entailed member checking with follow-up interviews to determine their perception of the accuracy of the principal findings and themes (Creswell, 2014). The themes and patterns developed from the codes accurately described the participants' perception of the phenomenon, serving to prove the descriptive validity of the codes and arguments that emerged from the data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

4.10. Limitations

When analysing the data, the researcher should be aware of his own bias in the process when identifying new categories or sub-categories (Creswell, 2014). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) further described that researchers would find evidence supportive of a theory easier than non-supportive. To attain conformability, the researcher should demonstrate that the findings develop from the data with evidence and quotations from the interviews and should not present their own biases (Creswell, 2014; Shenton, 2004). If the researcher self-reflect on how their background or bias could shape their interpretation of the findings creates an open and honest narrative (Creswell, 2014).

The qualitative nature of the study was planned around a limited number of firms, from which it will be difficult to generalise. The research methodology applied described the phenomenon, and the practices in the firms were explored. The resulting information did not necessarily develop new theories or test existing theories (Biron et al., 2011).

Secondly, the sample did not necessarily explore a balance of high and low performing firms where good practices could be identified from the high performing firms. The data did also not provide causal proof of critical success factors of PM in fast-growing start-ups, and further research could study issues in low-performance firms (Biron et al., 2011).

Lastly, the research considered planned and implemented PM practices and its influence on teams, other factors like organisational culture, business owners' goals, employee perceptions on performance and external factors would also influence the performance of a high-growth firm (Bendickson et al., 2017). PM practices alone would, therefore, not be sufficient in ensuring long term growth. Further research will be required on the external and internal factors that could influence PM in high-growth SMEs.

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ANNEXURE 1: AUTHOR GUIDELINES OF THE JOURNAL

Employee Relations Author Guidelines (n.d.) requested the following journal requirements:

Manuscript requirements

Please prepare your manuscript before submission, using the following guidelines:

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You should cite publications in the text: (Adams, 2006) using the first named author's name or (Adams and Brown, 2006) citing both names of two, or (Adams *et al.*, 2006), when there are three or more authors. At the end of the paper a reference list in alphabetical order should be supplied:

<i>For books</i>	Surname, Initials (year), <i>Title of Book</i>, Publisher, Place of publication. e.g. Harrow, R. (2005), <i>No Place to Hide</i>, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY.
<i>For book chapters</i>	Surname, Initials (year), "Chapter title", Editor's Surname, Initials, <i>Title of Book</i>, Publisher, Place of publication, pages. e.g. Calabrese, F.A. (2005), "The early pathways: theory to practice – a continuum", in Stankosky, M. (Ed.), <i>Creating the Discipline of Knowledge Management</i>, Elsevier, New York, NY, pp. 15-20.
<i>For journals</i>	Surname, Initials (year), "Title of article", <i>Journal Name</i>, volume issue, pages. e.g. Capizzi, M.T. and Ferguson, R. (2005), "Loyalty trends for the twenty-first century", <i>Journal of Consumer Marketing</i>, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 72-80.
<i>For published conference proceedings</i>	Surname, Initials (year of publication), "Title of paper", in Surname, Initials (Ed.), <i>Title of published proceeding which may include place and date(s) held</i>, Publisher, Place of publication, Page numbers. e.g. Jakkilinki, R., Georgievski, M. and Sharda, N. (2007), "Connecting destinations with an ontology-based e-tourism planner", in <i>Information and communication technologies in tourism 2007 proceedings of the international conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2007</i>, Springer-Verlag, Vienna, pp. 12-32.
<i>For unpublished conference proceedings</i>	Surname, Initials (year), "Title of paper", paper presented at Name of Conference, date of conference, place of conference, available at: URL if freely available on the internet (accessed date). e.g. Aumüller, D. (2005), "Semantic authoring and retrieval within a wiki", paper presented at the European Semantic Web Conference (ESWC), 29 May-1 June, Heraklion, Crete, available at: http://dbs.uni-leipzig.de/file/aumueller05wiksar.pdf (accessed 20 February 2007).
<i>For working papers</i>	Surname, Initials (year), "Title of article", working paper [number if available], Institution or organization, Place of organization, date. e.g. Moizer, P. (2003), "How published academic research can inform policy decisions: the case of mandatory rotation of audit appointments", working paper, Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Leeds, 28 March.
<i>For encyclopedia entries (with no author or editor)</i>	<i>Title of Encyclopedia</i> (year) "Title of entry", volume, edition, Title of Encyclopedia, Publisher, Place of publication, pages. e.g. <i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> (1926) "Psychology of culture contact", Vol. 1, 13th ed., Encyclopaedia Britannica, London and New York, NY, pp. 765-71. (For authored entries please refer to book chapter guidelines above)
<i>For newspaper articles (authored)</i>	Surname, Initials (year), "Article title", <i>Newspaper</i>, date, pages. e.g. Smith, A. (2008), "Money for old rope", <i>Daily News</i>, 21 January, pp. 1, 3-4.
<i>For newspaper articles (non-authored)</i>	<i>Newspaper</i> (year), "Article title", date, pages. e.g. <i>Daily News</i> (2008), "Small change", 2 February, p. 7.
<i>For archival or other unpublished sources</i>	Surname, Initials, (year), "Title of document", Unpublished Manuscript, collection name, inventory record, name of archive, location of archive. e.g. Litman, S. (1902), "Mechanism & Technique of Commerce", Unpublished Manuscript, Simon Litman Papers, Record series 9/5/29 Box 3, University of Illinois Archives, Urbana-Champaign, IL.

<i>For electronic sources</i>	If available online, the full URL should be supplied at the end of the reference, as well as a date that the resource was accessed. e.g. Castle, B. (2005), "Introduction to web services for remote portlets", available at: http://www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/library/ws-wsrp/ (accessed 12 November 2007). Standalone URLs, i.e. without an author or date, should be included either within parentheses within the main text, or preferably set as a note (roman numeral within square brackets within text followed by the full URL address at the end of the paper).
<i>For data</i>	Surname, Initials (year), <i>Title of Data Set</i>, Name of data repository, available at: Persistent URL e.g. Campbell, A. and Kahn, R.L. (1999), <i>American National Election Study, 1948</i>, ICPSR07218-v3, Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (distributor), Ann Arbor, MI, available at: http://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR07218.v3

Reference

Employee Relations Author Guidelines. (n.d.). Retrieved November 2, 2019, from Emerald Publishing website: https://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/products/journals/author_guidelines.htm?id=ER

ANNEXURE 2: AN EXAMPLE OF AN ARTICLE FROM THE JOURNAL

The following journal articles were selected from the chosen journal: *Employers Relations*. The basis of selection was the research methodology and number of citations. Both these articles used an exploratory research method with in-depth interviews, and has a relative high number of citations.

Grant, Wallace and Spurgeon (2013): 72 citations, 12 citations/year

Grant, C.A., Wallace, L.M. and Spurgeon, P.C. (2013), "An exploration of the psychological factors affecting remote e-worker's job effectiveness, well-being and work-life balance", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 35 No. 5, pp. 527–546.

Plester and Hutchison (2016): 61 citations, 20 citations/year

Plester, B. and Hutchison, A. (2016), "Fun times: the relationship between fun and workplace engagement", *Employee Relations*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 332–350.



An exploration of the psychological factors affecting remote e-worker's job effectiveness, well-being and work-life balance

E-worker's job
effectiveness

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of remote e-working on the key research areas of work-life balance, job effectiveness and well-being. The study provides a set of generalisable themes drawn from the key research areas, including building trust, management style and the quality of work and non-working life.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is an exploratory study into the psychological factors affecting remote e-workers using qualitative thematic analysis of eleven in-depth interviews with e-workers, across five organisations and three sectors. All participants worked remotely using technology independent of time and location for several years and considered themselves to be experts.

Findings – The paper provides insights into the diverse factors affecting remote e-workers and produces ten emerging themes. Differentiating factors between e-workers included access to technology, ability to work flexibly and individual competencies. Adverse impacts were found on well-being, due to over-working and a lack of time for recuperation. Trust and management style were found to be key influences on e-worker effectiveness.

Research limitations/implications – Because of the exploratory nature of the research and approach the research requires further testing for generalisability. The emerging themes could be used to develop a wide-scale survey of e-workers, whereby the themes would be further validated.

Practical implications – Practical working examples are provided by the e-workers and those who also manage e-workers based on the ten emerging themes.

Originality/value – This paper identifies a number of generalisable themes that can be used to inform the psychological factors affecting remote e-worker effectiveness.

Keywords Remote workers, Teleworking, Quality of working life, Work-life balance, Well-being, E-working, Job effectiveness, Management style, Trust, Psychology

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Technology has changed the nature of work and provided opportunities to work from multiple locations, including the home. Forecasts for the growth in numbers of e-workers predicted that by 2012 there would be 1.2 trillion remote workers worldwide (Twentyman, 2010), while Nilles (2007), predicted 144 million e-workers across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. The opportunity to work remotely is now provided by many organisations alongside other flexible working options, which can lead to savings for organisations (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). The ability to work remotely is now available through smart technologies and has led to more than just home working initiatives for those with families. It has become an issue for many employees, with or without families, wishing to manage their work and life effectively.

Remote working using technology is seen as a way for organisations to offer flexibility and consider the well-being of staff, including their work-life balance, whilst reducing costs and improving productivity (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). Recruitment agencies report approximately 85 per cent of those seeking work indicate they would be more likely to stay with their employer if working flexibly was available (Twentyman, 2010). Furthermore, high ratings of job satisfaction have been found for those working remotely (Madsen, 2011). For example, Wheatley (2012) reports that home-based workers report high levels of satisfaction. This could be related to the flexibility of working times compared to more static office-based hours and the freeing up of commuter time. Wheatley found that remote working can increase “available” time for other activities, however, this study also found that any “extra” time was not always spent on extra leisure activities, but filled with household chores, or other paid work, particularly for women. This research suggests that there are positive factors associated with remote working for both the employer and employee. However, it can be argued that time saved may, in some cases be redirected to more work as opposed to recuperation.

Research has also indicated there are negative effects associated with remote working. For example, whilst working remotely can reduce stress, it has been found that e-workers experience overlap between work and home lives thus reducing the restorative effects of home (Hartig *et al.*, 2007). As boundaries collapse this can lead to the blurring of work and non-working lives, working times and a lack of free time can then become a negotiation between employers and employees (Allvin *et al.*, 2011). Noonan and Glass (2012) report that whilst telecommuting can improve employee productivity and decrease absenteeism, aiding employee retention, it may not improve work-family conflicts. Even though there is growing awareness of the possible negative effects of remote working, this area of research and practice is still developing. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the way in which remote working impacts upon the three related research areas of job effectiveness, work-life balance and well-being. This current study aims to provide a set of generalisable themes that would aid the future development of new scale in this area. The three research areas have been identified as key factors from the literature relating to issues for remote e-workers. These areas are discussed separately in the following sections. However, first, it is important to define “e-working” for the purpose of this paper.

Definitions of e-working

Definitions of what constitutes remote working have been debated with no clear agreement on a specific term (Sullivan, 2003; Madsen, 2011). For example, several

studies describe remote working using telecommunications devices as e-working, teleworking and telecommuting (Morgan, 2004). The term “e-worker” provides more flexibility in terms of differing locations, so for the purposes of this present study the term “e-worker” was employed. The related definition adopted for an “e-worker” was “any form of substitution of information technologies (such as telecommunications and computers) for work-related travel: moving work to the workers instead of moving workers to the work” (Nilles, 2007, p. 1). Nilles considers that “e-working” emphasises the “location independent aspect directly”, whilst teleworking focuses more on “travel substitution aspects” (Nilles, 2007, p. 1). This relates to work being completed anywhere and at anytime regardless of location and to the widening use of technology to aid flexible working practices.

The three primary related research areas

1. Job effectiveness. Job effectiveness can be defined as “the evaluation of the results of an employee’s job performance” (Jex, 1998). It has now been recognised that there are numerous benefits to employers who seek to improve job effectiveness and the productivity of employees through implementing remote working practices (Butler *et al.*, 2007; Wheatley, 2012; Noonan and Glass, 2012). These include increased job satisfaction of employees, a positive impact on productivity as measured by the quality and quantity of work produced, reduced geographic constraints on the available workforce and a higher level of commitment by employees to the employer (Baruch, 2000; Morgan, 2004). These benefits also extend to the employee where working remotely can provide a means to balance work and non-work commitments, through flexible working. Previous studies have interviewed and surveyed remote e-workers regarding their views on the efficacy of e-working practices (e.g. Baruch, 2000; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). Findings from these studies indicate that key competencies are emerging, which may relate to improved job effectiveness, for example, self-motivation, integrity, self-confidence and good communication skills. Furthermore, remote working may have led to higher levels of autonomy for the e-worker and for some, lower stress levels but this may depend on a person’s job role, control over workload and the level of trust afforded by their line manager (Karasek and Theorell, 1990). Line managing remote workers can present challenges for supervisors both in developing trust and a change to their working practices. For example, supervisors may need to alter their working practices and adjust to the differences associated with employees working off site. Dimitrova (2003) argued that teleworkers with greater role autonomy had less supervision requirements as did those who already had a pre-existing face-to-face relationship with their supervisor. This study concluded that job context mediates the impact of telework and that control can be more effective with routine job roles such as sales but all teleworkers benefit from a trusting relationship with their supervisor. A study by Lautsch *et al.* (2009) that reviewed supervisory practices reported that a “helpful” and supportive environment was beneficial to remote e-workers. Increased frequent contact with supervisors was found to be helpful in engaging and enhancing motivation of the teleworkers. This study also found that advising telecommuters to retain some separation from work and home tasks should be encouraged to reduce work to family interference.

