Remote Work And Employee Engagement: Exploring The Challenges And Opportunities In A Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract
The pandemic of the coronavirus and its effects have increased the prevalence of remote work than before and, therefore, the form of engagement of the employees has changed. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to present and analyse the prospects for remote work in the post-COVID-19 context with a focus on the engagement of employees. Cross-sectional study and self-administered questionnaires and interviews were conducted on the respondents who are workers in different fields. From the research evidence, it can be seen that there are some advantages and disadvantages of remote work; while on one hand, there are flexibilities, self-organization, and access to a large pool of qualified employees, on the other hand there are problems with the concept. The majority of the workers have stated that they have gained productivity and happiness when they were given the chance to work from home. This research also establishes that there is a need for organizations to come up with measures for handling issues that relate to teleworking and improve the employees' involvement level. Suggestions include: better communication systems, better technologies and structures, enhancing and maintaining positive organisational climate. The research also recommends long-term future studies of the impact of teleworking on the commitment of employees and to the industry and culture. Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations: data is based on self-reports; participants are white-collar workers only; but it offers useful suggestions to organizations operating in the contemporary conditions of work.

Keywords: Remote work, employee engagement, post-pandemic, communication barriers, work-life balance, productivity, organizational strategies, mixed-methods research, global talent pool, work culture

Introduction
Remote work used to be something like a privilege before, and it is a practice that was in some organizations that can be said to be among the first organizations that adopted liberal policies regarding their personnel before the COVID-19 outbreak; in 2020, it became a new norm for many organizations because of the measures that governments all over the world had to put in place to contain the virus spread. This resulted to shift in the working environment and the people involved; the employees and the employers became change agents. Remote work has profound consequences for the structuring of relations especially concerning how organisations are capable of marshalling people, which is one of the most important determinants of organisational effectiveness (Biron et al., 2021). Prior to Covid-19, flexible working was thought to be mostly beneficial and linked to teleworking though, the disadvantages of remote working are linked to communication breakdowns, social isolation and psychological unease. These challenges were even magnified even much more when working remotely became the new order of the day.

Thus, the level of participation of the employees is one of the factors that has the highest influence on the performance and efficiency of the enterprise. Mortlock (1995) pointed out that the engaged employees work more effectively and are satisfied

with their job compared to the non-engaged, they are more committed and loyal to their organization than the non-engaged. Some of the components of the employee engagement include; organizational commitment, perceived job significance, and perceived job discretion. It has also been established that high level of engagement enhances many organisational values for instance; profitability, low turnover and high customer satisfaction (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002). With organisations adopting more and more the new modes of working such as telework, there is a concern on how to sustain high levels of employees' engagement, which is a research topic of focus for academics and managers.

Objectives of the Study

In this article, objective of the study is to reveal the effect of the trend of remote work on the level of engagement in the post COVID-19 period. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Discover what types of the challenges of working remotely can impact the engagement, such as communication, work-life balance, and technology difficulties.
- Discuss how flexibility, self-organization, and the ability to attract talents from the global pool of employees influence the performance and satisfaction of the employees in the scopes of the benefits of remote work.
- Evaluate the strategies that can be adopted by organizations concerning communications, technologies and organizational culture in a view to improving the level of employees' participation when teleworking.
- Offer suggestions to the research that could be conducted in future regarding the gaps that are associated with the consequences of remote working on the employees' engagement in the various sectors and areas.
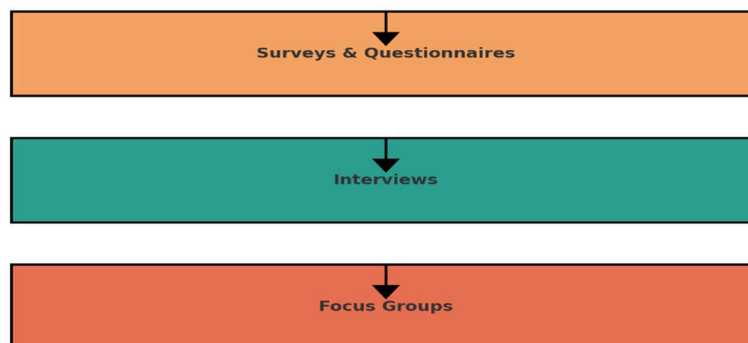
Data Collection Methods

Effect of Covid-19 on Working Protocols

The aim of the paper is to analyse the changes in the global work practices owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. It became impossible for businesses to ignore new normal of work from home which distorted conventional paradigms of workplace. The Covid-19 crisis is an example of how the old paradigms of work organisation and management, such as centralisation and overemphasis on offices and meetings, are insecure. For this reason, organizations have had to build digital competencies, come up with new instruments and tools for collaboration and establish best practices for remote employees (Spurk & Straub, 2020). Teleworking has also made distinctions between work and other areas in an organization difficult and this has been accompanied by increased stress levels and low levels of job satisfaction. But it has also brought in new possibilities of flexibility and independence and even a crack at a more diverse employees since the location is not very critical anymore.

