



*Working Remotely in the UK Automotive Industry
during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Managerial
Perspective*

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the research study was to identify the positive and negative aspects of working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of managers in the UK automotive industry. The research focused on identifying the factors that had an impact on job effectiveness, working with team members in a virtual environment and the management of work-life boundaries.

Research Design/Methodology: The research project was an exploration of the personal experiences of managers from one automotive company, working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. A qualitative research approach was adopted and a thematic analysis was carried out on eight in-depth interviews. All of the study participants worked from home during the pandemic but were normally office-based.

Findings: Remote working during the pandemic was associated with increased work intensity, difficulty collaborating with team members, and the erosion of work-life boundaries. A surprising finding was that the use of video conferencing software to create a virtual work environment was perceived to have increased the frequency of meetings, changed the pattern of work, reduced productivity and caused some managers to behave unreasonably in their interactions with colleagues. Study participants derived benefit from greater work schedule flexibility, the absence of office distractions and time saved on commuting. However, a lack of face-to-face contact with colleagues and poor quality of collaboration via video conferencing software were seen as disadvantages.

Limitations: This qualitative research study explored the personal experiences of eight managers in one company in the UK automotive industry and the research findings would need to be tested before they can be generalised.

Keywords: remote working, job effectiveness, virtual teams, work-life balance, video conferencing, automotive industry, trust, Covid-19.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.0 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most significant global events of the last 70 years. It disrupted educational institutions, transport systems, put enormous pressure on health care systems and forced businesses to rapidly introduce remote working to maintain business continuity. This study aims to investigate the positive and negatives aspects of a rapid transition to remote working in the UK automotive industry from the perspective of managers working remotely during the pandemic.

The research literature uses several terms to describe remote working. It has been referred to as teleworking, telecommuting, remote working, working from home and agile working (Grant et al., 2019). Taskin and Bridoux, (2010) defined remote working as a technology-enabled form of work where activities are performed remotely, at a location that is remote from the place where the results are delivered through the use of information communications technology (ICT). During the last two decades, improvements in technology and the availability of high-speed internet services resulted in an increase in the adoption of remote working practices.

1.1 Context

Before the pandemic, the practice of remote working had not been widely adopted. Data from the 2017 American Community Survey showed that in 2015, 3.9 million people were regularly working from home at least fifty per cent of the time which represented 2.9 % of the US workforce (Franklin, 2019). In contrast, the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey 2021 showed that 36.9% of respondents had substituted some or all of in-person work for telework during the pandemic (Marshall et al., 2021).

The rapid transition to remote working in the European Union during the pandemic was equally dramatic. EU statistics published by Eurostat indicate that in 2019 only 5.4% of people in the EU-27 regularly worked from home and this percentage had been stable since 2009. During the pandemic, almost 40% of people working in the EU were working remotely on a full-time basis (European Commission, 2020).

1.2 Research Problem

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the introduction of a national lockdown in many countries around the world and anyone that could work from home was encouraged to do so. Many companies were not fully prepared for the sudden switch to remote working and had to adopted interim solutions to ensure they could continue to function.

Remote working during the pandemic was the first opportunity many people had to experience this work practice. Office-based workers had to adapt to full-time remote working and cope with family members being together constantly, sharing a physical space, and internet connections (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020). Managers had to rapidly adapt to supervising staff remotely which requires a different set of skills than face-to-face supervision (Parker et al., 2020). Video conferencing software became the main link between managers and staff during lockdown but prolonged use of software made workers feel uncomfortable and they experienced “Zoom Fatigue” (Orrell and Ledger, 2020).

The experience gained by managers working from home during the pandemic may have an influence on the development of remote work policies and practices in their organisations. The pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to investigate how managers perceive their job effectiveness, their work with team members, and their work-life boundaries were affected by remote working.

1.3 Overview of Key Literature

The bulk of the research literature on remote working was produced before the pandemic when remote working was voluntary and employees who worked from home did so by choice based on their circumstances and preferences. The unique circumstances created by the pandemic may have affected employee attitudes and behaviours towards the practice.

Previous research indicates that remote workers benefit from being able to concentrate on complex tasks without office distractions, they save time on commuting and can switch between work-related tasks and non-work activities (Kelliher and Anderson, 2009).

Remote workers have been found to experience lower levels of stress and work-home conflict (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007) and enjoy enhanced well-being derived from increased autonomy and schedule flexibility (Anderson et al., 2015). However, because these findings relate to workers who made a voluntary choice to work remotely, we cannot be certain that remote working during a mandatory lockdown will produce the same outcomes.

Previous research has shown that remote outcomes are dependent on the personal characteristics of remote workers. Remote working is not suitable for everyone because of differing skill levels and personality differences such as the need for social contact and the ability to exercise self-discipline. (Baruch, 2000). Consequently, in a situation where everyone was required to work remotely, there may be negative consequences for companies if staff have difficulty adjusting to a new environment. One potential problem area is in the management of work-life boundaries. The effective management of temporal and physical boundaries is an important aspect of remote working (Greer and Payne, 2014) because the absence of boundaries can adversely impact well-being and effectiveness (Kossek, 2016).

The literature indicates that organisational support for remote workers is a key factor that enhances performance (Bentley et al., 2016). Many organisations were ill-prepared for the switch to remote working and may not have been able to provide the necessary support for employees during the pandemic. Additionally, managers had to supervise their staff remotely and may have lacked the necessary interpersonal skills to do so. Research indicates that a supportive supervisory relationship benefits remote workers and increases job satisfaction and improves performance (Golden and Veiga, 2008).

The rapid switch to remote working resulted in the creation of virtual teams, and this potentially has negative consequences. Virtual teams have lower levels of motivation than co-located teams due to the lack of face-to-face contact (Hertel et al., 2004). The absence of face-to-face contact can result in a reduction in the level of trust between virtual team members which reduces the effectiveness of the team. (Rocco, 1998).

1.4 Gaps in the Literature

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a change in the context in which remote working has taken place. Many companies were not prepared for a shift to remote working and their managers were not trained in managing teams in a virtual work environment.

A search was conducted to identify previous research on remote working in the automotive industry and one study was identified. Quantitative research was conducted by Durucu and Bayraktar, (2020) on the impact of remote working on work-life balance in the Turkish automotive sector. The research found that remote working reduced communication between remote workers and their managers, and remote workers experienced a positive impact on work-life balance.

There is a gap in the literature as no research studies have been undertaken into how managers in the UK automotive industry perceived a rapid transition to remote working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted job effectiveness, working in virtual teams, and work-life boundaries. The current research study is intended to fill that gap.