Kowalski and Swanson (2005) consider that there are several factors which are critical to the success of teleworking. These include management and supervisory support, having a formal policy, managerial training, and including the use of informal and formal communication skills. In turn, the employee requires support from the family and clearly defined work and family boundaries. This may require employee

training in teleworking potentially to establish what the expectations are when they are remote e-working (Kowalski and Swanson, 2005). These expectations should be clearly defined, so that the psychological contract is understood (Morgan, 2004). Misunderstandings and misinterpretations of what is required from the e-worker can lead to a break in trust and dissatisfaction for both the employee and the employer (Kowalski and Swanson, 2005). However, Clear and Dickson (2005) found little evidence of teleworking training programmes in their survey, indicating that senior managers may not fully realise the need for staff to become competent remote workers so they may achieve the full benefits from this style of working.

2. *Well-being.* Some of the adverse effects of teleworking have been linked with poor well-being (e.g. Hartig *et al.*, 2007; Mann and Holdsworth, 2003). There has been limited research on how remote working practices may impact on well-being. This is despite many organisations now emphasising the importance of working effectively with technology (Madsen, 2011). The increased risk of musculoskeletal disorders are one of the leading causes of ill-health in the UK and are related to long hours sitting without appropriate breaks (Sang *et al.*, 2010). Much of the previous research in this area has focused on improving work-life balance for individuals and consequently increasing productivity for employers (Baker *et al.*, 2007). For example, an early study by Duxbury *et al.* (1992), looked at the effects of teleworking on work to family conflict, studying over 500 remote workers. The findings indicated that those who did not possess a computer at home work fewer hours than those who continued to work remotely on their own computer after-hours. For the latter group, this led to significantly longer work hours being completed. Longer working hours are not generally found to be ameliorated by teleworking, and that removing the usual work constraints of structured time to work can intensify work (Dimitrova, 2003). Furthermore, in a study by Hayman (2010) of 336 employees, it was reported that flexitime had greater benefits for reducing role overload and work-life balance issues than teleworking.

Studies in the last ten years have examined both the physiological and psychological outcomes for e-workers (e.g. Golden *et al.*, 2006; Hartig *et al.*, 2007; Lundberg and Lindfors, 2002; Mann *et al.*, 2000; Mann and Holdsworth, 2003). Findings from these studies are mixed with evidence showing that the physiological aspects of e-working can be beneficial, including reduced blood pressure when working from home compared to working in the office. However, these benefits can be negated if work continues past normal working hours. Mann and Holdsworth (2003) interviewed 12 journalists who teleworked and found that there was decreased stress when compared to office-based workers but also increased loneliness. These teleworkers also experienced increased irritability and negative emotions, such as worry. This was attributed to social isolation and being unable to share problems with colleagues (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003).

Whilst teleworking can provide a means to reduce stress it can also lead to over-work. It has been found that remote e-workers may experience overlap between work and home, thus reducing the restorative effects of home (Hartig *et al.*, 2007). Hartig *et al.* (2007, p. 231) report in their study of 107 teleworkers that "having a separate room for telework appeared to ameliorate spatial but not temporal or mental overlap of work and non-work life". A possible problem of working at home means that the overlap caused by physically working at home can cause mental health-related problems including over-work. For example, continuing to think about work may still remain after the computer has been switched off. Home is seen as a place of restoration and to mix work and home activities together in the same location may well have an impact

on well-being. However, in a further study by Kossek *et al.* (2006) of teleworking professionals, they found that increased autonomy through teleworking resulted in a lower incidence of depression in women. Kossek *et al.* (2006) consider that teleworking may provide women with the flexibility to control their work so they have the opportunity to be involved in both work and their family lives, giving a higher sense of well-being.

3. *Work-life balance.* Remote access to work via technology has played a part in over-coming work-life balance issues for organisations wishing to retain skilled employees. This has been particularly effective for those individuals who need to consider family arrangements, for ill-health, or to reduce commuting time to provide time for other activities. For some individuals remote working has provided a release from the restrictions of office based hours. However, there are negative impacts as shown by some studies into work-life balance, gender and teleworking (e.g. Hilbrecht *et al.*, 2008). These indicated that whilst teleworking provides the ability to combine the dual role of childcare with teleworking, this resulted in very little time for personal leisure activities. Sullivan and Lewis (2001) in a series of interviews with remote workers and their co-residents (partners) found that perceptions between genders differed. Both genders reported a similar number of advantages to e-working, however, the content differed. Women cited managing their household tasks and childcare situations as primary advantages, whilst males cited having quality time to be with the family. Sullivan and Lewis (2001) indicated that females associate the home with paid work, whilst males considered working from home as “being able to help out”. However, Maruyama *et al.* (2009) surveyed over 1,500 teleworkers examining the effects of teleworking on work-life balance. Findings indicated that gender and having dependants were not significant effects but managing working hours was the most important ability to gain a positive work-life balance (Maruyama *et al.*, 2009).

It is important to consider that remote e-working is not just a work and family flexible working arrangement. Many organisations now expect employees to use remote based technology, such as smart phones and Blackberrys, to keep in touch with work both inside and outside of work time (Vernon, 2005). This has been exacerbated by a global culture where work needs to be completed with business contacts across the world working different times, meaning that contact may be required at all times of day and night. Hislop and Axtell (2007) highlight the need for more research into the affects of working in differing remote locations, other than home. Remote technology provides ease of access to work, however, the effects of this on managing the boundaries between work and personal lives for e-working needs to be realised.

3.1 Managing boundaries, segmentation and integration. Technology provides a spatial link between the work and home environment. These boundaries can become blurred, with flexitime and flexiplace working. Whilst e-working has been shown to have some positive effects, particularly for work-life balance, improvements in productivity and reduced stress levels, plus positive environmental impacts, there are some aspects which can be considered to be negative. Kossek *et al.* (2006) examined a group of 245 professionals' use of teleworking and their perceptions of job control and boundary management strategies. They found those who separated the boundaries between work and family and had control over where and when they worked reported positive individual well-being. In a more recent study Kossek *et al.* (2012) postulated a theory of boundary management that was person centred. Individuals were found to have differing styles when managing boundaries between work and family.

Some participants reported a preference for integrating their work and family, others preferred separation, whilst some moved between styles. This type of research is important as it highlights aspects of how individuals can self-manage and for supervisors to identify those most at risk.

Summary

Job effectiveness, well-being and work-life balance have been found to be key factors when exploring the impact of remote technology on individuals, supervisors and organisations. The three areas overlap and are inter-related to some extent, in that job effectiveness can be impacted negatively and positively by both well-being, and work-life conflict. The positive aspects of remote working can be summarised as increased productivity, the ability to work flexibly and from different locations without the temporal restrictions of office-based hours and in some cases reduced stress levels and greater well-being. Conversely, the negative effects include work intensification with access to technology 24/7 leading to long hours with little respite from work. Sitting behaviours may increase with the temptation to work for longer hours at the computer and cause physical problems. Remote e-working facilitates the blurring of boundaries between work and home, with some individuals preferring to integrate the two whilst others separating tasks. Remote working and more flexible technology may have helped to improve job effectiveness, flexibility and to some extent well-being, however, the more negative issues also need to be explored in greater detail.

Rationale for the study

The rationale for the study is based on gaining an in-depth understanding of the potentially increasing impact of remote technology on work-life balance, well-being and job effectiveness. In particular, the identification of generalisable themes that will provide an understanding of the related issues for e-workers, those managing e-workers and organisations employing them. This represents an innovative piece of research because although previous studies have looked at some areas they have not fully explored in-depth both the positive and negative psychological aspects and the relationships associated with remote e-working, job effectiveness, work-life balance, well-being and thus, the aims of the study were to:

- elicit the issues related to the impact of remote working on job effectiveness, work-life balance and well-being for employees;
- identify a set of generalisable themes containing sub-themes that will support the future development of new methods of measuring the impact of remote working; and
- identify practical implications for e-workers and their managers.

An inductive qualitative method was employed using semi-structured interviews. The research strategy employed was to relate the emerging themes to the three primary research areas of, job effectiveness, work-life balance and well-being. The themes would be categorised under each primary theme according to the definitions of each primary theme elicited from the literature. Where themes emerged that related to all three primary research areas these would be labelled as “over-arching” themes. Data would be analysed systematically by coding responses and collating these under common headings to create a new theme.

Method

Participants

The researcher approached organisations by e-mail to ask if members of their e-working staff could be approached to take part in the interviews. The organisations were widely known to use e-working practices. E-mail was then used as the mechanism to enlist volunteers. Criteria for the selection of participants were based on length of experience as a remote e-worker (one to two years) and proficiency using technology remotely to communicate with work. Participants were voluntary so their own self-assessment and declaration of experience and abilities were relied upon for the study, although many of the participants were recommended to the interviewer by their line managers. Eleven participants volunteered and met the criteria. Participants selected were based in the UK, and recruited from five different organisations, across three sectors (private, public and voluntary). Five participants had one or more children and a further two looked after elderly dependants on a regular basis. Recruitment ceased when data saturation had been achieved and no new themes emerged. A summary detailing the demographics and e-working background of the interviewees is provided in Table I.

Materials: semi-structured interview

The interview schedule was derived using the literature on work-life balance, e-working, job effectiveness and well-being. A semi-structured approach was used to ensure that the three research areas were covered and questions were formulated, which related work-life balance and remote e-working together. An open style of questioning technique was employed to compliment the semi-structured questions. The interviewer responded to any questions regarding clarification of questions either face to face or by e-mail. A pilot of the interview refined the questions to ensure they retained clarity and focused on all aspects of e-working. Two additional questions were added on e-working practices as a result of the pilot feedback. The interview was developed in a form which could be used both in person and remotely. The interview was developed in a form which could be used for three types of interviews, face to face, by telephone or e-mailed to the interviewee and completed without the presence of the interviewer. The interview questions were split into seven sections:

- *Section 1: "About You"*, requested demographic details.
- *Section 2: "Your role"*, requested a description of their role type.
- *Section 3: "Access to Technology"*, included questions on how much time was spent e-working off site, e.g. How often do you work remotely, i.e. what type of technology and working practices do you use?"
- *Section 4: "E-working practices"*, focused on activities completed when remote working and their frequency.
- *Section 5: "Measurement of e-working practices"*, including questions on measuring productivity.
- *Section 6: "E-Work life"* covered an exploration of the relationship between work-life balance and e-working, asking interviewees to review both positive and negative aspects.
- *Section 7: Requested* any further comments.

Table I.
Demographic details
of the interviewees

Interview reference	Gender	Age group	Marital status	Job role ^a	Contracted working hours	Hours spent e-working remotely
A1	Male	22-35	Single	Professional	Full-time	1 day per month
A2	Male	46-55	Co-habiting	Managerial	Full-time	2-3 days pre week
A3	Male	22-35	Single	Professional	Full-time	2 days a month and evenings
A4	Female	46-55	Married	Administrative	Full-time	2 days per week
A5	Female	36-45	Married	Managerial	Full-time	3 days per week flexibly
A6	Female	46-55	Co-habiting	Managerial	Part-time	All contracted hours
A7	Female	36-45	Married	Administrative	Part-time	All contracted hours
A8	Female	22-35	Single	Professional	Full-time	All the time including evenings
A9	Female	56-65	Not given	Administrative	Part-time	2 days per week
A10	Male	22-35	Single	Professional	Full-time	A day per week
A11	Female	46-55	Not given	Administrative	Part-time	All contracted hours

Notes: ^a“Professional” roles: related to high-level roles in the organisation that were part of team but not managing team members. These roles indicated high levels of autonomy to manage their own workload. “Managerial” roles: related to those roles responsible for managing employees. “Administrative” roles: related to lower level roles in the organisation who were being line managed, with little or no autonomy to manage their own workload

Procedure

Interviewees were given a choice of completing the interview face to face, or remotely by telephone. The semi-structured interview was conducted by one independent researcher, usually lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. The interviewer asked for clarification to ensure that questions were understood and interpreted in the same way for all interviewees. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An iterative process was used to inform further interviews based on analysis of the data on an ongoing basis. All data were coded according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to explore the themes across the data collected related to the three research areas. The themes were elicited by searching for commonality, relationships and differences (Gibson and Brown, 2009). The data were read and re-read to ensure specific themes were captured. To ensure concordance, the results from the thematic analysis and the coding method were confirmed by occupational psychologists and experts in e-working and adjusted where necessary. This involved reading the transcripts and reviewing the codes, ensuring that they related to themes extracted. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion and realigning of the codes to the transcribed thematic data.

Results

The data were related to the three corresponding primary research areas of job effectiveness, work-life balance and well-being and ten themes emerged from the data. Figure 1 provides the ten themes and illustrates the themes relating to each other under the primary research areas. The way the sub-themes were chosen as relating to a primary research area was from the content analysis of the themes. For example, those themes that related to how the work was completed, or measured related to the definition provided of job effectiveness gained from the literature. The same applied to the two further research areas. The themes of trust, individual differences, skills, competencies and adaptive behaviours related to all three primary research areas (shown as shaded in Figure 1) and are discussed separately as "overarching themes". They were defined as "overarching" themes through content analysis and their relationship to the definitions provided from the literature on the three primary themes.

Those themes that overarch the three research areas are discussed first. These are followed by each of the primary research areas and their related themes.

Over-arching themes

Three themes were found to be related to all of the research topics of well-being, job effectiveness and work-life balance:

- trust;
- the ability to adapt behaviours; and
- individual differences including skills and competencies.