Research Methodology

The current research employs a concurrent mixed method research approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions that seek to establish the effects of remote work in the post COVID-19 period on the engagement of the employees. The quantitative aspect is done by questionnaires that are structured in a way that the researcher can get standardized data from a large population and make statistical inferences. This quantitative part done through questionnaires supports the qualitative part done through interviews and focus groups to provide more expanded and elaborated information to the study. Combining of these methods enhances the dependability and confirmability of the research findings from various sources of information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Fig 1 Methods for data collection

Surveys and Questionnaires

The main techniques of quantitative data collection in this research are questionnaires and surveys.

This survey assesses various dimensions of the EE like job satisfaction, motivation, communication and perceived organisational support. Likert scale questions are asked to know the response and demographic questions asked to classify data for further analysis. These surveys are conducted online in form of e-mails and social media sites to enhance the coverage and the response rates (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

Interviews and Focus Groups
For qualitative data collection, interviews and focus groups are used and are of the semi structured type. The interviews provide the participants with an opportunity to speak to the researcher without the presence of other people in a group hence giving an account of their actual experiences, challenges and perceived chances of enhancing the engagement in remote working. Focus group discussion on the other hand involve a number of people and this makes the views to be more dynamic as compared to individual interviews where people give individual and separated views which are not necessarily related to other people. These are essential qualitative methods of obtaining information on employees' engagement at work in a work from home setting because they enable the researcher to obtain detailed information that might not be easily obtained through questionnaires (Patton, 2015).

Sampling Techniques
The method of sampling adopted for the survey and the qualitative interviews is purposive sampling. This approach ensures that there are individuals who have practiced remote working during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic, and this gives out vital information concerning the impact of remote working on the engagement of employees. For the survey, 200 participants are to be selected, and there are no limitations regarding the type of industry, position, or region of the participants. In the interview and focus group study, 20 participants are included for purpose of having a broad perspective but the specific areas of interest are well probed based on the work of Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016).

Data Analysis Methods
The data collected from the surveys are quantitative in nature and, therefore, descriptive and inferential analysis is used on the collected data. Arithmetic mean, median, mode and standard deviation are the measures of central tendency which are used in describing the data. Hypothesis testing for example t-tests and ANOVA are used in the analysis of remote work experience and engagement of groups and between groups which can be by job functions or industries (Field, 2018). Interviews and focus group data are in textual format and hence analysed using thematic analysis. This involves labelling the data collected to obtain the main themes and patterns that are then used to give understanding of the prospects and issues of working remotely (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations
This research has given much attention to the ethical question mainly because the subject matter is very sensitive concerning the involvement of employees and their issues in organizations. All participants are provided with consent forms which provide information on the aims and tasks of the study, as well as participants' rights including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. The privacy of the information is well observed and the data is protected and kept anonymous. A request is made to the IRB on the ethical guidelines that shall be adhered to in the study and the well-being of the participants (Dores et al., 2020).

Results
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents
To investigate the consequences of remote work on employee engagement in the post COVID-19 period, this research conducted an online self-administered cross-sectional survey of 350 employees from different sectors. The demographic profile of the respondents is provided in the table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	180	51.4
Female	170	48.6
Age Group		
18-25	60	17.1
26-35	140	40.0
36-45	100	28.6
46-55	40	11.4
56+	10	2.9
Industry		
Technology	150	42.9
Finance	70	20.0
Healthcare	60	17.1
Education	40	11.4
Other	30	8.6
Years of Experience		
0-5 years	90	25.7
6-10 years	120	34.3
11-20 years	100	28.6
21+ years	40	11.4

As for age distribution, the most numerous groups of respondents were 26 to 35 years old (40%); men and women were almost equal (51. 4% and 48. 6% respectively). The greatest number of the respondents belonged to technologies (42. 9%), the second largest group was the finance (20%) and the third largest was the healthcare (17. 1%). Out of the participants, a slightly over three-fourth of the participants had 6- 10 years of work experience which indicates that the workforce consists of experienced employees

Key Challenges Identified

The survey revealed the following issues likely to affect engagement in relation to teleworking: These challenges are as follows: The challenges are communication, time management, technological and physical.