1.5 Research Approach - Justification for using Qualitative Research Methods

The research aims to gain a deep understanding of the perceived challenges faced by managers working in the unique context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although, quantitative research has made an important contribution to the literature on remote working, the use of deductive and positivist approaches does not enable researchers to gain a deep understanding of the perceptions and feelings of study participants on their experience of remote working. Based on a review of methods used in previous research studies (Bosua et al., 2013; Grant et al., 2013) it was considered that the appropriate way to collect the data was by conducting qualitative research using in-depth interviews and thematic analysis of the data collected.

1.6 Structure of the Research Project

The research addresses the challenges faced by managers in adapting their working practices to a fully remote environment and investigates the issues that arose in ensuring that communication was maintained between team members during the period of mandatory working from home.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter one contains a brief outline and justification for the research project. The chapter discusses the subject of remote working and the context of the research project. A brief outline of the research literature is presented and the justification for the use of qualitative research methods is discussed.

Chapter 2: Research Literature

Chapter two contains a review of the research literature. An in-depth review of the research literature was conducted to identify the current theoretical knowledge on remote working in the key research areas of job effectiveness, working in virtual teams, and the management of work-life boundaries. The gaps in the research literature are discussed.

Chapter 3: Research Objectives

Chapter three presents the main research question and the four related research objectives.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Chapter four discusses the philosophical stance of the research project, the research design, and the justification for selecting a qualitative research approach. The sampling methods, data collection, interview procedure and interview structure are presented. The approach to the analysis of the research data and the limitations of the research approach are discussed.

Chapter 5: Findings

Chapter five presents the findings of the research study using the themes that emerged from the analysis of eight in-depth interviews. New findings emerging from the research are identified in this chapter.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Chapter six contains a discussion of the research findings, a comparison of the findings to the key literature, and a discussion of new knowledge that was identified on the research topic. The limitations and implications of the research are also discussed.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Chapter seven presents the conclusions that were drawn from the research project along with recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The benefits that accrue to employers from the implementation of remote working have been described by many writers on the subject. The main attraction has been increased productivity, reduced accommodation costs, improved staff retention, ability to recruit staff from a wider geographical area without incurring the costs of relocation, and improved employee morale.

Employees have been attracted to remote working by the option to determine their work location, either a home office or some other location. Working from home was a choice that was made voluntarily by the employee and this was a fundamental assumption underpinning all of the previous research. When the Covid-19 pandemic started, working from home was no longer a matter of choice, it became a necessity and this changed the context of remote working.

2.1 How the employee benefits from remote working

A review of the research literature and reports in the media on remote working consistently refer to the benefits that attract people to remote working (Allen et al., 2015; Baruch, 2000). The consensus is that there are three main benefits for employees:

(1) Reduced time spent commuting

This appears to be the main reason that people choose to work remotely. Workers can avoid long commutes to the office and the time savings can be considerable. Baruch, (2000) found that 41.9% of remote workers reported saving more than two hours per day commuting. Avoiding the daily commute may also result in cost savings and reduced stress.

(2) A better work-life balance

The time previously wasted commuting to work can be spent at home, enabling workers to have more leisure time with their families, caring for young children or helping children with their educational needs. Remote workers do not need to take days off if maintenance and repair workers need access to their homes.

Workers experience a feeling of well-being on days when they work remotely that may be linked to better work-life balance and the perception of more autonomy (Anderson et al., 2015).

(3) Increased flexibility

Flexibility is a major attraction for remote workers and it derives from the fact that they have the freedom to manage their own time (Mann et al., 2000). Remote workers have the flexibility to decide on the hours that they work, although this is not always the case. They may have flexibility over the number of hours worked per day or over their work schedule so that they can divide up their days into time segments and switch between work and personal life activities. This type of flexibility helps remote workers to do their shopping, collect children from school or get more physical exercise by going to the gym. Workers benefit from being able to adapt their work schedule to their body clocks so that their work is done at a time that suits their natural rhythm (Mello, 2007). Having the flexibility to work from home can also provide access to employment for people who would otherwise be excluded, such as the disabled, mothers with young children and people that live in remote locations. Increased access to employment is a major policy issue in the European Union.

2.2 Effectiveness of Remote Workers

Baruch and Nicholson, (1997) as cited in Baruch, (2000) proposed that four main factors influence the effectiveness of remote workers: (1) the nature of the work, (2) the home-work interface, (3) the organisation, and (4) the individual. All of these factors need to be present simultaneously for remote working to be effective.

2.2.1 The nature of the work

When introducing remote working into an organisation it is important to consider the nature of the work and the technology that is required to carry out the employee's role in the organisation (Baruch, 2000).

Olson and Primps, (1984) evaluated remote working from a work design perspective and note that it could be easily accommodated within both the scientific management approach and the job enrichment approach.

Scientific management principles can be applied to jobs with a low level of complexity because the work is carried out in small simple units with a relatively fast turnaround time, and the pace of the work is determined by the technology. A job enrichment approach is more appropriate for the design of jobs that have a high level of complexity because the work involves larger and more complicated units of work, with longer delivery times and the pace of the work is determined by the employee (Olson and Primps, 1984).

Research conducted before the pandemic highlighted that the opportunity to engage in remote working had only been made available to specific types of workers. Lister and Harnish, (2011) found that in 2009 only 2.3% of the US workforce were working from home although they estimated that 45% of US workers had a job that was capable of being done remotely. Their research indicated that there was a disproportionate number of management professionals, sales staff and office staff teleworking relative to the size of the total US workforce. Bloom et al., (2015) found that jobs with a low level of complexity can be performed remotely with a significant improvement in employee productivity attributed to the absence of office distractions. Interestingly, Baruch, (2000) found that individuals working remotely on complex tasks also reported higher levels of productivity that they attributed to being able to avoid the distractions and interruptions encountered in the office.

Modern communications technology connects remote workers to a central office to deliver their work output and it also connects them to co-workers. Teams can be geographically separated and even located in different time zones. Communicating via technology platforms may result in remote workers appearing to be less accessible, and the use of synchronous forms of communication, such as email, might be a potential threat to team collaboration (Greer and Payne, 2014). Boundaries created between team members working remotely lead to a reduction in the frequency, quality and quantity of job-related communication between co-workers (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). Complex technology platforms can result in remote teams engaging in excessive levels of communication which disrupts work activity and inhibits productivity (Karr-Wisniewski and Lu, 2010).

Workers may be slow to adapt to new technology and fail to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant information which can lead to oversharing and disruption to team productivity (Marlow et al., 2017).