These themes are now discussed with reference to interview data.

Trust (10): respondents indicated that joint goals and objectives needed to be communicated well in an electronic environment for a culture based on trust to work effectively: "Some deliverables are tangible others not so, and that is where the fear

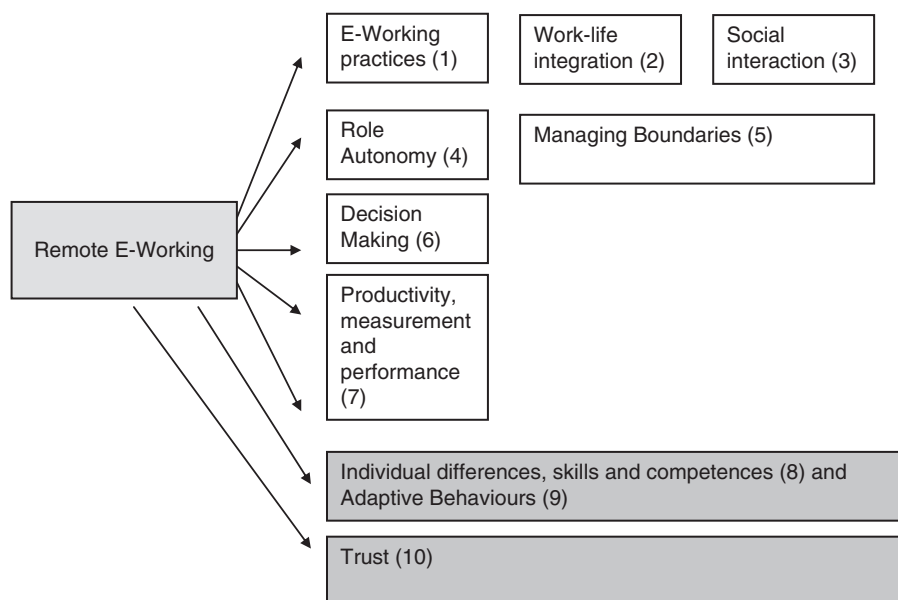


Figure 1.
Thematic diagram
illustrating the
relationship between the
primary research areas
and the ten emerging
themes

factor comes in, with some cultures that don't want to go the e-working route, because there is a cloud of mis-trust" (Interview A2). One interviewee described her feelings of trust as being: "you do not build as trusting a relationship as you might do if you were working together" (Interview A6). For one interviewee, whilst all work was completed through teleworking she was monitored very closely by IT systems, which checked her log-in times as well as the amount of work completed. She also had limited times when she could access the software. This differed considerably to the professional/managerial sub-group of e-workers who tended to have more control over when and how they worked remotely. For example, one public sector project manager indicated: "You feel like your own boss, you can manage time yourself" (Interview A4). These demands are psychological in terms of adjusting to a different psychological contract engaged with employees, involving trust that the work will be completed both to the quality expected and in the timescales required.

Individual differences, skills and competencies (8): remote e-working can be challenging to continue work when there are other distractions: "I'll do it later mentality' and then not do it" (Interview A3). Individual differences and motivation can play a part in the success or otherwise of remote e-working. Motivation can be difficult for some remote home workers. "I enjoy coming into the office more than staying at home [...] I've found that in the past I have been slightly lazy at times, stick on the TV" (Interview A1). The other extreme was also found to be present, that is, too much motivation to work remotely outside of normal working hours and not knowing when to stop. Several interviewees stated they had become "addicted" to switching on the computer and working in the evening, for example: "I can be on the computer at 2am, this is not good for sleep" (Interview A4).

Adaptive behaviours (9): adapting behaviours to achieve effective remote working emerged as a strong theme from the research. The interviewees had been remote working for some time and so had developed their skills and behaviours to manage the

overlap between work and home, including planning and scheduling work in advance, writing “to do” lists and planning breaks and social contact: “The smart phone is left on and I can see emails constantly but I don’t always respond straight away [...]. I don’t do 24/7 like I thought I had to” (Interview A5). Another interviewee reported that “I’m very good at setting boundaries. I used to be worse but now that I live with my partner I am stricter. I have had to change my working patterns” (Interview A3). Family, social and leisure time also needed to be considered and the interviewees indicated that planning all of these activities ensured that a balance could be maintained: “My young children understand that mum has to work at home sometimes and they have adapted to this working pattern. They know I’m working and they leave the room to watch TV” (Interview A4). This finding also highlights that there can be interference from family whilst working from home and that this “dual tasking” may affect concentration unless effectively managed by the e-worker. Most interviewees responded in the same way indicating their priority would be work and would not put family first unless a specific family crisis arose or the demand had been anticipated. Work culture can impact on the number of hours expected to be worked leading to long hours working both in and out of the office becoming the norm, so work would immediately take priority over any other commitments. In response to these norms, adaptability was seen by the interviewees as important to changing working practices, managing their work-life integration and well-being, otherwise the ability to manage remote working and non-work issues together could become overwhelming.

Next each primary research area is discussed with the related emerging themes.

Primary research area: job effectiveness

The constituent parts related to improving job effectiveness for remote workers that emerged from the thematic analysis, related to working practices, self-autonomy to manage own workload, the ability to make decisions remotely, productivity, performance and measurement.

E-Working practices (1): interviewees identified specific working practices and types of technology which were seen to aid remote working productivity. These included smart phones, internet, video conferencing and webinars, all of which provided a means to limit travel by working with customers remotely or from home. However, problems were identified with technology that could impair performance. For example, the use of teleconferences in replacing face to face meetings, meant potentially missing important social or body language cues: “the more vociferous [people] on a teleconference are harder to shut up, no visual signals to use, for example, a kick under the table. You do need a very strong chair to run teleconferences” (Interview A6).

Role autonomy (4): autonomy within work roles and level of responsibility within the organisation were found to be important factors for interviewees. People whose roles differed in responsibility also had different levels of access and flexibility when using remote working facilities. The flexibility of access varied significantly between clerical/administrative roles compared to managerial/professional workers. Less senior employees had reduced access to different types of technology and were restricted when they could use the work-related software, for example, between specific allocated time slots. This may explain why those with less autonomy indicated that they might prefer to work in the office. Conversely, those at a professional or managerial level had access to the full range of technology within their role. This enabled them to work as and when they required, increasing the flexibility of their working hours. Remote

working was also found to add to pressure on more operational roles within an organisation, leading to an increase in working hours: "it is also about your role in an organisation, the lower down you are potentially the more responsible for keeping it going. There is a temptation to work more" (Interview A2). Also, those interviewees who managed a team resulted in the decision to limit home working to a certain number of days per week, noting that they needed to be visible for staff purposes.

Decision making (6): most interviewees indicated that remote working did not affect the quality of decision making: "any decisions I have to make regarding my work are not affected in any way by e-working. This is because the communication link between my home and office is outstanding, along with very efficient feedback and a constant link during my working hours" (Interview A7). Several interviewees indicated that remote working provided greater access to real-time information allowing decision making to be made outside of normal work hours. The quality of this type of decision making could be questionable, given the time of day and whether or not other parties have been adequately consulted, for example, a participant questioned whether "a midnight decision is a good one" (Interview A5). Decision making using technology requires slightly different working practices, such as scheduling video conferences with remote e-workers. It emerged as being important to utilise good communication skills, so that all relevant stakeholders can be involved. One participant indicated that "the decisions would have to be the same both on and off site" (Interview A10).

Productivity, measurement and performance (7): most of the respondents to this present study reported their productivity increased, particularly when e-working from home. Factors which were associated with increased productivity included working quietly without interruption, ensuring work was completed on time, concentration on writing large documents, avoidance of social processes in the office and the problems associated with working in an open plan office such as noise and lack of privacy. Less positive aspects were also cited. For example, one interviewee indicated they found e-working productive, but only up to a point: "Increases up to the point of burnout, when it decreases. My measures of productivity are key deliverables around client relationship management, process deliverables and writing assignments such as creative tasks, which are most impacted when exhausted" (Interview A8). Other interviewees felt more productive in a work environment, indicating that sitting at their usual desk was more productive. "I would say decreases when I'm away [from the office] [...] it's a psychological or mental thing, you're at work sitting down at your desk, whereas you are in your comfort zone [at home]" (Interview A1). A similar response was reported by a second participant: "Actually when I'm e-working I'm not actually as productive as when I'm at my desk. If I'm checking my email at the airport I probably won't be able to be as productive as when at my desk" (Interview A11).

Overall, organisations differed in the extent of measurement and the use of actual measures of remote working. Respondents reported their remote working was measured formally in several ways, for example, by regular surveys, self-report measures and by the number of e-mails completed in a day. For those who reported that their organisation measured remote working, there were differences in monitoring according to seniority. Participants in managerial or executive roles measured themselves and reported back to the organisation. Whereas, those in less senior roles were managed directly, via specific work completed and sometimes accessed on-line by direct access to their computer systems. But several respondents reported that their organisations did not measure e-working nor recognise e-working practices, for example: "no my organisation does not officially recognise e-working or teleworking,

this is only at the managers' discretion and as such does not measure e-working practices" (Interview A3).

E-worker's job
effectiveness

Primary research area: work-life balance

This theme draws together the way in which work and non-working lives interact together and the associated issues. The theme of managing boundaries related both to this topic area and to well-being.

Work-life integration (2): all interviewees indicated that remote working had improved their ability to work flexibly and subsequently the time spent away from the office: "Very useful in improving work and I am a great believer of flexi-time [...], I have no worries about doing some work at home on a Sunday if it is going to pay dividends at work the following day. I can fit my life style in with my private life" (Interview A2). Interviewees also noted remote working was important to them in managing their "other" non-work lives including relationships: "[...] [I've] been very successful in improving my relationships too. Good to work out of the office and get back home, yes you are still working but you are with your family" (Interview A3). Further, interviewees indicated that remote working helped improve efficiency due to working in a more globalised economy both for employers and themselves, for example, being able to work late but from home: "email is helpful because I don't have to stay in the office to communicate with colleagues in different time zones, I often have teleconferences in the evening which are best conducted from home" (Interview A8). Remote working was seen to have a positive effect for both the employer and the employee, particularly in difficult circumstances: "No lost days from work working off site and being flexible meant I was able to deal with family emergencies and bereavement. This has had a very positive effect on my life" (Interview A10). The majority of examples cited (12 out of 17) related to improvements in interviewees' personal lives through working either at home or utilising e-working technology, releasing time to be spent with families, reductions in time spent commuting, reduced stress, avoidance of extra child-care requirements such as taking less time off as annual leave, the ability to flex working times, doing the household chores at less busy times. Other examples included having time for personal or domestic duties such as letting the plumber in or attending doctors' appointments during the day. They reported they had less time off sick and for some, the ability to e-work provided opportunities to work more paid hours.

Primary research area: well-being

Communication and support from colleagues emerged as two critical success factors to ensure successful remote working and to balance the psychological aspects of well-being. The themes of building relationships and interacting, including where boundaries could be crossed over, where both important themes seen to affect psychological well-being.

Managing boundaries (5) – this also relates to the primary research area of work-life balance: the collapsing of boundaries between work and private lives and the impact being able to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week has on other family members and health was a common theme: "[...] the blur between work and home is badly affected. I work 12-14 h days as a norm and it is impacting my well-being. Clients can always reach me [...] I don't think I'm as productive because I'm so exhausted" (Interview A8). Interviewees showed signs of over-working to relieve work pressures and indicated the need to manage home and work boundaries carefully: "Too long working into the night

albeit that can be negative against your life, this depends on whether this is enabling you to catch up on work. This then relieves stress as you have the ability to react quicker” (Interview A5). Habitual accessing of work remotely, ignoring family commitments, preferring to work instead of engage with the family, not knowing when to stop working for respite so that it damages health, including logging onto to work past normal hours and over-working are examples from the interviews of where remote working can outweigh the benefits of flexibility. “You can become addicted to it, it is there so you just start work [...]” (Interview A4). This can limit the amount of time left for non-work and respite from work activities. “I have been advised that I need to draw strict boundaries to get my life back” (Interview 8).

Social interaction (3): building relationships and maintaining communication channels both at work with colleagues and relationships outside of work emerged as a common theme for maintaining the psychological well-being of the interviewees. One interviewee indicated that they would prefer to be in the office to maintain social contact: “I’m probably a person who would enjoy coming more into the office rather than staying at home” (Interview A1). Being able to manage social interaction when away from the office and missing social cues when remote working were also raised. An alternative view is that other family members may be around to provide support: “some say they miss social company but I don’t feel isolated. The husband is at home” (Interview A10).

Discussion

The findings from this study have enabled us to establish some of the psychological factors that are impacted by remote e-working. This current study has explored these factors using three related primary research areas of work-life balance, well-being and job effectiveness. Ten themes emerged from the data, associated with these areas presenting a wider range of findings than in previous studies. The themes identified offer a unique insight into how the issues affecting remote e-workers can be categorised and where similarities and differences can be seen. For example the over-arching themes relate to all three research areas and could, therefore, underpin a new scale in this area. The research offers practical insights for remote e-workers and their managers. In particular those areas that enhance and detract from effective e-working. Table II summarises these findings.

In summary, the key areas that emerged from the analysis included the need for remote workers to adapt their styles and correspondingly that managers should also consider the way in which they supervise those working remotely. This ties in with previous research (Dimitrova, 2003), whereby supervisors of remote workers have been found to successfully adapt their working practices to create a supportive environment through ensuring that communication is structured. Work-life balance improved for many of the interviewees in this study, although many also referred to the problems associated with constant access to technology, including the inability to switch off entirely from work. This is supported by previous research into the lack of time to recuperate when working remotely when boundaries are not clear (Hartig *et al.*, 2007). Dimitrova (2003) also argued that e-working comes with a “price tag” and that whilst flexibility can be increased, the workload may also increase. This was supported in the present study by one interviewee who indicated that over-work was almost an expectation by their employer.