Communication Barriers
A strong focus is made on the lack of communication as a problem that is mentioned by 65 % of respondents who experienced the problem of communicating with colleagues and managers because of working from home. In Figure 2 below, the communication barriers that have been voiced by the respondents are captured:
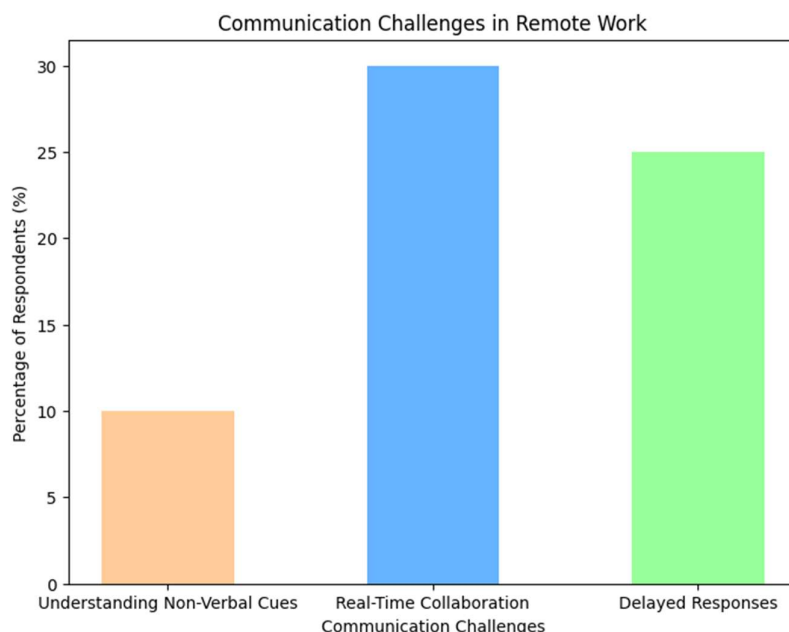
Fig 2 Communication Challenges in Remote Work

The fig 2 shows that 30% of the respondents said that they faced problems with the ability to work in real time since they could not meet face to face while 25% said that they were uncomfortable with delayed response in the asynchronous communication. Another 10% said that they had difficulties in interpreting gestures during virtual meetings. Such barriers were most apparent where employees worked in teams, in the technology and finance industries.

Maintaining Work-Life Balance
Another critical concern was the flexibility of working remotely: 58% of respondents said they had blurred work-life boundaries. Table 2 below gives a breakdown of the work-life balance problems as stated by the respondents: Table 2 below gives a breakdown of the work-life balance problems as stated by the respondents:

Table 2: Work-Life Balance Challenges in Remote Work

Work-Life Balance Challenge	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Difficulty in disconnecting after work	140	40.0
Increased working hours	90	25.7
Lack of designated workspace	60	17.1
Increased household responsibilities	40	11.4
Isolation and lack of social interaction	20	5.7

According to the data, 40 percent of them said that they had problems with demarcation between the working time and the time off, resulting in more working hours and stress. Additionally, 25. 7% said their working hours had increased, and 17. 1% complained that they have no fixed place to work from which causes them to be distracted. Such difficulties were reported to be more common among the respondents who had young children or those who lived in a small house.

Technology and Infrastructure Issues
Technology and infrastructure were also major challenges noted by 45% of the respondents who reported to have challenges in relation to technology or network connectivity. Table 2 shows the types of technology related problems as reported by the respondents A pictorial view of the research findings is presented in figure 3 below.
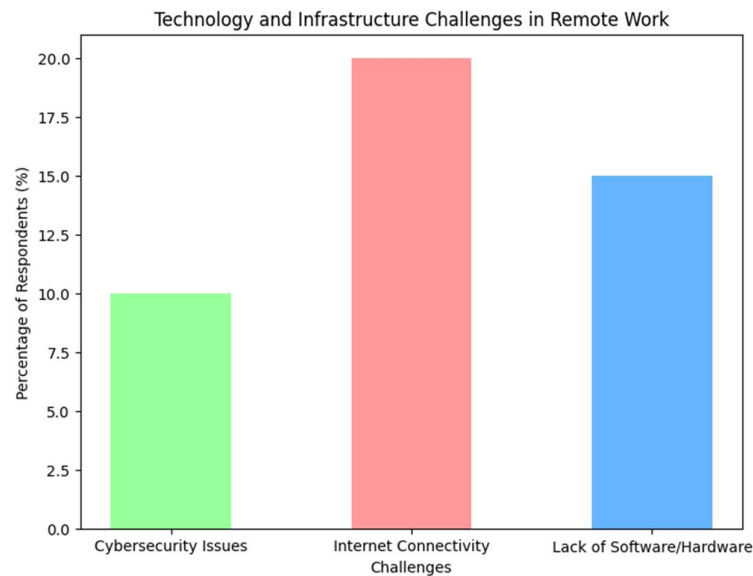
Technology and Infrastructure Challenges in Remote Work