Task interdependence, which concerns the extent to which team members depend on each other to perform their tasks effectively, can be negatively impacted by remote working (Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006). Task interdependence is at the core of all collaborative work (Schmidt and Bannon, 1992). Highly skilled workers performing complex, highly interdependent tasks, need to engage in more frequent and richer communication. Communication plays a crucial role in the assimilation of new members and poor quality communication negatively impacts team performance and collaboration (Chang et al., 2012). Communication becomes increasingly important to the achievement of high-performance levels as the degree of task interdependency increases (Marlow et al., 2017).

High levels of task interdependency also necessitate increased coordination by management (Golden and Veiga, 2005). When team members are dispersed across multiple locations, coordination can be difficult and can impact the quality of output. However, Hertel et al., (2004) noted that task interdependency was only related to team effectiveness during the first year after a team is formed. Once the team has developed its own internal processes, task interdependency becomes less critical and the level of formal coordination can be reduced.

2.2.2 The home-work interface

The suitability of the home as a workplace influences the effectiveness of remote workers. The main focus of the literature on the home-work interface has been on two main areas: work-life boundaries, and work-life conflict.

Work-Life Boundaries

Work-family border or boundary theory suggests that remote working should give employees greater flexibility and control regarding the temporal and physical boundaries between their home and work, enabling them to adapt their work to fit in with the demands of a family (Kossek et al., 2006).

These boundaries could be physical and involve blocking out time to spend away from the digital workplace, they could be psychological and involve some form of cognitive detachment from work to concentrate on family and friends, or they may be emotional and involve separating the emotions and feelings associated with work activities from family life (Kossek et al., 2006). Having a separate room to work in is an important factor that contributes to remote worker effectiveness. (Baruch, 2000).

Establishing a physical boundary between work and family life allows remote workers to concentrate on work activities and reduces the possibility of interruptions and distractions. Remote workers maintain boundaries between work and home life by not entering their home office after working hours (Greer and Payne, 2014) Remote workers also create boundaries between their work and personal lives by using different electronic devices, such as laptops and mobile phones, for work and personal communications (Rudnicka et al., 2020). Remote workers maintain temporal boundaries by not answering their work phones and not checking emails after working hours (Greer and Payne, 2014).

Schedule flexibility is important for working parents of young children who must manage their work responsibilities around very rigid limitations imposed by school timetables or child-care facilities (Clark, 2000). Having the freedom to organise each working day into discreet parts may increase overall effectiveness.

Chung and Van der Horst, (2017) found that flexible working arrangements gave working mothers the opportunity to integrate their work and family domains and combine childcare with work activities. Remote workers also increase their effectiveness by outsourcing childcare to day-care centres during working hours (Greer and Payne, 2014). Gender plays a part in the approach to setting boundaries. Self-employed male teleworkers structure their temporal boundaries to fit office-based work schedules but self-employed women match their schedules to the requirements of home life and children (Mustafa and Gold, 2013). Work schedule flexibility is a significant benefit when there is less flexibility in the home-family situation.

Work-Life Conflict

Work-life conflict has been attributed to the existence of inter-role conflict where the demands of work and family are incompatible and where workers are torn between their responsibilities in the two domains (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). During the pandemic, workers were encouraged to work from home whenever possible to reduce the spread of the infection. Schools and childcare facilities were closed which resulted in disruption in the home-work situation due to the presence of children during working hours. Wang et al., (2020) found that in China remote workers were experiencing increased levels of work-life conflict despite also reporting increased levels of autonomy.

Employee experience of remote working is an important factor in regulating work-life boundaries and reducing work-life conflict. Gajendran and Harrison, (2007) found that workers who had been working remotely for more than a year had lower work-family conflict and were better positioned to benefit from flexible working arrangements. Golden et al., (2006) as cited in Allen et al., (2015) stated that the extent of remote working is negatively associated with work-family interference, such that the more time spent working remotely, the less work impacted family life. However, the more time individuals spend working remotely the greater the extent to which family life can impact work activities.

Remote working can reduce work-family conflict, work-related stress and work-related exhaustion due to increased autonomy associated with remote working (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). Reductions in work-related stress may be explained by the perception that workers have greater control over their work environment and output (Duxbury and Halinski, 2014). Work-life conflict can be disruptive, organisations should actively support employees to develop work-life boundary strategies to improve their well-being and work effectiveness and prevent negative outcomes such as burn-out (Kossek, 2016).

2.2.3 The organisation

Greer and Payne, (2014) noted the importance of developing an organisational culture that was supportive of remote work, where every employee viewed it as one of the standard operating processes through which work is accomplished.

Culture of Trust

Baruch, (2000) highlights the importance of developing an organisational culture based on trust that creates an appropriate environment where people can work effectively. The main obstacle to the extension of remote working has been a lack of trust on the part of management Lister and Harnish, (2011). A study conducted by Bloom et al., (2015) in China also found that senior management did not trust employees to work without direct supervision.

If managers doubt that their team members are working they can have an unrealistic expectation that they should be constantly available and this will cause disruption to their work-home balance and result in increased levels of job stress (Parker et al., 2020). Remote workers may feel a need to be accessible via email and mobile phone after working hours to convince supervisors that they are working (Greer and Payne, 2014). Changing the behaviour patterns of managers and supervisors can be a slow process. Organisation culture develops over time as a result of the establishment of patterns of working and norms of behaviour that reinforce social cohesion (Alexander et al., 2020).

Social support

Developing an organisational culture that provides social support to remote workers may be as important as developing the technical infrastructure that facilitates their work activities. Social support has been defined as “verbal and nonverbal communication between receiver and provider that reduces uncertainty about a situation, one’s self, another, or a relationship” (Sias, 2009, p.70).

Three categories of social support were identified: emotional, informational, and instrumental. Emotional support involves listening to another person's problems and providing consolation, informational support is the provision of advice or information to another person, and instrumental support involves providing practical help to someone to help them do their job (Sias, 2009).

Bentley et al., (2016) researched teleworker perceptions of social support received from supervisors and peers in the form of helpful information, advice and feedback, and organisational support received from the company to assist with specific problems or support their well-being. Both forms of support increased the perception of job satisfaction and reduced the psychological strain experienced by remote workers.

Social support provided at the supervisory and organisation level plays a key role in assisting workers to deal with family conflict situations (Kossek et al, 2011). This would be a vital resource for workers during the pandemic when the risk of conflict could increase because of the pressures associated with the lockdown. Organisational support programs also contribute to the enhancement of the fit between the remote worker and the task environment. (Bentley et al., 2016).