Individual differences were found to impact on job effectiveness in the present study, with either too much or a lack of motivation, both causing problems for two

Primary research areas			E-worker's job effectiveness
	Enhancing	Detracting	
Job effectiveness	Productivity increased Allows decision making to take place at different times of day Increased of autonomy	Relationship building can be difficult Monitoring from a distance requires good communication Restricted by the technology available	541
Work-life balance	Work and non-working lives can be integrated Home relationships can improve by increased contact Remote working and flexible hours can provide the means to interact across different time zones	Boundaries between work and non-work may blur. There may be little time for respite from work Temptation to stay working for longer due to ease of access to work	
Well-being	Fewer days lost through absenteeism Working from home can relieve stress from travel and child-care issues	Social interaction may be limited to family and local friends. Office grapevine may be missed and important information missed Sitting behaviours may increase	
Overarching areas	Being ones "own boss" increases a sense of confidence and ability Technology provides a means to deliver work and liaise with colleagues and customers remotely. Saving on time spent travelling Experienced e-workers adapted their working practices to meet remote working requirements	Face-to-face contact is easier for building relationships Those who are highly motivated may over-work and become "addicted" to stay switched on Those who are not motivated may under-work Late e-mails and working culture that promotes "non-stop" working can be exasperated by remote working	

Table II.

Enhancing and detracting factors identified from the research areas and themes

remote workers. Recent research (Kossek *et al.*, 2012) indicates that there may be preferences for individuals when managing their boundaries between work and non-working lives. These strategies could also be found in the present study with varying activities according to work and home requirements, although most interviewees indicated that work would take preference over non-work issues. Managers were also found to be important for e-worker effectiveness. Morgan (2004) indicates that teleworking has benefits but also challenges for organisations and these need to be addressed. Managing the psychological contract may be the most important aspect of working remotely for many, ensuring that expectations are managed on both sides.

This present study has identified a set of generalisable themes that illustrate the overlaps in the literature, as well as the differences. Analysis has also provided both the benefits to e-working but also identified some of the disadvantages. Through the analysis of the interviews, themes have emerged that can be used to support the development of dimensions for a new scale in this area. Within the themes and from an analysis of the literature scale items can be deduced that will assist in the measurement of e-working in the context of work-life balance, well-being and job effectiveness.

Implications for e-workers

Remote workers in the current study clearly showed they could be highly competent at managing their e-working though adaptive behaviours. Positive insights were identified into how personal relationships could be improved through remote working

and the identification of specific areas of individual differences, skills and competencies. The current study also found that over-working whilst remote working could affect health and one participant indicated it may induce burnout. Further, remote e-working was found to be important to the interviewees in managing their relationships outside of work. There is little research available on the impact of remote working on personal relationships, although some research focuses on the social isolation aspect of working at home or away on business. For example, Mann *et al.* (2000) looked at the psychosocial aspects of home working and found that 57 per cent of those teleworking felt some kind of social isolation. The current research found both positive and negative aspects to the social isolation experienced in remote e-working. For example, having a quiet private space to work with no interruptions was seen as an advantage. However, it also supported the study by Mann *et al.* (2000) which found that the negative aspects related to a lack of human and social contact. Social networking internet sites have opened up on-line access to socialising and whilst these were not considered in this research it is likely they will continue to become popular as a remote means to interact with others especially if office based socialisation diminishes through remote working. New technologies can provide greater access to visual communication can be important mechanisms to maintain contact. For example, in this current study it was reported as useful to have face-to-face access to enhance building relationships, this can now be done through smart phones which provide a camera. This could allow for the interpretation of social cues more easily.

These findings have some implications for the development of supportive practices for e-workers, which we consider next.

Implications for managers of e-workers

This current study identified some clear implications for the management of e-workers. Building trust with the line manager was a strong theme and when this was in place many of the e-workers in this current study had a good relationship with their manager and felt they performed well in their job. Whilst this degree of autonomy was found at higher levels in the present study, building support with line managers could improve job effectiveness for all levels in the organisation. From the current study it was found that e-workers shared many similar competencies, high levels of motivation, were well organised and able to work independently. These are supported by Baruch's (2000) study which asked managers to list the key remote working competencies. However, the current study found difficulties in managing e-workers when work has no time limits or boundaries, work commitments led to over-working and ultimately to poor well-being including stress and burnout. There are many reasons for over-working and previous literature has described these as continuing to work when sick, isolation and a lack of management support (Mann *et al.*, 2000). The implications for managers of e-workers are that whilst working through illness keeps the employee working in the short term, longer term this can lead to more severe absences from work.

Not being able to "switch off" and over-work were reported by e-workers in the current study as significant negative factors. Theories that relate to motivation and internal stressors (over-commitment) when related to external stressors (e.g. high work demands) can lead to high effort but not always high reward (Chimel, 2000). This is particularly relevant in remote working as work demands and the effort required to complete the work may not be as obvious as they would be if carried out in the office (e.g. staying late in the office) and could, therefore, be overlooked by line managers.

Interviewees in the present study highlighted the need for self-management and communication with peers and line managers. Conversely, individuals who are not motivated by working remotely may under perform and require strong external motivators (e.g. financial rewards) to complete the work as would be expected when under closer supervision in the office.

Practical implications. A summary of the practical implications from the findings of this study are provided below:

- (1) Exemplar e-workers show adaptive behaviours and skills to manage e-working effectively, these could be shared with new or less experienced e-workers to give benefit to organisations.
- (2) Over-working may be an issue for some e-workers. Employers could mediate this problem but ensuring that clear goals and expectations for managing the workload are discussed with their supervisor.
- (3) Well-being needs to be considered by those managing e-workers, discussion of social isolation and the building of relationships may need to be mediated by some planned face-to-face contact with team members. This would also enhance trust between supervisors and co-workers.
- (4) New technologies can be utilised to increase social contact, but as in (3) above some face-to-face contact would be recommended, especially for those new or less experienced e-workers.
- (5) Managers of e-workers should consider that whilst “normal” office rules also apply to those working remotely, that communication should be enhanced for e-workers, ensuring that checks are made on workload, well-being and performance.
- (6) The psychological contract between the manager and the e-worker needs to be clearly defined to increase the benefits and reduce the negative aspects of e-working.

Limitations of the study

The current study was limited in generalisability by the small qualitative sample. However, Gibson and Brown (2009) indicate that it is important that the sample is representative of the topic being studied. Remote e-workers for this current study self-selected by years of experience and remote working capability for their specific qualities and experiences. Interviews were in-depth providing a richness to the data collected.

Conclusions

The current research was novel in that it explored the psychological and practical implications of technology and identified a set of generalisable themes that can be used to inform the study of the psychological aspects of remote e-working. The research has raised some clear implications for e-workers and their managers. E-workers should not be allowed to become “invisible workers”, they may be very skilled at their job but they do still require support to be effective remote workers. It is recommended that managers communicate regularly with remote workers, not just about work matters but also psychological issues such as over-work, managing work and home boundaries and their stress levels. This current study found that trust, working practices, skills and competencies were important but so were considering the mental health issues of

e-workers. Assessing their ability to e-work and to provide training for e-workers and their managers should be considered by organisations as part of any move towards a remote workforce.

The recommended future direction for research is to utilise the identified themes to develop a means of measuring, by self-report, each of the three primary and the ten related themes. A survey method using a large sample of e-workers could be employed to test the validity and generalisability of the findings from the current study. It would be further beneficial to consider how the competencies for e-working can be further developed to support an individual's quality of work and non-working life. The impact of remote on mental health should also be further investigated in order to develop preventative and protective practices.

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Fun times: the relationship between fun and workplace engagement

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Abstract

Purpose – The idea of workplace fun seems positive, straightforward and simple but emerging research suggests a surprising complexity and ambiguity to this concept. Drawing on recent literature and empirical data, the purpose of this paper is to use three different forms of workplace fun: managed, organic and task fun to examine the relationship between fun and workplace engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an ethnographic approach, the qualitative data originated from four different New Zealand organizations, within different industries. Organizations included a law firm, a financial institution, an information technology company and a utility services provider. Data for this study were collected from semi-structured interviews with a range of participants in each company. In total 59 interviews were conducted with approximately 15 originating from each of the four organizations. One full-time month was spent within each company experiencing the everyday life and behaviours at all levels of each organization. The specific focus of the research is organizational culture and humour and during analysis findings emerged that linked to engagement, fun, disengagement and the concept of flow.

Findings – This paper offers exploratory findings that suggest some specific connections between the concepts of fun and engagement. Empirical connections between these concepts are not currently apparent in either engagement or fun research, yet the data suggest some firm associations between them. The exploratory findings suggest that some forms of workplace fun offer individual employees a refreshing break which creates positive affect. Participants perceive that such affect results in greater workplace and task engagement. Additionally the data show that some people experience their work tasks as a form of fun and the authors link this to a specific form of engagement known as “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Moneta, 2010). The authors suggest an organizational-level effect, where workplace fun creates enjoyment which stimulates greater overall engagement with the team, unit or organization itself. Conversely the data also suggest that for some people managed or organic fun (see Plester *et al.*, 2015) creates distraction, disharmony or dissonance that disrupts their flow and can foster disengagement.

Practical implications – The ambiguity and complexity in the relationship between these concepts is an emerging topic for research that offers a variety of implications for scholars and practitioners of HRM and organizational behaviour. The authors contend that workplace fun potentially offers practitioners opportunities for fostering a climate of high engagement which may include most employees and thus create additional workplace benefits. Additionally through highlighting employee reactions to different types of fun we suggest ways of avoiding employee disengagement, disharmony and cynicism and the associated negative effects.

Originality/value – The concept of fun is not empirically linked with current engagement research and the authors assert that workplace fun is an important driver of employee engagement. The authors identify engagement at the individual task level and further extend engagement research by emphasizing that fun has the potential to create engagement at the team, unit or organizational level. These differing levels of engagement have not thus far been differentiated in the extant literature.

Keywords Engagement, Fun, Organization, Flow

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Intuitively, having fun and enjoying oneself at work would seem to foster or create greater workplace engagement – yet the concept of fun has not been strongly empirically linked with current engagement research and literature. From an empirical study into workplace humour, fun and organizational culture, we provide exploratory data that link the concepts of fun and engagement. Specifically, this paper addresses the research question:

RQ1. What is the relationship between the concepts of fun and engagement in organizational contexts?

Our qualitative data gathered from four different New Zealand organizations, suggest that the relationship between fun and engagement is significant, and our exploration into the relationship extends current engagement models by proposing that fun influences engagement at two distinct levels. First, using the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, 1996) we suggest that fun can increase employee engagement with their actual work task or role; and second we suggest that experiencing fun at work can increase employees' camaraderie and enjoyment which enhances engagement with the overall organization or work team.

However, adopting a cautious approach, we also warn that fun is complex, not easily created, and cannot really be delivered as a “package” to employees. As conceptions of workplace fun are socially constructed between organizational members and boundaries are implicitly understood by socialized employees (Plester, 2009) we need to understand fun as a multi-layered concept that is simultaneously collective whilst being also experienced in an individual and personal way. Drawing on recent fun research that theorizes fun as a tripartite model including organic, managed and task fun (see Plester *et al.*, 2015) we extend current research by developing the link between workplace fun and engagement. Using the conceptions of fun presented by Plester *et al.* (2015) we focus upon the forms of fun created by task absorption (or flow) which we empirically link to workplace engagement. We compare task fun to fun that is specifically organized or “managed” (Plester *et al.*, 2015) and discuss the implications that this has for the notion of engagement. This paper presents evidence suggesting that when fun is perceived as forced it can create dissonance, distraction and foster disengagement with the organization, work tasks or both. Our contribution in this paper is in explicating the relationship between workplace fun and engagement. Therefore we extend earlier conceptions of fun by asserting that task fun achieved through flow, creates specific forms of engagement that are beneficial to an organization. Additionally, we show that organic fun is enjoyed by many employees and offers a refreshing break that fuels re-engagement with work tasks but warn that it can also distract other engaged employees. And finally we present the novel idea that “managed or forced” fun although enjoyable to some employees, can also cause some employees to disconnect or disengage from their organization and tasks.

Fun

There is little consensus regarding the meaning of “fun” (Blythe and Hassenzahl, 2003) because what is fun (and/or funny) to an individual may be just as easily considered offensive, demeaning and/or silly to a different person. The term fun is often confounded with the concepts of humour, laughter, funny and joking, but is, in fact, a distinct but overlapping concept. For example, while humour is said to occur when amusing stimuli are contextually appropriate (Zillman and Cantor, 1976), and a reaction such as a smile or

laugh occurs (Chapman and Foot, 1976), fun does not necessarily involve laughter or humour. Rather, definitions of fun comprise elements of activity, enjoyment, pleasure, frivolity (Fluegge, 2008), spontaneity, surprise, informality (Fineman, 2006) and even play (Costea *et al.*, 2005; Dandridge, 1986). Ultimately, workplace fun can be seen as “any social, interpersonal, or task activities at work of playful or humorous nature which provide an individual with amusement, enjoyment or pleasure” (Fluegge, 2008, p. 15).