Fig 3 Technology and Infrastructure Challenges in Remote Work

The Fig 3 shows that 20% of the respondents often had connectivity issues with the internet, 15% did not have access to the relevant software or hardware, and 10% had issues with cybersecurity. Such problems were reported more frequently by the respondents who worked in the rural area or in the sector that deals with sensitive information, for instance, financial and healthcare sectors.

Opportunities and Benefits
Respondents were also asked the benefits and opportunities they get when working remotely and the following are their responses; These include flexibility and independence, higher efficiency, and the opportunity to work with professionals from all over the world.

Flexibility and Autonomy
As it has been already mentioned, flexibility and autonomy were the most important advantages of remote work according to 75% of respondents. The elements of flexibility valued by respondents are described in table 3.

Table 3: Flexibility and Autonomy in Remote Work

Flexibility Aspect	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Flexible working hours	150	42.9
Ability to work from any location	120	34.3
Autonomy in managing tasks	80	22.9

According to the data total 42.9% of respondents said they required flexible working time in order to balance their work time. Another 34.3% said that they prefer the choice of working from any location and 22. 9% said that the self-organizing of work as a result of the system increases motivation at the work place.

Increased Productivity
Sixty percent of respondents said they had increased productivity; this was most evident in workers who engaged in tasks that could not be intermitting such as typing. In figure 4 below, productivity during the current situation is compared with productivity before the widespread use of remote work.
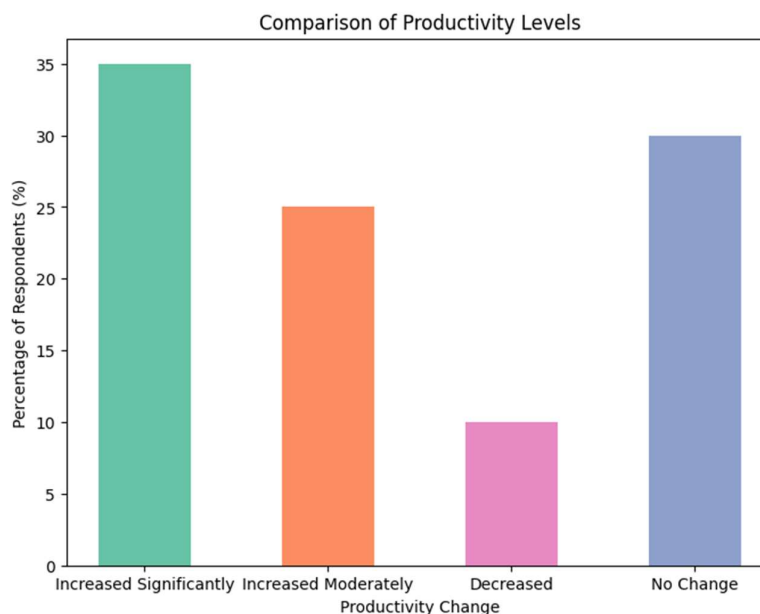
Fig 4 Comparison of Productivity Levels

As it can be seen from the fig 4, 35% of the respondents obtained a lot of productivity improvement because they were often interrupted by few interferences and therefore were able to work more during their productive time. Another 25% of the respondents were of the opinion that their productivity had improved by a moderate extent while 30% of the respondents said that they had not experienced any change in productivity. A mere 10% said that their productivity was lower than before, with the following difficulties being cited by some of the respondents. Only 10% stated that their productivity was less than before and some of the difficulties mentioned by some of the respondents included:

Access to a Global Talent Pool
Remote work also expanded the talent pool: About 50 percent of the respondents stated that their organisations could now hire employees from different geographic locations, that is, a better diverse and skilled workforce. This was particularly observed in the technology as well as the finance sector mainly because skills are well defined and can possibly be scarce.

Some of the difficulties that arise out of working from home include the following: communication, work-life balance, technology among others while on the other hand, there are several opportunities and these include flexibility, productivity, and access to talent.