Previous studies on remote work practices have indicated that remote workers experience a loss of social connections (Olszewski and Mokhtarian, 1994). However, Collins et al., (2016) found remote workers could avoid negative workplace relationships while developing positive relationships with other remote workers. These types of connections can be very important. Wang et al., (2020) found that the isolation caused by Covid-19 lockdown restrictions gave rise to feelings of loneliness and online social interactions with work colleagues increased the sense of belonging, had a positive motivational impact and increased productivity.

Monitoring

Monitoring and evaluation of employees is an important part of the management process. Pyöriä, (2011) stated that one of the issues slowing the spread of remote working is the absence of a contractual framework. Remote work outcomes are successful if management and workers know what to expect from the beginning.

This was confirmed by Greer and Payne, (2014) who noted the importance of having a written remote work policy and providing effective training for both managers and remote workers.

There has been an increase in the use of monitoring software to control the activity of remote workers since the pandemic started. Orrell and Ledger, (2020) note that this form of monitoring can have a detrimental impact on morale as remote workers see it as an invasion of their privacy. While monitoring of activity may be appropriate for routine call-centre work, an alternative approach based on the measurement of outputs is required for highly skilled employees (Alexander et al., 2020).

Peters et al., (2016) found that organisations use softer forms of internal control when remote working levels are low. Control is based on the professional standards of the employee and also on peer pressure exerted by team members. However, as the level of remote working increases so does the perceived risk level for the organisation and more rigid control mechanisms like 360 performance evaluation and performance-related pay are utilised.

Employee well-being

Organisations have an important role to play in safeguarding the physical and mental health of remote workers. The research literature highlights two issues that may harm employee well-being: work-life stress and increased working hours.

Modern information communications technology (ICT) enables remote workers to remain connected to work outside of normal working hours with negative consequences for their well-being. Remote workers experience work-life stress and require strategies for creating boundaries to help them manage their work-life relationships (Kossek, 2016). Recent research indicates that remote workers in the United Kingdom experienced difficulty setting boundaries between their work-life and home-life. Remote workers had difficulty disconnecting at the end of their working day with negative spill-over into family life (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Mobile communications technology, such as smartphones, reduce the transition time between work and non-work roles which negatively impacts mood and mental well-being (Kossek, 2016).

Social exchange theory implies that employees working remotely will voluntarily work longer hours, in return for the opportunity to choose where and when they work (Kelliher and Anderson, 2009). Eddleston et al., (2017) found that remote workers who worked exclusively from home were more likely to overwork, which resulted in work interfering with their family role. Qualitative research by Grant et al., (2013) revealed that communications technology contributed to overworking and a lack of time for recuperation which had a detrimental effect on well-being.

An analysis of the UK Skills and Employment Survey (SES) data by Felstead and Henseke, (2017) provided statistical evidence that the work effort of remote workers was significantly higher than those working in conventional offices. Survey data showed that a higher proportion of remote workers (39%) compared to fixed location workers (24.1%) agreed that their working day was longer, their work intensity was higher and they were required to work additional hours voluntarily. Consistent with social exchange theory, remote workers displayed higher levels of organisational commitment, reported higher job satisfaction, and were more enthusiastic than office-based workers.

2.2.4 Individual Characteristics that impact effectiveness

One of the consequences of the pandemic was that people who occasionally worked from home were required to do so full-time for an extended period. This was a challenge for some individuals as remote work effectiveness is influenced by personal characteristics and individual skill levels (Baruch, 2000).

Motivation

Self-discipline is a critically important attribute of a remote worker (Baruch, 2000). Managers and professional staff that perform highly complex work remotely need to be internally motivated. Their work effort is reinforced by self-feedback derived from the nature of the work they are performing rather than from an external source such as a supervisor (Mello, 2007). Workers who need regular, positive reinforcement from supervisors are less likely to be effective when working remotely.

Grant et al., (2013) found that motivation was an important factor in determining job effectiveness, but noted that motivation levels varied for individuals who experienced both too much, and too little motivation at different times. Wang et al., (2020) noted that individuals working remotely in China during the lockdown experienced increased procrastination and difficulty in applying themselves to work which they attributed to a reduced level of monitoring.

Organisational Skills

Good organisational skills are required in all work settings but become more essential in the context of remote work. To work effectively managers and staff need to be able to establish clear personal goals and priorities. Qualitative research conducted by Baruch, (2000) indicated that remote workers felt that being well organised and having good time-management skills were essential characteristics of remote workers. Golden et al., (2006) as cited in Allen et al., (2015) found that the ability to control work schedules and manage time effectively resulted in better quality remote work outcomes.

Self-reliance

The ability to work alone is an essential characteristic of a remote worker and remote work is unsuitable for people who value the social interaction of the office environment (Baruch, 2000). The primary reason for this is that remote work can result in feelings of professional isolation. Professional isolation has been described as a belief that one is not in touch with co-workers, and that efforts to connect socially to others in the workplace have been frustrated (Golden et al., 2008). It does not necessarily imply physical isolation or actual separation from co-workers. Increased levels of professional isolation have been linked to lower performance. The performance of remote workers deteriorates most when they have less face-to-face contact with colleagues (Golden et al., 2008).

The workplace is closely associated with opportunities for personal and professional development and consequently, isolation creates a barrier that prevents workers from obtaining those benefits. Cooper and Kurland, (2002) noted that the more value workers place on networking opportunities, mentoring, and learning, the greater the impact of professional isolation.

Workers frequently refer to how much they miss casual conversations with colleagues that result in a learning experience and the sharing of knowledge (Rockmann and Pratt, 2015). During the pandemic, employees found ICT-mediated communication slow and unsatisfactory compared to face-to-face communication, and this harmed their efficiency (Wang et al., 2020).

2.3 Qualitative Research on Remote Working in the Research Literature

Qualitative research methods are used when researchers need to gain a deep understanding of the perceptions and feelings of study participants based on their personal experience of remote working.

Baruch and Nicholson, (1997) used qualitative research methods to identify the key factors that influence the effectiveness of remote workers. This research was expanded upon by Baruch, (2000) who conducted semi-structured interviews with 64 teleworkers to study their perceptions of teleworking, the impact on their work effectiveness, the quality of their family life and the quality of their working life. Bosua et al., (2013) investigated the productivity and well-being of Australian teleworkers by conducting 28 in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. They concluded that frequent, clear communication between managers and teleworkers on expectations and work targets is very important for enhancing well-being and productivity.