The role that fun plays in organizational life is significant, with fun offering a means for escape as well as engagement at work (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Workplace fun is complex and ambiguous. Part of the complexity arises from differing perceptions about what comprises fun for organizational members (Aldag and Sherony, 2001; Ford *et al.*, 2003; Plester and Sayers, 2007; McDowell, 2004; Warren and Fineman, 2007b) and what outcomes are generated by workplace fun (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Fluegge, 2008). Although fun is usually associated with positive organizational outcomes (Tews *et al.*, 2012) and can create a sense of involvement for some organizational members (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Barsoux 1993; Duncan and Feisal, 1990), it may also be ignored or just tolerated by others (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Burawoy, 1982; Collinson, 1988). In fact, fun has the potential to divide groups and to cause disharmony and disquiet among colleagues (Warren and Fineman, 2007a).

Recent interest in workplace fun parallels the positive scholarship movements in psychology, economics and organizational studies (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Fun at work has become a popular concept that transcends a mere “fad” (Karl *et al.*, 2005; Fleming, 2005) and is garnering increasing research attention (Blythe and Hassenzahl, 2003; Collinson, 2002). Workplace fun has been tentatively linked to improved employee engagement, satisfaction and performance (Karl and Peluchette, 2006; Karl *et al.*, 2005; Newstrom, 2002) and is “promoted as a mechanism for enhancing organizational effectiveness” (Tews *et al.*, 2012, p. 106). The mainstream press has endorsed companies that foster a work climate conducive to fun (Tews *et al.*, 2012), and praise has been effusive for companies such as Southwest Airlines, IBM, Google and PikePlace Fish Market in their deliberate attempts to promote fun as a key element of their corporate cultures (Collinson, 2002; Tews *et al.*, 2012; Karl and Peluchette, 2008). However after investigating boundaries to fun and humour, Plester (2009) cautions that although promoting workplace fun may seem desirable, the linkages between fun and workplace outcomes are not always straightforward. Fun is a socially constructed phenomenon, monitored and regulated by organizational members, rather than being something that can be easily “managed”.

Conceptions of fun

Researchers recognize the ambiguity created by differing perceptions of fun (Owler *et al.*, 2010) and suggest that fun should not be investigated as a “unitary concept” – rather the multidimensional aspects of fun must be considered (Tews *et al.*, 2012, p. 111). Organizational tensions in defining fun reside in the contrast between fun as a phenomenon that occurs naturally between organizational members (organic fun; Plester *et al.*, 2015), and the idea that fun can be deliberately and even tactically organized by managers to fulfil some organizational objectives (managed, official or packaged fun; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Such strategically created fun includes activities such as events, parties, games, sharing food and drinks, outings, gift exchanges and light-hearted competitions (Ford *et al.*, 2003; Karl *et al.*, 2005; Karl and Peluchette, 2008; Peluchette and Karl, 2005). Although it seems positive and aspirational when organizations attempt to create fun activities or events in workplaces, such contrived (managed) fun can result in cynicism and employees may feel patronized and demeaned (Fleming, 2005;

Warren and Fineman, 2007a). Contrastingly, organic fun that is spontaneously generated by organizational members and occurs naturally, often in small interactions such as jokes, horseplay and even physical interactions (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990; Lamm and Meeks, 2009; Plester and Orams, 2008; Plester and Sayers, 2007) is usually preferred and perceived as genuine.

The third, emerging perspective on workplace fun suggests that for some organizational members, fun is experienced within actual work tasks (Groppe and Kleiner, 1992; Peluchette and Karl, 2005; Plester *et al.*, 2015). This final construction of fun suggests that work itself is a form of fun and some workplace responsibilities are “personally enjoyable” (Tews *et al.*, 2012, p. 108). This third conception of fun is paradoxical to popular assumptions that assume fun and work are separate and distinct from each other. Recent research (Tews *et al.*, 2012, Plester *et al.*, 2015) challenges the traditional dichotomy between work tasks and fun activities suggesting that for some people they can be synonymous. This notion of fun experienced within work tasks suggests that such an experience of fun constitutes what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) termed flow – related to the concept of engagement (Fluegge, 2008) and considered to be a short-term experience of engagement (Albrecht, 2010; Moneta, 2010). As very few (if any) studies have explored the relationship between fun and engagement, or fun and flow, we now consider literature on these related concepts.

Engagement

Employee engagement is currently a hot topic amongst human resource (HR) practitioners and academics alike, as it appears to deliver a range of positive outcomes, such as higher job performance, lower turnover intentions, and higher levels of organizational commitment and extra role behaviour (Harter *et al.*, 2002; Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Rich *et al.*, 2010; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Sonnentag, 2003). Fundamentally it is a motivational construct that reflects an employee’s intention to throw their full self – heads, hands, and heart – into their work (Kahn, 1990; Rich *et al.*, 2010). There are numerous definitions of engagement (Albrecht, 2010), and most include components of cognitive, physical and emotional connection with work (Kahn, 1990), capturing the notion that engagement is about full absorption, dedication, energy and effort (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Engagement is also about identification (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008), purpose, and focus towards organizational goals (Macey *et al.*, 2009), and has even been touted as the opposite of burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001), suggesting that is not just about motivation, it is also has well-being overtones. While the definition of engagement is likely to remain somewhat fluid and ambiguous given the literature’s scope, Albrecht (2010) emphasizes that engagement is ultimately a “positive work-related psychological state characterized by a genuine willingness to contribute to organizational success” (p. 5). When understanding what drives engagement, it is important to recognize that both organizational factors and individual differences play a role. There are certain conditions that organizations can put in place to enhance engagement, but the fact remains that some employees are more likely than others to be naturally engaged. Rich *et al.* (2010) capture this idea in an empirical study of 245 firefighters. Building on Kahn’s (1990) initial seminal model of engagement’s antecedents, Rich and colleagues show that employees who find their work meaningful (psychological meaningfulness); and experience a safe and supportive environment (psychological safety) are more likely to be engaged. Simultaneously, their personality traits play a role, with high-core self-evaluations, that is, high levels of confidence, emotional stability and perceptions of control (psychological availability), predicting higher engagement. As we will ultimately argue that workplace

fun can play a role in supporting or hindering certain drivers of engagement we will briefly describe the drivers below because it is these organizational factors that may be influenced by workplace fun.

Psychological meaningfulness, then, is the extent to which an employee's work goals are aligned with their own values, goals and needs. Generally, meaningfulness is enhanced when an employee has good person-job fit, their values are aligned with the organization's, and their job has positive characteristics, such as being challenging, interesting, and under their control. Psychological safety, on the other hand, is the extent to which an employee feels they can invest in their work without fear of negative consequences. Psychological safety occurs when the environment is trustworthy, secure and predictable. Workplace relationships play an important role here, as does the caring and concern of management. Finally, psychological availability is the extent to which an employee feels they have the psychological resources to invest in their role. This includes confidence in their ability to perform, and whether or not they have sufficient personal energy and resources to devote to their role.

Critical perspectives of engagement

Engagement is not a static concept and it fluctuates over time but this is not always acknowledged in engagement literature. For instance, new employees demonstrate high levels of engagement but this tapers over time (Trahant, 2009). Wollard (2011) raises the question: "is full engagement at all times actually possible or even fair to ask?" (p. 529). When considering questions such as the one just cited, it can be useful to examine the antithesis of the studied concept and thus we discuss differing conceptions that are suggested as the opposites to engagement: disengagement; over-engagement; burnout and workaholism.

Although there is a large and growing body of knowledge concerning engagement and its' antecedents, disengagement is not often discussed or even considered. Disengagement is an important concept as low-quality work is harmful to people and therefore the ability to disconnect from work mentally, physically and/or emotionally is a crucial form of protection for some workers. It is postulated that 50-70 per cent of worker are not engaged and there is very little research on disengagement (Wollard, 2011). However, in much of the engagement literature the antithesis of engagement is hypothesized to be burnout rather than disengagement. Burnout occurs when a person is emotionally weary or exhausted and it includes the failure of coping strategies. This raises the question is it possible to become too engaged and thus suffer burnout? And we must also consider whether burnout can be partially caused by being over-engaged.

Using "conservation of resources" theory Halbesleben *et al.* (2009) argue that employees' energy and personal resources are limited and when significant amounts are used at work this reduces the resources that employees can use at home. Therefore high levels of work engagement can have repercussions for employees' family life. They further claim that employees who are highly engaged at work are more likely to perform organizational citizenship behaviours and may have difficulty "balancing the demands of multiple roles" (p. 1452). Although engagement is primarily discussed as a highly positive construct, engaged employees are likely to experience greater interference with family life which may erode employees' finite cache of coping resources which then ultimately erodes their workplace engagement. This raises further questions about the long-term effects of high workplace engagement as the "depletion of resources" perspective suggests that people invest their personal resources in one role at the expense of another (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2009).

Over-engagement is not as widely researched as engagement but it can lead to problems with work/life balance and stress. This occurs from being too willing “to go the extra mile or an inability to let go” (McBain, 2007, p. 19). Additionally, the organization may become a key source of identity for an employee which can lead to personal problems (McBain, 2007). Different levels of engagement may occur within different workplace groups and raises the question whether there can actually be an optimum level of engagement (McBain, 2007). The dangers of over-engagement are not often articulated within the engagement literature, rather current conceptions of engagement focus mostly on leveraging engagement to improve performance. Therefore the concept of engagement needs to be reframed to embrace ideas such as meaning and purpose in work and its overall impact on employee well-being (Schuck and Rose, 2013).

Finally, we consider the concept of workaholism as a critical perspective on the notion of very high engagement, whereby employees become so engaged with their work that they are obsessive about it. Gorgievski and Bakker (2010) define engagement as “employees ‘harmonious passion’ and connection with their work activities” (p. 265). Engaged employees are dedicated, feel pride and inspiration and “feel happily engrossed (absorbed) in their work” (p. 265). Contrastingly they link workaholism to “obsessive passion” that results in employees who devote much of their time to work; find it difficult to disengage from work; and are compulsive about their work. The crucial difference between engagement and workaholism is that workaholism lacks the “positive affective (fun) component of work engagement” whereas work engagement does not include the “compulsive element of workaholism” (Gorgievski and Bakker, 2010, p. 265).

Gorgievski and Bakker basically suggest a dichotomy between positive affect (engagement) and negative affect (workaholism) but what none of these current studies or the ones cited earlier postulate is that there can be a differing states of engagement on different days or during different work cycles and for different tasks. Therefore we contend that engagement can occur with an individual job task or role and/or with the organization itself. Thus we need to consider a more fragmented picture of workplace engagement and more research is needed to further deconstruct current notions of engagement in order to consider a more fluctuating concept that includes different types of engagement – both task and context driven. We can consider engagement as a dynamic state that alters at different times with different conditions. Similarly we need to be wary of the almost overwhelmingly positive attributions made to workplace engagement and to seriously consider the other side of the concept that may include workaholism, over-engagement, cynicism, stress and burnout at different times during an employee’s tenure. With this in mind we turn to the concept of flow, considered to be a special short-term form of engagement, less likely to cause issues such as burnout.

Flow is discussed as a subset of engagement and is considered to be a momentary, less enduring state than engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Moneta, 2010). Flow involves complete task absorption, effective cognitive performance, and an enjoyment and pleasure aspect (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) so that a person feels “at one” with the activity (Moneta, 2010, p. 272). There are two contributing factors towards achieving flow and these are: a personality disposition (intrinsic motivation) towards the state; and the opportunity and environment offered within the job for this to occur (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Moneta (2010) suggests that the relationship between flow and engagement can be a reciprocal one with engagement fostering and predicting flow but the reverse effect also likely to occur. Engagement and flow are clearly similar in that they reflect a positive attitudinal and affective disposition towards work. It is engagement, though, that attracts more attention from HR practitioners, probably because of its more enduring nature.

Engagement and fun

Engagement is defined in terms of high energy and a positive psychological state. Fun also includes such elements, which suggests significant conceptual overlap. There is, however, to our knowledge, no research that specifically investigates the connection between these concepts. Albrecht (2010) calls for research that focuses on “understanding the psychology or felt experience of engagement” (p. 17) and he specifically suggests that research into organizational climate, organizational culture and organizational values could extend the current models of engagement. Quoting Bindl and Parker (2010) he claims that the more that employees internalize workplace values the greater their levels of engagement. Supporting this, Rich, LePine and Crawford found that, of the three antecedents, it was values congruence that was most strongly associated with employee engagement. Fun is a concept that has been investigated through the framework of organization culture and values (see Plester, 2007, 2008, 2009) and fun is often cited and promoted as a specific workplace value (Plester, 2009).

What we do know is that for engaged employees actual work is fun (Schaufeli, Tarris and Bakker in Bakker, 2010) and Gorgievski *et al.* (2010 p. 265) suggest that workaholism and work engagement are differentiated primarily by the positive affect or “fun” associated with engagement. Therefore in the extant literature there are already some passing linkages to the notion of fun in engagement and calls for greater culture, climate and values studies of which fun is an important component. Thus we proceed to extend research and discussion on the relationship that we have identified between these concepts.

Research design

This fun and engagement research was part of a larger empirical study investigating the relationship between organizational culture and humour in four New Zealand organizations. As themes emerged regarding organizational culture, it became apparent that the experience of fun was significant to employees’ enjoyment at work. The concept of fun was a core value in all of the studied organizations to the extent that two of the organizations had officially documented fun as an organizational value. Therefore the original data were re-examined to specifically analyse participants’ perceptions of fun, engagement, enjoyment, values, absorption, commitment, performance and satisfaction. Although the overall data collection included participant observations and document collection, the data presented in this paper are derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted within each of the four organizations. They represent a cross-section of interviews from each of the companies.