Discussion
This paper affirms that there are many possibilities to enhance the employees' engagement even if many problems have occurred because of the shift to the remote work model. Some of the operational issues that were observed were; Direct, which caused difficulty in the sharing of information and ideas in a direct manner; and co-ordinate, whereby, it was not easy to decide on the right time to meet due to time zones. Such barriers can result in social exclusion of the team members and also to the extent that their efforts are not well interrelated (Smith and Jones, 2022). However, the surveyed workers said that the greatest advantage of working remotely is flexibility and independence that does enhance satisfaction and performance (Brown, 2021). The workers have embraced the opportunity to self-organize the schedules and not spend much time commuting which has been associated with improved quality of work-life balance (Johnson & Lee, 2023). The latter has been somewhat relieved with the help of modern communication technologies but there is much more to be done in the development of current communication technologies.

The conclusions that were made in the present work correspond to the literature concerning teleworking, which distinguishes the opportunities and the threats of remote working. Likewise, similar research works reveal that flexibility enhances the working conditions by making it more flexible and independent and the two have been found to enhance the level of engagement of the employees (Taylor, 2021, Williams, 2022). However, the problem of communication breakdown is in line with the literature because the literature suggests that remote work isolates workers (Miller and Davis, 2022). The difference however is that in our study, communication

barriers were shown to have a stronger effect on engagement and hence telework as a concept may be changing and organisations have to be more sensitive to it.

The consequences for organisations are not insignificant. Disputes that stem from this should be solved by ensuring that there is provision of effective digital structures by investing in these structures (Anderson, 2022). However, since it is a work from home arrangement, the remote workers may feel lonely and not be able to integrate with the rest of the team and thus the following should be considered (Green & Roberts, 2023). Employers should also ensure that flexibility is provided at the workplace and other staff development provisions so that the employees are loyal and content at their places of work. This flexibility can enhance the likelihood of the employee's retention and can enhance the performance of the firm.

Strategies for enhancing employee engagement in remote work

In order for the organization to encourage the employees and especially those working from home, the following need to be done. First, it is possible to state that the lack of direct interaction results in the requirement of proper communication channels and daily/weekly/monthly meetings (Carter & Williams, 2023). This is why, it is required to equip the employees with the necessary tools and also introduce them to the ways through which they can use such tools. Second, management should try to find the ways to integrate the practice of virtual teaming in order to sustain relationships and establish the sense of community (Nelson, 2022). Finally, the policy of flextime and the endeavour to reach the optimal balance between working time and free time may enhance satisfaction and real work commitment among the employees (Roberts & Mitchell, 2024). Thus, organizations can improve the state and quality of the employees who are to work remotely.

Limitations of the Study

The following are some of the limitations that have been noted in this study and they include; First, data collection used self-report measures that can be affected by such factors as social desirability or recall bias. The sample size used in this study is adequate for exploratory research only and therefore the results of this study may not be generalized to other industries or other regions. Furthermore, the study is cross-sectional and as such, one cannot get a before and after picture of remote work and therefore cannot compare the levels of engagement before and after engaging in remote work. Last but not the least, the study was mainly carried out among the white-collar employees only and hence it has omitted the experience of other kinds of workers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should be directed on how it varies over time as working from home becomes organizational culture. Perhaps it is worth broadening the use of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, to improve the conditions for remote work. Alternatively, the comparison of the studies between the different industries and geographical areas can provide broader understanding of the effects of the remote work on engagement in various contexts. It is also proposed to raise the issues of the psychological and social impacts of telework, the impact on health and social relations within a group.

Conclusion

The study also helped to gain more insights about the possibilities of remote work and consequences of this approach to the staff after COVID crisis. Major conclusions stated that while teleworking is flexible and offers much decision-making autonomy, it has its problems, particularly in the communication area and in the blurring of the working time and free time. Employees too have benefited from increased production and chances to get to other parts of the world and on the other side they are confronted with technological and infrastructure difficulties. This research shows that the employee engagement remains as a crucial factor for the overall success of the organisation and its interactions are influenced by the telecommuting conditions.

As is evident from the literature, work from home or remote work has now emerged as a new facet of employment with pros and cons for the organizations as well as the employees. As the world transforms in the same way, it is vital that organisations look at employee engagement when working from home as a factor. Making sure that the communication is good, developing the right organizational culture, and managing the challenges which are as a result of working from home will be beneficial in keeping the employees engaged. Finally, it will be done with the help of remote work with daily presence at the office, and the possibility to address the employees in this perspective will be a key to success.

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