Grant et al., (2013) investigated the impact of remote working on the job effectiveness, well-being and work-life balance of eleven journalists using qualitative research. The data obtained from the in-depth interviews were coded using the thematic approach developed by Braun and Clarke, (2006). Grant et al., (2013) found that the well-being of remote workers was negatively impacted by over-work and lack of time for recuperation. Some study participants reported working excessive hours and being addicted to their computers, while others procrastinated and put off starting work. The current research study aims to gain a deep understanding of the perceived challenges faced by managers in the UK automotive industry working in the unique context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Based on a review of methods used in previous research studies it was considered that the appropriate way to collect the data was by conducting qualitative research using in-depth interviews and thematic analysis of the data collected.

2.4 Gaps in remote work research

A review of the literature indicates that there are a number of gaps in the knowledge on remote working. Kniffin et al., (2021) state that the introduction of mandatory home-based work during the pandemic changed the context of remote working and this may have affected employee attitudes and behaviours towards the practice. They indicate that research is required to identify working practices that may have been developed by managers to enable teams to work more efficiently and effectively. They also stated that research is required into how virtual teams communicate and regulate negative emotions such as stress and anxiety can impact team performance. Wang et al., (2020) identified a need for future research into the virtual work characteristics of remote workers as well as their non-virtual work characteristics when working at home to develop a more complete understanding of the individual's work experience and how it affects their effectiveness.

There is a gap in the literature as no qualitative research studies have been undertaken into how managers in the UK automotive industry perceived a rapid transition to remote working in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted job effectiveness, working in virtual teams, and work-life boundaries. The current research proposal is intended to fill that gap.

Chapter 3 - Research Question

A review of the literature indicates that there is a gap in the knowledge regarding how managers in the UK automotive industry perceived job effectiveness, virtual teamwork and work-life boundaries were affected by a rapid transition to remote working during the pandemic. This study is intended to address this gap and provide an understanding of the personal experience of managers and what they perceived to be the positive and negative aspects of remote working.

3.0 Research Question

“What are the positive and negative effects of a rapid transition to remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of managers working in the UK automotive Industry?”

3.1 Research Aims and Objectives

Objective 1: To identify factors that were perceived to be impacting job effectiveness while working from home. This objective is designed to gather data on the challenges that affected managers job effectiveness.

Objective 2: To investigate the challenges of working with team members in a virtual environment during the pandemic. The objective was developed to consider the issues that arose when managers had to switch to working with team members in a virtual environment instead of being co-located in an office.

Objective 3: To investigate how work-life boundaries were impacted by remote working during the pandemic This objective was developed to gather data on how managers felt a rapid transition to remote working had affected their work-life boundaries.

Objective 4: To consider the aspects of remote working that managers would like to retain and those they would change. This objective was developed to obtain the personal views of managers on the outcomes of remote working that managers felt were worth retaining and those that were negative and would need to change.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

4.0 Introduction

This study focuses on the impact a sudden transition to mandatory remote working during the pandemic had on managers in the UK automotive industry.

4.1 Research Philosophy

Saunders et al., (2016) state that the research process commences with the adoption of a research philosophy. The data collection and data analysis methods adopted are determined by the philosophical stance taken by the researcher at the beginning of the process. There are two different philosophical viewpoints: ontology and epistemology.

Ontology is an area of philosophy concerned with abstract concepts such as the nature of existence and being. Bryman, (2012) describes how ontological beliefs are referred to in terms of a dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism. The objectivist perspective is that there is one true reality that exists independently of the observer and the subjectivist perspective is that there are multiple realities and our perception of the world is socially constructed from the sum of the individual perspectives (Saunders et al., 2016).

Epistemology is an area of philosophy concerned with assumptions about what constitutes knowledge. Two epistemologies relevant to social science research are objectivism and constructionism. Objectivism proposes that meaningful reality exists in objects waiting to be discovered and it is separate from the individual consciousness of the researcher.

Constructivism proposes that individuals have different perceptions of the same situation and truth and reality come into existence when people engage with the reality of the world they inhabit (Crotty, 1998). This study adopted the constructivist epistemology because this enables the researcher to examine the views of the participants in a particular context. After all, each individual may have a different understanding of the same situation. The unique context in this study is remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another important aspect of the study is the selection of a theoretical perspective. Positivism is a theoretical perspective associated with objectivist epistemology. It is closely aligned with the natural sciences and the researcher works with the observable social reality to gather measurable data to produce generally applicable laws (Saunders et al., 2016). This was not considered to be appropriate for the current research study. Interpretivism is a theoretical position associated with constructivism and this was the perspective adopted for the research. Interpretivism acknowledges that “People create and associate their own subjective and intersubjective meanings as they interact with the world around them” and therefore interpretive research is an “attempt to understand phenomena through accessing the meanings participants assign to them” (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991, p.5).

This research study adopted the constructivism epistemology and the interpretivist theoretical approach. The study participants have a conceptual as well as a contextual understanding of remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research study therefore also examines the perceptions of the participants concerning the new work patterns and the technology that facilitated remote working and social interaction during the pandemic.

4.2 Qualitative versus Quantitative Research

Researchers may choose to use either qualitative or quantitative research methods to gather data to answer the research question. Stake, (1995) as cited in Jackson et al., (2007) noted three fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches to conducting research. Firstly, the purpose of quantitative research is explanation whereas qualitative research is concerned with understanding. Secondly, the quantitative researcher's role is impersonal but the qualitative researcher is personally involved. Lastly, quantitative research is concerned with discovering knowledge whereas the objective of qualitative research is to create knowledge.

Merriam, (1998) states that the key to developing an understanding of qualitative research is to grasp the concept that meaning is socially constructed by people in their interaction with their world.

Qualitative research aims to give a special status to the perceptions of the participants in the research process and to “illuminate the subjective meaning, actions and context of those being researched” (Popay et al., 1998, p.345). It is naturalistic in its approach because researchers must work in a natural setting to establish trust and participation, and gain access to meanings and in-depth understanding (Saunders et al., 2016). Data is gathered from a variety of sources including interviews, observation, and focus groups (Mills and Birks, 2014). Qualitative research mainly uses an inductive approach to build a new theory or develop a better theoretical perspective of an existing theory. (Saunders et al., 2016).

Creswell and Creswell, (2018, p.41) define quantitative research as “an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables” and it involves the collection and analysis of numerical data using questionnaires, surveys and structured interviews designed to collect quantifiable information. Quantitative research uses a deductive approach to test a theory but may also be used as an inductive approach to develop a theory (Saunders et al., 2016).

Quantitative research is highly structured and uses a large, stratified sample of the target population in contrast to qualitative research which uses a semi-structured, flexible approach and smaller sample sizes (Park and Park, 2016). Mixed methods research, which collects data using both qualitative and quantitative methods, was developed to eliminate the perceived research bias that existed when only one method of data collection was used (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Triangulation is the term used to describe the use of multiple methods of data collection and analysis to improve the reliability and internal validity of the data.