The four organizations are from different industries and have been assigned fictional nom-deplumes to protect anonymity. The organizations comprise: Kapack – a law firm with 119 staff; Sigma – a finance company with 800 staff dealing with loans, mortgages and insurances; Uvicon – (853 staff) a multi-network infrastructure company supplying electricity, gas and telecommunications; and Adare – a small information technology company specializing in network solutions and internet security (25 staff). Overall 59 semi-structured interviews were completed and these were audio-recorded and transcribed. The distribution of interviews was similar in each company with 15 interviews conducted at two of the larger companies, 16 at the third large-sized company while only 13 were undertaken in the smallest company in the study.

Although the data were entered into NVIVO software for coding the software was used primarily as a storage facility and data were coded manually and the interviews were conducted and coded by a single researcher. We assert that there was no “priming

effect” or leading questions because the interview purpose was to allow participants to co-construct their organizational experiences in regards to organizational culture and humour. The questions that were asked of participants did not actually address the topics of either fun or engagement at all. Participants were asked questions that allowed them to describe their organizational culture; discuss the importance of their organizational culture; describe humour activities and contexts; and explore the relationship between humour and organizational culture in a series of interlinked and overlapping questions. The terms engagement and fun were not introduced to participants but these terms originated independently from the participants who spent quite some time richly discussing organizational context and the aspects that were important to them.

In our first analysis, data from each organization were analysed separately to achieve a contextual overview of the organizational culture and humour activities within each organization. Then the data were combined as we started to identify categories and themes. This second analysis resulted in research examining the relationship between humour and organizational culture (see Plester, 2009). Our third separate analysis examines the current data (presented next) and in this we identified some in-depth participant reflections on their insights into workplace fun and engagement. These insights appeared to be highly relevant to the participants as their ideas on these topics were offered independently of the actual interview questions. The reflections were garnered from a variety of different participants from all four of the studied companies. Therefore our data discussing engagement and fun were an unexpected finding. When we realized that many participants had discussed these concepts we re-analysed the interview transcripts and manually searched for the specific terms engagement and fun. We then reconsidered our data from this different angle and this has allowed us to offer some early and exploratory findings in our arguments about the relationship between fun and engagement.

We do not focus on the frequency of themes but use empirical material that offers insights and rich descriptions of how our participants perceive fun and engagement within their own organizations. We attempt to highlight the relationship and connections suggested by the empirical material and we emphasize the participants’ sensemaking in regards to the topics under research (see Weick, 1989). Adopting the approach of Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) we view our empirical material as a social construction between the researcher, the participants and the social phenomena under investigation. Kvale (1983) asserts that an interview subject “seeks to understand the meaning of the phenomena in his life-world” (p. 174). Our purpose was to understand what was important to these participants and our investigation into fun and engagement was “presuppositionless” (Kvale, 1983) as we had not actually considered these topics in the semi-structured interview questions.

In following Kvale’s arguments about interpreter –reliability we acknowledge that a variety of interpretations may be possible from our data and as suggested by Alvesson we considered a set of interpretive possibilities. In the words of Alvesson (2011, p. 38) “highly diverse material cannot easily be codified categorized compared and aggregated” but a “best interpretation” is possible. We acknowledge that others may interpret our data differently but believe that we have crafted meaning from the co-constructions with participants (in interviews) and through the lived experience of one researcher participating and developing understanding of the everyday organizational reality of our participants. Such a methodological stance is given the metaphor “bricolage” by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and this sees the research process

as the craft of creating meaning from a collection of empirical materials. We do concede that the arguments derived from the data are co-constructed with our participants, and such work can be ambiguous, but we have attempted to authentically, pragmatically and reflexively (see Alvesson, 2011) craft an interpretation that offers a useful way of understanding the emerging topics of fun and engagement experienced by our participants.

Results

The empirical material constitutes a representative selection of activities and participant reflections from the four studied companies. The data have been arranged into three key thematic areas comprising data that highlight engagement specific to the participants' own roles; refer to engagement with the overall organization or specific organizational division (such as a team); and suggest dissonance, distraction and ultimately disengagement as an outcome of workplace fun. The analytical voice interpreting the excerpts precedes each tranche of interview quotes[1].

Theme 1: role engagement

All of these participants (below) link fun and engagement to their enjoyment of their role and some participants even suggest that if these elements were missing they might leave their job. These participants are enthusiastic about having fun in their roles but also stress the serious nature of some of their tasks. They emphasize that having fun does not mean they are frivolous about their work tasks. In these reflections, fun and task absorption exist synonymously, sometimes blending into each other, sometimes separate and distinct. Their depiction of work tasks as "fun" suggests that they experience the specific form of engagement termed "flow" which includes aspects of enjoyment, pleasure and effective performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). As well as fun occurring within work tasks, these participants also suggest that fun may occur around or among them, while they are performing tasks. Although it may disrupt their "flow" and momentarily take their attention from their tasks, participants suggest that fun creates additional enjoyment which they perceive as beneficial to their overall performance. It appears that fun offers release from pressure and frees participants to re-engage with tasks feeling more refreshed and energized. Therefore fun increases engagement in two ways: through offering a "release" from tasks and allowing improved engagement after this momentary break; and some tasks are experienced as a form of "fun" in themselves thus creating flow, absorption and ultimately greater engagement:

If I'm having fun with the work I'm doing then I am going to be doing better simply because I am a bit more engaged (Mike, 32, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

I am probably one of the very lucky ones in that I come to work to have fun to be honest. I think the days when we are having more fun I enjoy my job more[...] but if I wasn't having fun I would give it up in an instant [...] with fun you certainly get a sense of engagement but we have to remind ourselves that there are some roles that it's possibly less important – but if you are a customer service consultant and answer the phone all day your ability to be light-hearted and to make a conversation and to engage people is an asset (Natalie, 30, HR Consultant, Sigma).

I'm quite serious about my job. If I'm working I concentrate at work and there is a job to do I want to get it done – I'm quite dedicated and conscientious – but if I can't take a break and have a bit of a laugh and fun to relax then I'm not happy. If I'm happy then I'm relaxed, engaged and enjoying it [...] we use Gallop which helps companies measure employee engagement - how committed an employee is to their role or to the company and to their work. Fun is the top of the list-absolutely. If I'm going to spend half of my life working I want to

enjoy it! I think we just take every opportunity to have fun which is why work is fun and I think there could be more because there could always be more [...] If I'm not happy in what I am doing I tend to not be myself, I become quite negative, more quiet which is not me. If you can't talk to people and have a bit of a laugh and fun you tend to let things build and you can't release it so it would affect my performance because I feel that I would become frustrated with my job and not do so well and be less committed to it - less committed because I'm not happy (Lisette, Learning and development coordinator, 30, Sigma).

It's always fun being on the ground and going 'wow, how we are going to do this today?' [...] and as a lawyer you are doing everything, so the job is very interesting and quite fun (Kent 36, Partner, Kapack).

We can have a little bit of fun with our internal work which is not possible for the outside world [...] but we can have a little bit of fun inside and we've got the variety [...] humour to me is about you have the side down so you can see the fun or you can see the ridiculous [...] the whole point of humour is that it is free (Fiona, 42, Organisational Development Specialist, Uvicon).

I definitely think fun does impact on the enjoyment and the satisfaction of the whole coming to work (Stephanie, 30, People and Culture Advisor, Uvicon).

Fun and humour have the ability to break down some of those pressures that are building and I would say for some that there isn't enough opportunity just to chill out a little bit and put things back into perspective (Dale, 30, Group Manager People and Culture, Uvicon).

If you have a laugh and some fun it always puts you into a better mood and you work better. When I'm grumpy or down I definitely wouldn't do as good a job (Jasper, 25, Engineer, Adare).

Fun is very important. I just believe that it is all part of the big picture that it helps you to enjoy your job. If there's no laughter then it's a bit of a sad little old state of affairs [...] fun disappears probably when we are in the midst of something really huge like doing major acquisitions and that would be just because everybody would be 'flat stick'. I don't think fun is inappropriate; probably it will just be that it's just heads down [...] For me personally, I think the fun does play a big part in that so I think that I would try and sort of wear me down and I wouldn't want to be here (Joanne, 39, Accounts clerk, 39, Uvicon).

I would feel better if there was more humour and fun. You can still be professional because jokes or fun ends and then you focus again, but you know it will happen and you are looking forward to that little bit of humour, it does make a great workplace [...] The day that you have a lot of laughs- that day I feel good, great and I have achieved that, confirmed policies, put through leads that I wouldn't normally not do and you feel great about yourself. Fun is like a cup of coffee it energises you. We use a lot of humour with the clients and they laugh, and sometimes they are hungry for that little bit of humour, you can sense that especially our older clients. You took the time to crack a joke in a professional way, the joke ends and then you get on with the query and then they think oh great she shared a joke with me today, somebody made my day (Mary, 42, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

Fun is very important I think- in terms of enjoying what you are doing. We've got targets to meet, in a role where the phone is your lifeline and we know that over half of the calls we get aren't going to be pleasant. In terms of the team it is very important that you are all getting along and you are enjoying what you are doing, otherwise you are not going to perform to your best, just a lit bit of a light hearted quip every now and again it is amazing what it does to lighten the mood (Ian, 32, Department Manager, Sigma).

I think the days when we are having more fun I enjoy my job more. On a good day when I'm having fun I'll get 'stuck in' and get everything done (Marilyn, 32, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

Theme 2: engagement with the organization, organizational unit or team

All of the participants (below) express positive perceptions suggesting that when their organization values fun it creates a more enjoyable work climate and culture which fosters greater overall engagement with the organization. These participants associate the experience of workplace fun with the enhancement of either team or organizational culture (or both). A perceived “fun culture” increases their enjoyment in their workplace which increases their engagement and even influences decisions to stay with their company. Lily highlights that she does not like her current role but stays because of her team engagement. Participants emphasize that a balance between fun and work tasks is important. Sharing fun stimulates engagement with others in the team and people in the wider organizational context:

[...] what we are trying to do is really look at the things for employee engagement in the job and their duties at the same time [...] people are generally quite enthusiastic for our fun initiatives and activities [...] people here love the company, which is good, from an HR point of view you can't ask for much more and we have a good reputation around the place as being a great company to work for (Jerome, 38, HR manager, Sigma).

This company as a whole for a start recognises the value of fun and the company is fairly big on that as you'd know if you've ever seen one of our Christmas parties, they are fairly amazing events [...] we recognise that fun is definitely part of the culture [...] We do actually work but at the same time we have fun, so I think it is in the culture [...] (Mike, 32, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

I think that we show it every day in just working together and how everyone gets on and has a laugh, has a lot of fun. I guess our team culture is that we like to have fun while working hard. By improving our results and taking on challenges we can show that we do actually work but at the same time we have fun, so I think it is in the culture but there is a fine balance because I guess when you look around this building there are some teams that are very serious (James, 32, Lawyer, Kapack).

This is probably the best company I have ever worked for [...] I they invest in the people that work in the company. This company is excellent- it invests in the people, it does a lot of things together as whole company, I enjoy working here, I mean you guess you have to, you spend so much time here, but I get up and look forward to coming to work here and when I ever leave I'd miss the people and the culture that has been created here [...]. if I didn't get away from my computer and go and relax and have a bit of laugh or a bit of fun with somebody and I was deskbound all day every day, I probably wouldn't like my job as much (Jenny, 33 PA to CEO, Uvicon).

We can't operate in isolation and we have to be interactive, we have to be engaged, we have to care, and care about other people rather than just what we are doing (Matt, 35, Group General Manager Strategic Development, 35, Uvicon).

Fun culture can make it or break it as far as I'm concerned because like when you are doing accounts and I mean the job itself can often get really boring and like even though I get a lot of satisfaction and enjoyment out of it, a fun culture can provide you either with a reason to stay or a reason to leave and that is a huge part of the reason why I left (my last job) [...] it is quite important. It creates a nice atmosphere to work and when you've got a bit of a laugh going on, nothing is too serious or too quiet [...] There is freedom to have fun and it's definitely easier to come to work if you know that you're going to have a fun day. It stops it from being boring (Polly, 25, Finance Officer, Uvicon).

Fun is part of the culture -you know how some corporates are very much no humour whatsoever - this is not like that - you can tell a joke, people laugh, silly things happen we laugh too. I particularly like laughing and joking (Betty, 54, Receptionist, Uvicon).

I'm engaged in this company because I enjoy our team – they can laugh and you know you can enjoy yourself and have fun [...] it is the difference between waking up in the morning, it's raining and dark outside and you go "oh, I've got to go to work" but it's the difference between really not wanting to go to work and knowing that once you get to work it's fine. Fun just creates a good atmosphere at work, it makes going to work a lot easier, knowing there is a friendly, happy environment you are going to. It's fun, the whole floor, everyone is genuine, it's a good place to work [...]. I do my job, have fun doing it [...] on the first day I came in they were all about having fun. They do encourage the whole fun thing but there is a definite line there and as much as we do joke about it is still very professional [...] our team and our management, they have fun with us, it's great for the team, we all have a laugh and a joke, but I think everyone knows where the line is (Brendan, 25, Sales Representative, Adare).

I think the (organizational) values of fun and unity and achievement really comes through. Fun, unity and achievement are things that make it a lot more satisfying about my job than I probably have been in any organization – it is exciting to know that when you go to work even if it is busy, I have a feeling that they are supporting you and it is more of a motivator than anything else. If you have a bad culture and you have a personal view to do your best with your job and be as successful as you can be the culture will just drag you down and demotivate you so I think our culture is the opposite of that it motivates us as much as we want it to be [...] having as a value flows through from the types of performance based measures that we use [...] people like our PA's are responsible for organising events and really pull people together and really encourage people to be happy and to relax and have fun- there are certain administrators within teams who encourage it (Grace, 26, HR Administrator, Sigma).

I think we really do work together and that we have a lot of fun and people really are willing to help each other. I think that we show it every day in just working together and how everyone gets on and has a laugh, has a lot of fun and the Gallup results come up really really positive and that is all about staff engagement and we got some great marks for our team in that space. I guess our team culture is that we like to have that balance of having fun and also working hard [...] I think by adding fun into the values – and fun and humour is something that we have always had in the team – and I guess I am proud of our team environment. In the past we have been a team that has been picked on for our humour and that is just in the sense of when I guess you mix that balance up people tend to think that you are not working, you are all standing around laughing and telling funny stories and jokes and so if you are doing that then you mustn't be working which is what we have tried to work by improving our results and taking on challenges so that we can show that we do actually work but at the same time we have fun, so I think it is in the culture but there is a fine balance (Felix, 32, Operations Manager, Sigma).

I love my team. I don't particularly- to be honest- love my job but I think the most important thing is that I get along with the team and the team is great, lots of fun. I'd be sad to leave [...] I haven't had a single day when there wasn't some kind of joke or fun. I haven't spent a single day without laughing (Lily, 27, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

Theme 3: disengagement, distraction and dissonance

Although this segment of data is significantly shorter than the earlier segments, it is noteworthy as these comments highlight a conflicting perspective (from the earlier two sections) and thus offer another dimension to the findings. These four comments, although divergent to the majority, suggest that workplace fun can be perceived as a distraction by some people. Fun activities can be noisy and pull people away from their focus and work tasks, this would suggest that fun could therefore cause disengagement with tasks. James' reflection portrays an even stronger reaction and suggests that the "organized fun days" which he strongly dislikes induce such a negative reaction

that he disengages with his organization and deliberately absents himself. Kayla experiences dissonance when her organization markets itself as a “fun” company which she does not believe is true. These participants’ comments suggest that fun can be loud, distracting and hinder task completion but even more insidiously may cause alienation and disengagement from the organization itself-offering a cautionary note to the overall discussion presented next:

When we have fun days at work – like wearing pyjamas – or dressing up as a TV character, I can’t stand it! It’s so childish-so I stay at home and have a sick day (James, 34, Engineer, Adare).

You want to say in general – humour, fun, having people laughing is always good – but it’s not good when it gets in the way of getting things done. If it’s too social where people just sit in the café, and drink coffee and joke and play around and that sort of stuff, I guess that is not productive (Aidan, 30, Group manager, Uvicon).

I like being in an office where you can have a good laugh and it’s a lot of fun [...] BUT – I will work from home if I want to get something done as the office can be too loud, occasionally the antics of the company will be an issue. All the fun and hijinks can be really distracting [...] (Bruce, 25, Account manager, Adare).

I think we want to tell people that we are a fun organisation but they can’t use that word fun because that would be downright lying. It makes me cross when they say we are the “fun law firm”. We are not really a culture around fun, we don’t have a value called fun – but I know that HR are very aware of that – they sort of are trying to bring on people that might create that fun or introduce that fun [...] (Kayla, 37, Marketing Manager, Kapack).

Discussion

The data show that employees often spontaneously use the word “engaged” or “engagement”, when talking about fun. It certainly appears that fun plays a role in engagement. Engagement is associated with positive psychology and emotions such as happiness, joy and enthusiasm. Likewise, fun is primarily perceived as positive and is associated with enjoyment, pleasure, frivolity, play and laughter. Both fun and engagement are linked to enjoyment and for the most part our participants hope and expect to experience some enjoyment at work. Enjoyment is discussed synonymously with fun but people experience this enjoyment through different types of fun. Our first data theme highlights how for some of these workers fun is experienced within the job itself (Marilyn, Mike, Kent, Natalie) which helps them engage their “heads, hand and heart” (Rich *et al.*, 2010). Such absorption is related to the specific form of engagement known as “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1991, 1996) and this is experienced in momentary segments or sustained periods of time. Theme one also demonstrates that fun allows people to take a break from work tasks. Our participants found this refreshing and having fun created a positive effect upon their mood which they then applied to their work tasks. This break or “relief” function of fun promoted a refreshed re-engagement with their work tasks. Therefore, fun experienced within work tasks or fun experienced as a short diversion from work tasks promotes greater engagement in two ways. Experiencing one’s actual work tasks as fun helps to create a state of flow in some people. Additionally, having spontaneous fun, as a break from work tasks assists in renewed engagement with tasks.

Our second data theme supports the idea that fun creates enjoyment and camaraderie, and thus engagement at the team, unit or organizational level. This type of engagement is created through fostering an organizational climate or culture that values and encourages workplace fun – as experienced by participants in all four of our studied organizations. A workplace that allows fun to flourish creates positive feelings about the

team or organization which fuels increased organizational engagement. In terms of antecedents, the data reveal that fun facilitates connectedness with others at work, in addition to a safe and supportive environment, all of which facilitate psychological safety (Rich *et al.*, 2010), showing how fun contributes to one of engagement's key antecedents. Further, the data suggest that fun supports the "heart" part of engagement, in that it enables employees to enjoy work. It supports the "head" and "hands" part of engagement by giving employees a rest and refreshing them so that they are able to come back to tasks and devote their full attention to their work, avoiding burnout. Fun is associated with positive emotions and workplace climate therefore fostering conditions of fun may contribute towards creating a climate of engagement. Fun aside, the data hold interesting implications for engagement theory, in that they suggest that engagement can be directed quite separately towards a role or the organization. When employees talk about "being engaged", they're not always talking about their job. Sometimes they do not enjoy their job or its tasks but they are still engaged with their overall organization.

Our third theme offered data that showed that not all fun created enjoyment and fostered engagement with tasks or the organization itself. This dissonance and cynicism is supported in the literature (see Fleming, 2005, Plester *et al.*, 2015). Prior literature does suggest that workplace fun can create cynicism and disharmony. However from our participants' reflections it appears that there are differing influences on this dissonance. One of these is the type of fun that is experienced and similar to findings by Plester *et al.* (2015) it seems that fun that is managed, packaged and enforced (such as the dress up days so reviled by James), may cause negative reactions such as distancing oneself from both the fun activity and the organization. In James's case this caused disengagement to the point of absenteeism. Second, spontaneous (organic) fun among colleagues can be noisy and distracting for some employees and these elements of fun can therefore cause distraction from work tasks and causes employees to disengage from their tasks, their organization or both. As disengagement is less empirically prevalent in the extant literature, this early finding linking fun and disengagement may offer a starting point for further investigations into the antithesis of engagement.

Implications, future research and concluding remarks

This exploratory research offers some early evidence concerning the relationship between fun and engagement and this relationship has implications for both theory and practice. Our theoretical contribution comes from extending current models of engagement by showing that fun is an important factor in engagement. We also extend the current concept of engagement in illustrating two different levels of employee engagement, in that when employees talk about engagement they refer quite separately to their role and their organization. We demonstrate engagement at the individual task level where employees find the task itself to be a form of fun and thereby feel fully engaged (flow) or enjoy fun as a refreshing break from work tasks and subsequently engage more fully with their tasks after experiencing fun. We also provide evidence suggesting that fun at work can create positive feelings and camaraderie which stimulate engagement at the wider organizational or team level. Contrastingly, we offer some early findings about disengagement and dissonance and how the wrong types of fun can create this less-desirable state in some employees.

For managers and HRM practitioners, the key message is that fun is a tricky area to get right, but is worth endorsing as long as it is done carefully. While some organizations take steps to initiate "fun" initiatives, such as fancy dress days or organized social events, such packaged attempts are not likely to have desired effects on engagement, and may backfire. Instead, our data show that fostering a culture where spontaneous fun is

encouraged, and allowing organic fun to emerge, is likely to help employees refresh themselves, enjoy themselves, and, in turn, be more prepared to invest their full selves into their work. One important point for managers to remember is that fun can help employees connect with each other and develop a sense of relatedness, which in turn can help them feel “psychologically safe” and able to engage more fully with their work. So, if managers notice that organic fun is arising, provided everyone is enjoying themselves it is worth stepping back quietly and allowing it to happen rather than worrying about work that is not getting done at that very moment.

In terms of developing a fun culture, how can one do this without it appearing too packaged? Culture is often perpetuated by leaders’ role-modelling, by stories and symbols, by sending signals about what behaviours are rewarded or punished, or by recruiting and selecting people who fit that culture. It is worth considering how leaders model an organic type of fun that is appropriate and acceptable to others in the organization. It is also worth contemplating whether organizational selection processes allow for the selection of people who fit with existing organizational members’ views of fun, and whether the organization sends discrete signals that it values fun, without being contrived. This could simply involve allowing employees to take time to laugh around the water cooler, and sending discrete signals that they are not expected to be taking their job seriously every single moment of the day. Even when it comes to performance reviews, perhaps one should not come down too hard on employees who do take time to connect in light-hearted ways with their colleagues, as such behaviours can ultimately help engagement, retention, well-being and even performance.

On a separate note, the data also suggest that an employee’s engagement with their role can be different to their engagement with their organization. Therefore, when HR practitioners conduct staff engagement surveys it is worth measuring both of these types of engagement. There are two well-validated engagement measures that are cost-free and easy to use. These are Rich *et al.* (2010) measure, and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Both of these could be reworded to separate engagement in the role and/or task from engagement in the organization itself.

This exploratory study has given us the basis for future research into the phenomena of fun at work. We believe that there are significant opportunities for further research which could include an extensive quantitative survey. Questions for employees could ask about the relevance and importance of fun at work and where or not they actually experience fun at work. The notion of coerced or managed fun could be further investigated and also the related concepts of organic and task fun (as discussed by Plester *et al.*, 2015). Surveys could also address the questions of organizational fun policies, values and the relationship between fun and engagement at both the organizational level as well as the individual’s engagement with their task and/or role. Finally, future studies could consider the concept of fun from the perspective of employees and compare this with a managerial view to consider whether experiences and perceptions are similar or different in varying hierarchical positions and roles. There is much more to be investigated and this early study has begun to address a topic that has great complexity and original insights to offer regarding workplace social processes and the well-being of employees.

In conclusion, we have presented a qualitative study that has shown preliminary links between fun and engagement. Specifically, fun helps employees refresh themselves, enjoy their tasks, and feel positively towards their organization. However, if not treated cautiously, fun can also serve as a distraction which in turn can lead to disengagement. The results suggest that fun is a worth encouraging in the workplace, but it needs to be handled carefully by managers and HR practitioners.

Note

1. The names of all participants have been changed.

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Dr Ann Hutchison specialises in human resource management, with a particular interest in the areas of selection, performance management and reward. Prior to joining the University of Auckland she was a Human Resource Practitioner and has held specialist positions in employment relations and reward, as well as several generalist internal human resource roles. Now her current research interests include senior executive selection and development, the measurement of team and individual performance, personality as a predictor of workplace outcomes, and employee motivation.

ANNEXURE 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How do you define performance?
2. What drives performance in an organisation?
3. What measures do you have in place to manage performance?
4. Of these measures, which do you believe have the most influence in motivating employees to perform? Why?
5. What are the issues that inhibit high performance?
6. How does your company motivate people to perform during high-stress periods or periods of high growth?
7. Which of these actions would you perceive to have the highest impact on performance? Why?

ANNEXURE 4: THEMES, SUB-CATEGORIES AND CODES FROM THE DATA

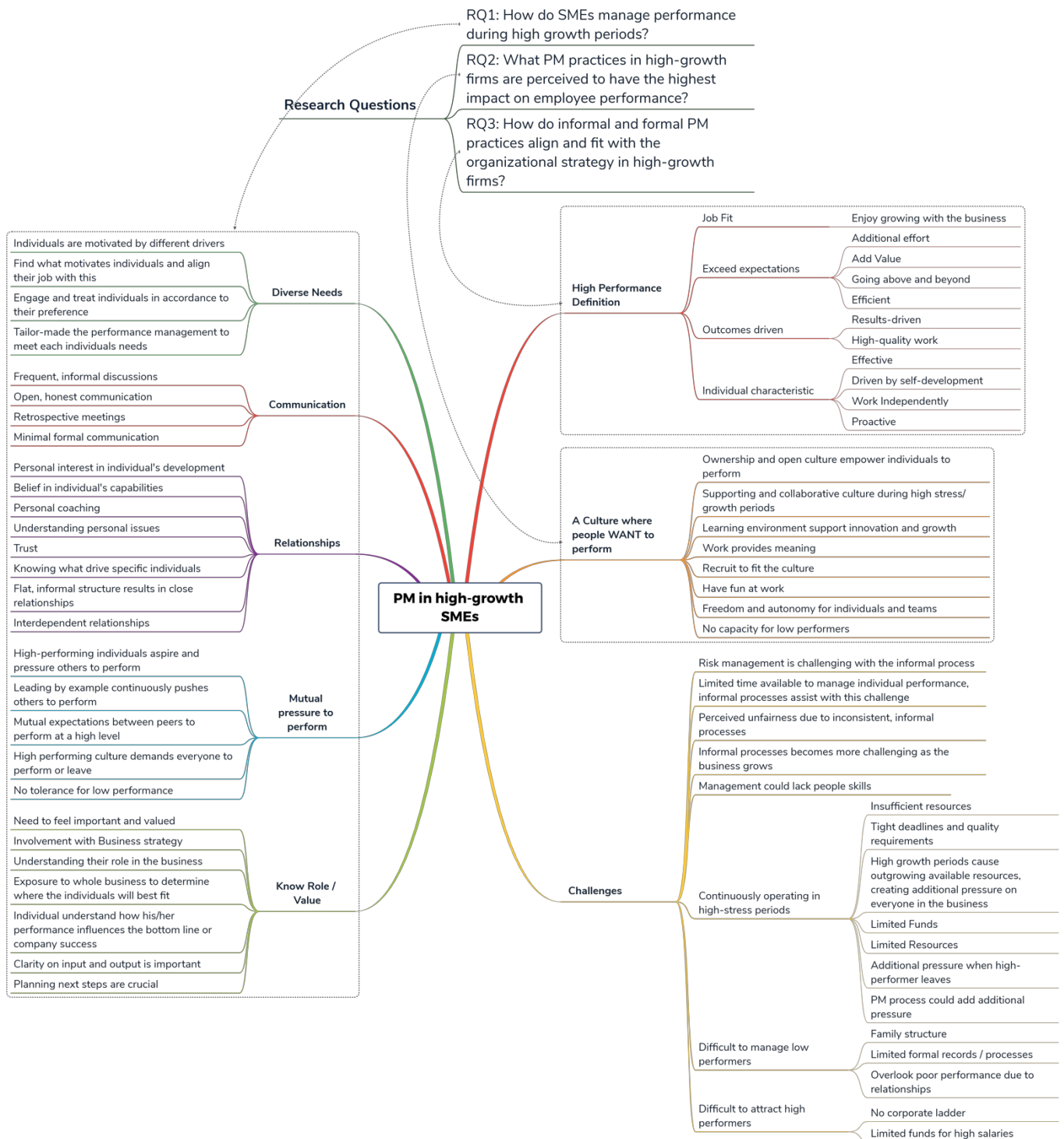


Exhibit 1: Overall diagram linking themes, codes and sub-categories to the research questions