4.3 Research Design

The research design provides a specific direction for the procedures adopted in qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research studies (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) and the research design flows from the research question that the study seeks to answer (Saunders et al., 2016). This study was developed as an investigation into the positive and negative aspects of a rapid transition to mandatory remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic, as perceived by managers in the UK automotive industry.

The purpose of the study was to gather data that would provide an insight into how managers felt working from home in the context of a mandatory national lockdown affected job effectiveness, communication with team members, and work-life boundaries. The research also sought to collect data on the lessons managers learned from the experience that could be applied to their professional and personal lives after the pandemic.

Myers, (2013) argues that qualitative research is the best way to gain an in-depth understanding of people's motivations, actions and beliefs in a particular context. Qualitative research is conducted to reflect "the socially constructed interpretations of participants in a particular setting at the time it is conducted" (Saunders et al., 2016, p 205). This makes the qualitative research method suitable for research into the experience of managers working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Qualitative research allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions and receive answers that are open-ended and more descriptive (Myers, 2013).

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and an inductive approach that allows themes to be derived from the data gathered rather than being imposed by a theoretical framework related to any existing theory (Saunders et al., 2016).

Grant et al., (2013) successfully researched the psychological factors affecting remote workers job effectiveness, work-life balance and well-being using qualitative thematic analysis based on eleven in-depth interviews. A similar qualitative thematic analytical approach has been adopted for this study. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach that is not exclusive to any philosophical position and may be used in an interpretivist research study to explore the interpretations of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants (Saunders et al., 2016). Eight managers from the UK automotive industry were recruited to take part in the study.

4.3.1 Sampling Method

The target population for the research study was defined as managers in the UK automotive working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study aimed to gather data on the experiences of managers working in the UK automotive industry who had started to work from home during the pandemic.

Purposive non-probability sampling was used to select participants from the homogenous subgroup of managers working remotely in one large UK automotive manufacturer based in the United Kingdom. When using a purposive sampling method, the researcher uses personal judgement to identify people that have the required knowledge and who are willing to take part in the research (Etikan et al., 2016). There is no specified limit on the number of participants needed to construct a purposive sample provided the necessary information can be gathered (Bernard, 2011). Saunders et al, (2016) suggest that the minimum sample size for qualitative research conducted using semi-structured in-depth interviews should be in the 5 to 25 range.

To gain access to the target population initial contact was made with one senior manager in the automotive manufacturer, who agreed to participate in the qualitative study and to identify other members of the management team to participate in in-depth interviews.

To qualify for inclusion in the study participants were required to be at supervisory, middle management or senior management level in the organisation, they must have worked from home on a full-time basis during the pandemic, and not have been working from home more than four days per month before mandatory work-from-home commenced. Eight managers were selected for the interview process and the sample consisted of 2 females and 6 males aged from 30 to 45 years. Recruitment of participants ceased once data saturation was achieved and no new themes emerged from the data.

Figure 1: Interview Participants Codes & Breakdown

Participant Code	Business Area	Duration at the Company
Interviewee 1 – A	Network Development	5 years
Interviewee 2 – B	Customer Satisfaction	20 years
Interviewee 3 – C	IT Lead	7 years
Interviewee 4 – D	Regional Business Manager	7 years
Interviewee 5 – E	Independent Sales Consultant	9 years
Interviewee 6 – F	Network Development	10 years
Interviewee 7 – G	Training Capabilities	10 years
Interviewee 8 – H	IT Manager	13 years

4.3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams. The purpose of the interviews was to collect primary data on the personal experience of the participants working from home during the pandemic. The interviews were scheduled in advance by using Microsoft Teams and participants were asked open-ended questions, supplemented with probing questions to enable the researcher to explore issues raised during the interview in greater depth.

Figure 2: Participants’ Demographics & Remote Work Pre-Pandemic Frequency

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Remote Work Pre-Pandemic	Duration (per month)
Interviewee 1 – A	Male	38	Yes	1 Day
Interviewee 2 – B	Male	44	Yes	4 Days
Interviewee 3 – C	Male	30	Yes	2 Days
Interviewee 4 – D	Female	36	Yes	1 Day
Interviewee 5 – E	Male	40	Yes	1 Day
Interviewee 6 – F	Female	45	Yes	4 Days
Interviewee 7 – G	Male	41	Yes	2 Days
Interviewee 8 – H	Male	41	Yes	1-2 Days

4.3.3 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for use in research studies where personal contact needs to be made with the participants to gather data on their beliefs, emotions and perceptions about the research subject matter (Saunders et al., 2016).

The semi-structured interview is a flexible research method that permits the researcher to ask set questions on the specific topics and then follow-up questions to encourage participants to share more information. Bryman and Bell, (2011) note that the semi-structured interview format permits the interviewer to change the sequence of the questions as the interview progresses which can assist the natural flow of the conversation. The semi-structured interview is also a conversation between the researcher and the participant, where the participant should feel comfortable and engaged (Baumbusch, 2010).

Participants were asked questions relating to the challenges they faced working from home, how social contact with team members was maintained, their perception of work-life boundaries and their views on the qualities that a person should have to be able to work from home.

The interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams and all of the interviewees were working from home when the interviews took place. This had the advantage that they were interviewed in a familiar setting that was also their remote work location. It allowed the researcher to observe the participants in the environment where they worked during the pandemic.

4.3.4 Interview Structure

The interview questions were developed to gather data on the research question “What are the positive and negatives aspects of a rapid transition to remote working in the UK automotive industry from the perspective of managers working remotely during the pandemic?” and the four research objectives set out below:

1. To identify factors that were perceived as impacting job effectiveness while working from home.
2. To investigate the challenges of working with team members in a virtual environment during the pandemic
3. To investigate how work-life boundaries were impacted by remote working during the pandemic
4. To consider the aspects of remote working that managers would like to retain and those they would change.

The questions were carefully worded and the researcher asked them in a neutral tone to avoid any possibility of interviewer bias (Saunders et al., 2016).

The interview was structured into five main areas as follows:

- Participant demographics
- Perception of remote work challenges during the pandemic
- Working and communicating with team members in a virtual environment
- Work-life boundaries
- Reflections on the positive and negative aspects of remote working

The interview questions were designed to encourage participants to discuss their personal feelings on the topics and they are listed below:

1. What do you feel were the main challenges you faced while working remotely?
2. Can you describe any specific issues that arose because team members were working remotely instead of working face-to-face?
3. What do you feel are the main challenges in maintaining social contact while working remotely?
4. How do you feel about work-life boundaries when working from home?
5. Do you feel that there are any particular qualities a person should have to be able to work from home?
6. Thinking of your experience of working remotely what are the aspects of it that you would like to retain after the pandemic is over?
7. What are the negative aspects of remote working that you feel would need to be changed?
8. Are there any other comments that you would like to make on the subject of remote working?