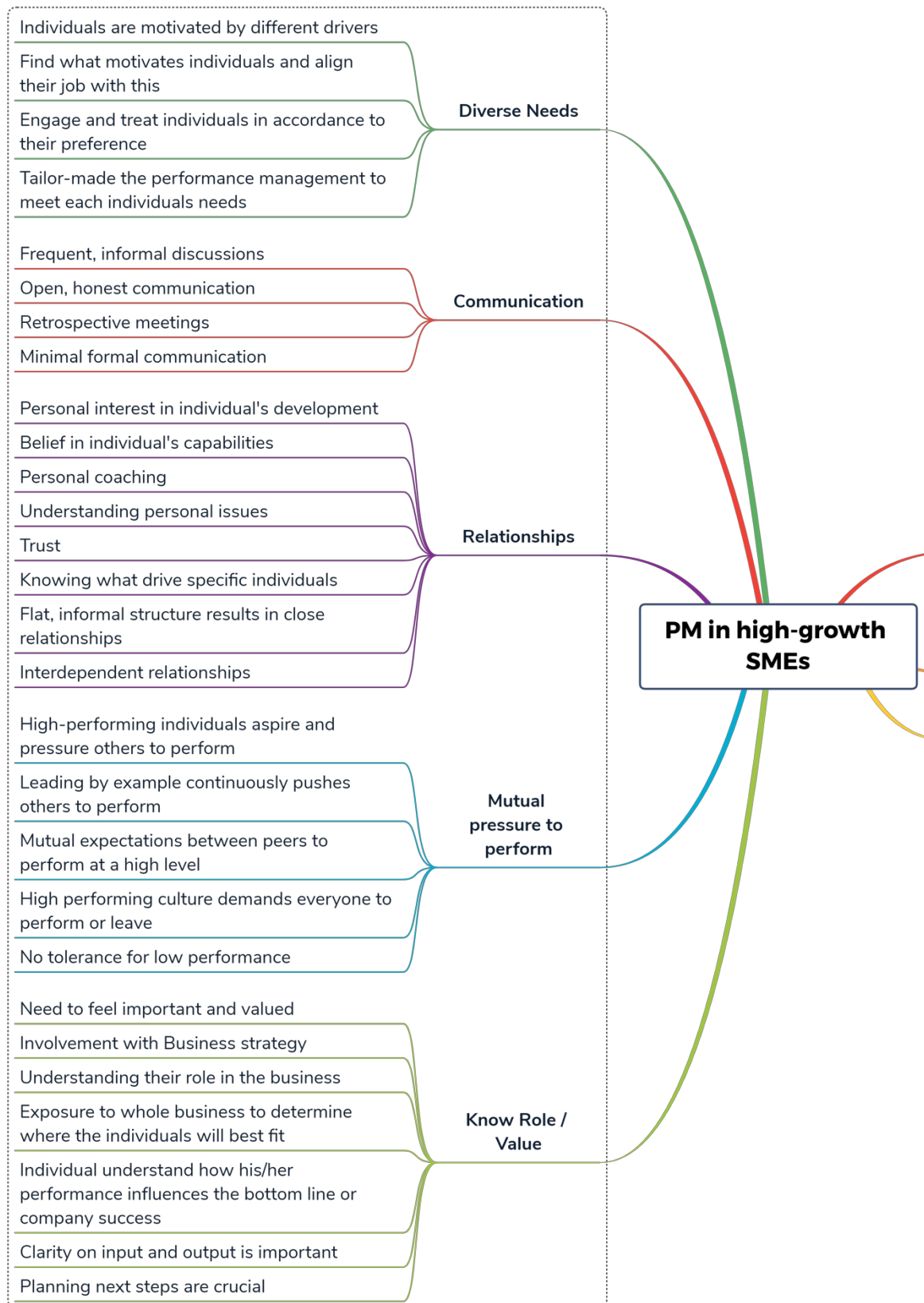


Exhibit 2: Codes developed into sub-categories and consolidated into Theme 2 related to RQ1

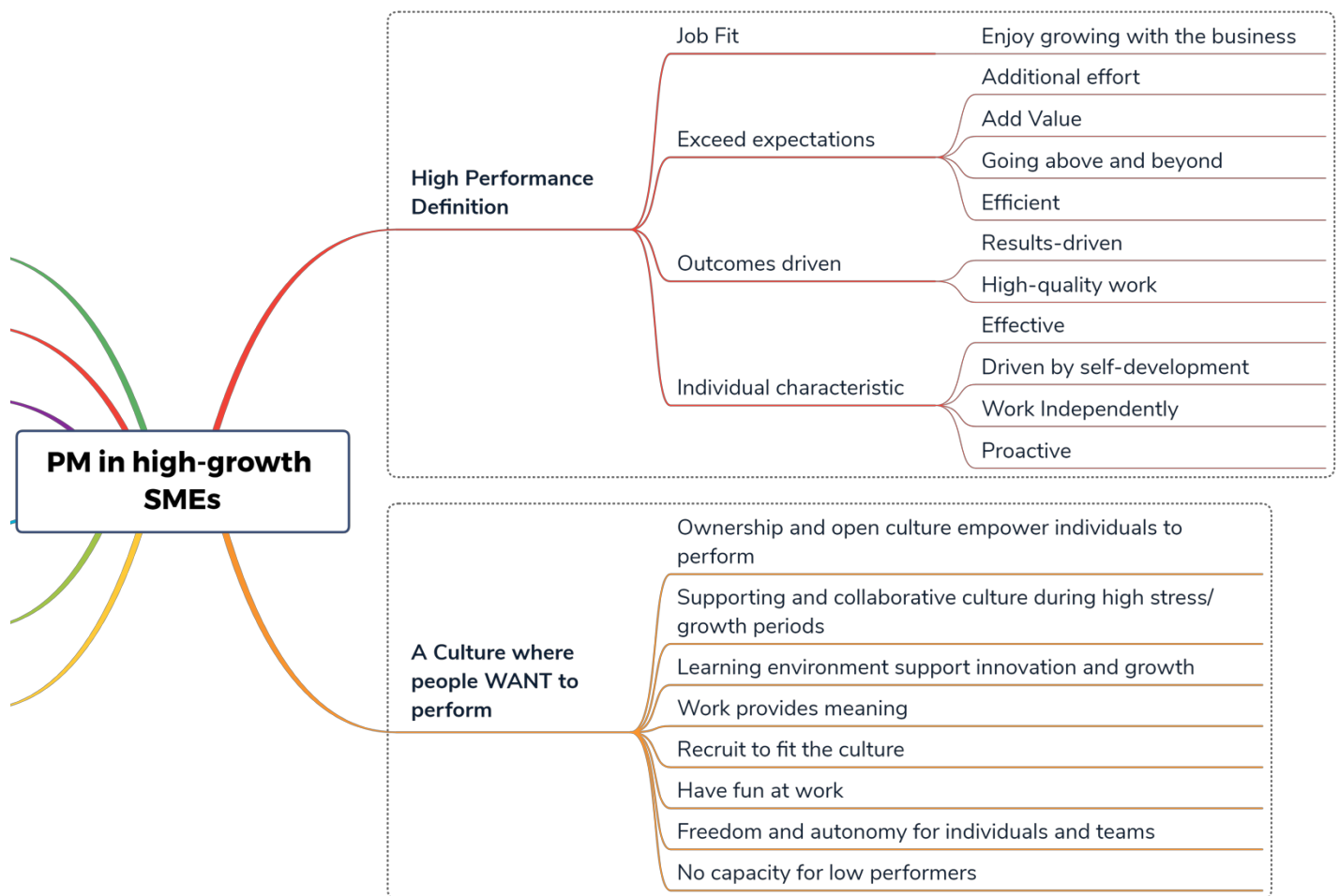


Exhibit 3: Codes and sub-categories relating to the Definition for a high performance individual (top) and Theme 1 (bottom), mapped to RQ3 and RQ2 respectively

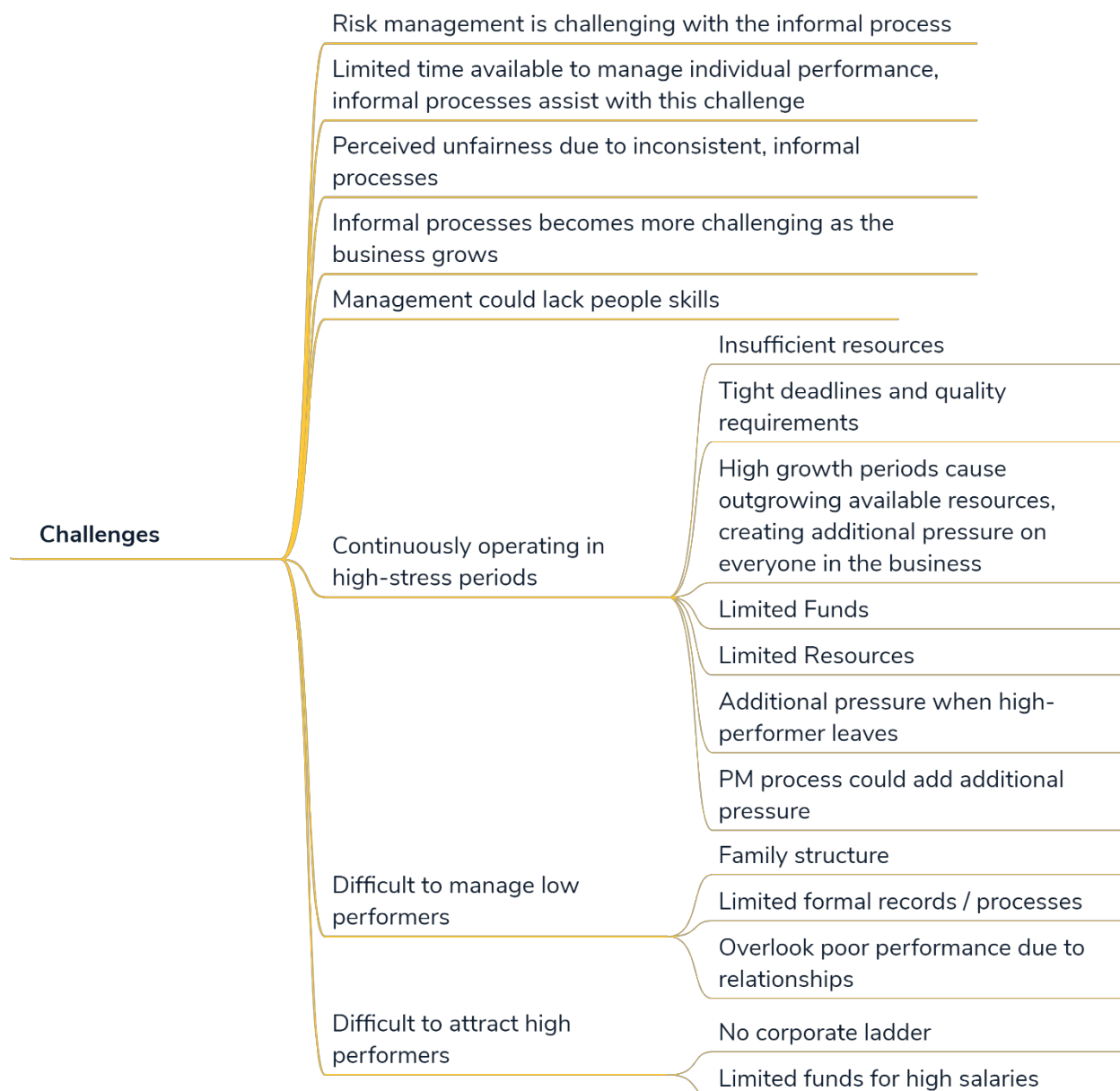


Exhibit 4: Codes and sub-categories concerning challenges within high-growth SME (Theme 3) with relation to managing performance.