Probing questions, such as ‘Can you tell me more about ...?’ or ‘How did you feel about ...?’ were also used to encourage participants to provide information.

4.3.5 Interview Procedure

Eight managers were identified as potential participants and they were sent an email inviting them to take part in the research study. Attached within the email was a copy of the consent form, shown in Appendix 1 and a copy of the information form containing details of the study, shown in Appendix 2.

All of the participants were located in the United Kingdom, so the interviews were conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams which permitted visual contact during the interview.

Saunders et al., (2016) suggest that video conferencing technology is useful when the target population is geographically dispersed and it has the benefit of permitting the researcher to establish a rapport with an interviewee. The participants were familiar with Microsoft Teams software and used it daily.

A suitable date and time for the interview were agreed upon with the participants in advance by email, and the participants were then sent a Microsoft Teams meeting request for a 30-minute time slot.

Before the interview commenced the researcher confirmed that the participants understood the nature of the research and gave their consent to take part, and for the interview to be recorded. The interviews commenced with four demographic questions that were useful for getting the participants to settle into the interview process. The participants were asked eight open-ended questions that allowed them to discuss the challenges they faced working from home.

4.3.6 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to explore themes in the data that was collected. Thematic analysis is an approach that enables the identification and analysis of patterns in a dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach was employed by Grant et al., (2013) in their qualitative research study on remote working. The video recordings of the interviews were transcribed to produce a detailed written record for analysis. Each transcription was read several times to enable the researcher to become familiar with the data set. Summary notes in the form of self-memos were written to act as an aid to data analysis.

The transcripts were analysed and codes were generated and assigned to relevant segments of the data that the researcher believed captured their meaning. As coding of the data set progressed and more descriptive codes were developed, the earlier data transcripts were reread and recoded to ensure consistency in coding. The final codes were compiled into a list to identify patterns and diversity of meaning within the data set. Codes that appeared to be related to one another were grouped into broad analytic categories or clusters (Terry et al., 2017). The clusters were analysed to identify distinctive themes that were organised around a core concept and related to the original research question. The themes were reviewed to identify linkages and to develop the research narrative around the theoretical propositions that emerged from the data. Theoretical propositions were tested by looking for alternative explanations before formulating the research conclusions.

4.4 Limitation of the Research Design

The small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings of this qualitative study. Saunders et al., (2016) stress that the sample selected should be representative of the topic under study. All of the managers interviewed worked from home during the pandemic and had a depth of knowledge about the challenges. The unique context of the pandemic may also be perceived as a limitation. However, the purpose of the study was to explore how the participants experienced remote working in the context of the pandemic. Affleck et al., (2012) indicate that qualitative studies may be limited by an inability of men to verbalise their emotional problems. The researcher did note that the female participants were more willing to discuss the emotional challenges they faced in greater depth than the male participants but this did not have a significant impact on the quality of data gathered.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The personal nature of the data collection process undertaken for qualitative research studies requires that greater attention is given to ethical considerations (Myers, 2013). The participants were contacted by a senior manager in the automotive manufacturing organisation who provided them with brief details of the proposed research study. Managers that expressed a willingness to take part were then contacted by email by the researcher and supplied with the information sheet and the consent form. The managers were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research study at any time.

All of the participants were informed that the data collected would be treated as confidential, that the interviews were private and the personal information collected was subject to the provisions of the Data Protection Act. Transcripts of the interviews were anonymised so that it would not be possible to identify any individual who took part.

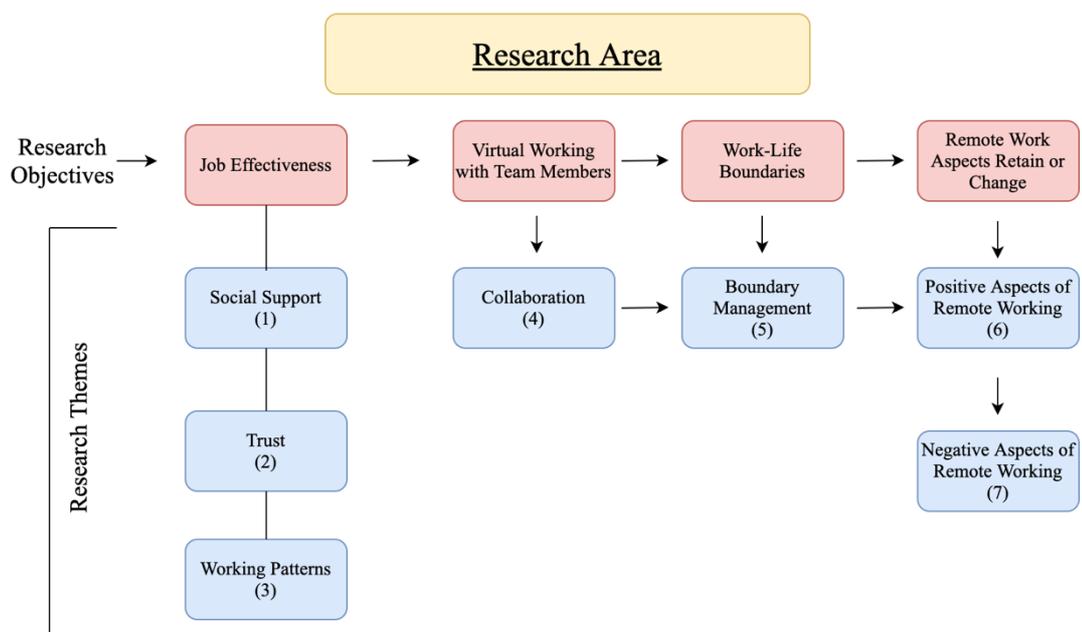
The participants were asked to give their consent to take part before the interviews commenced. Because some of the questions were concerned with the personal challenges faced by the participants during the pandemic, the researcher conducted the interviews from a home office to ensure that the conversations were private. The participants were all working from home and in a secure private environment.

The interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams and the participants were informed in advance that the conversation would be recorded for research purposes and stored securely on a personal laptop computer in a password-protected file. The participants were assured that the researcher would follow the National College of Ireland's ethical guidelines.

Chapter 5 - Findings

5.0 Introduction

Seven themes emerged from the analysis of the in-depth interviews. Social Support (1), Trust (2), and Work Patterns (3) were related to the first research objective concerning job effectiveness. One theme, Collaboration (4), was related to the second objective concerning working with team members in a virtual environment. One theme, Boundary Management (5), was related to the third objective concerning work-life boundaries. Two themes, Positive Aspects of Remote Working (6), and Negative Aspects of Remote Working (7) were related to the fourth research objective concerning the aspects of remote working that managers would like to retain and those they would change.



5.1 Thematic Analysis of Findings

Research Area One: To identify factors that were perceived as impacting job effectiveness while working from home.

5.1.1 Theme 1 - Social Support

Institutional Support

Access to technology to facilitate remote working was seen as essential by all of the participants. The company had started using Microsoft Teams before the pandemic and not all of the managers were familiar with it. "Teams wasn't really used, but all of a sudden we had to use it all the time if you wanted to speak to anyone rather than just having a phone call" (Participant G).

Microsoft Teams became the main communications channel but not everyone was trained in how to use it effectively. "I know there's lots of useful tools around now, Microsoft and many others, but there is no kind of guidance on here's what you could use and here's how it can be used" (Participant B). The company did not provide support to assist managers in setting up home offices.

Four participants noted that they had transitioned from working in a fully equipped office to working at home on a laptop. Participants felt that not having access to large monitors and keyboards made them less effective when working from home. "I was supplied a company laptop that was it, so I didn't have a second monitor, I didn't have a desk, I didn't have a chair, well a suitable chair for sitting down and working all day" (Participant C). Two of the participants purchased large monitors and keyboards when they realised they would be working remotely for an extended period of time. One manager said she had to incur the expense because she had poor eyesight. "I need a screen and keyboard; you know I needed [...] a bigger screen because my eyesight is appalling" (Participant F). One of the findings of the study is that there were additional costs associated with remote working that participants had not anticipated.

Informational Support

All of the participants referred to issues with informational support that impacted work effectiveness. Before the pandemic information was obtained via email, face-to-face meetings and casual conversations, however, during lockdown the main form of communication was Microsoft Teams. Participants noted that casual conversations had been an important part of their information-gathering process. “So what you miss are these coffee machine, corridor conversations, did you hear about this? what do you think about that? You know, from the outside [...] it might look like idle chitchat but you do pick up on so much more that’s going on around the business” (Participant B). Managers found that video calls were an inefficient way of getting regular progress reports from staff, and brief office interactions had become thirty-minute meetings. “Everything has become a formal meeting where it used to be “Hey did you see that email? Have you dealt with it? Are you good? Do you need any help or support?” It’s now a 30-minute meeting” (Participant A).

The absence of face-to-face contact made the process of gathering information slower. Participants found it difficult to get access to colleagues because Microsoft Teams indicated that they were busy. “Probably the difficult variation was [not being able] to walk up to someone’s desk and ask them a quick question, so you had to type it out, you had to wait for a response or you didn’t want to just call them if they were shown as busy [...] in a meeting” (Participant C).

Emotional Support

All of the participants felt that the office had been a source of emotional support. Participants spoke of socialising with colleagues in pre-pandemic times, going for after-work drinks, meals out or playing football. Social distancing requirements severed these links. “That social aspect that you get when you’re in the office where you can have a quick corridor chat conversation “how’s it going?”, “how’s the kids?” “what’s happening with this?”, “did you see the football the other night?” They were happening less and less” (Participant E).

Participants commented that their circle of contacts had reduced and they only spoke to people that they needed to work with. The lack of social contact resulted in feelings of isolation and participants commented on the negative impact on their mental well-being. “I don’t like the isolation aspect, you know I’m looking forward to getting the balance back and to feel part of a team again” (Participant B).

Social interaction with work colleagues was an important support mechanism and remote working resulted in increased anxiety. “I also think actually not having contact has created a real anxiety and people are now coming to the point where they are ready to go back [to the office]” (Participant D). One participant stated that the company had organised coffee breaks on Microsoft Teams to promote social interactions, and introduced “coffee roulette” where staff were randomly assigned to chat with another colleague they had not previously met. The company was forced to furlough staff at the start of the first lockdown to reduce costs as car sales declined and manufacturing plants closed. Management took action to provide emotional support to staff on furlough by holding a half-hour Microsoft Teams meeting each week. “[The Managing Director] would give a quick business update and thank them for their bit that they’re doing by being on furlough because it was helping us survive as a business” (Participant D).

The staff on furlough were concerned that they might lose their jobs, but the staff that were still working worked longer hours and resented their colleagues. One of the negative consequences of the pandemic was that it undermined the social cohesion that had existed between team members. “I think that was a really big thing the whole furlough situation. It caused a real divide between the teams at the time. Almost maybe a bit of bitterness from the people that were still here doing all the crazy hours” (Participant D).

5.1.2 Theme 2 - Trust

Four of the participants considered trust to be an essential condition for effective remote working. Participants stated that working from home was occasionally permitted if there was a good reason for doing so, such as a dental appointment or a maintenance engineer calling to carry out repairs. However, remote working was not a common practice because of a perception in the company that people working from home were not actually working.

“I think there was always permission to [work from home] if you really needed to but there was also a bit of a cultural need to be in the office, and there was a bit of an underlying view that if you were working from home you were kind of there with your feet up” (Participant E).

The necessity of introducing remote working for the whole company during the pandemic was perceived to have demonstrated that staff could be trusted to do their work and deliver it on time. “But it is that kind of trust from the people I worked with, that just because I am not in a suit and I am not sat in the office that it doesn’t mean I am doing any less work, my quality of work isn’t reduced” (Participant C).

One senior manager noted that during lockdown his staff had the freedom to prioritise their activities and schedule their work around family commitments. He stated that he trusted his staff to get their work done and meet their deadlines. “I saw my team members as schools were in lockdown, for example, taking time out during the day to look after the kids but I knew they were back online at 8 o’clock at night. I knew that they wouldn’t let the work slip” (Participant A). The company’s performance monitoring systems were still used during the pandemic so although staff were trusted to work remotely they still had to meet their targets. “I’ve had to learn how to be able to carry on doing what I’m doing [...] you are still held accountable, you know there are still metrics and KPIs and things you need to produce” (Participant G).

The participants believed it was in their best interests to do their jobs well, as this influenced their promotion prospects and the financial rewards they received. “Most people in the professional environment want to do a good job, ultimately they understand the importance of doing a good job from a career development perspective” (Participant A). The study findings indicate that the pandemic has accelerated the acceptance of remote working as a normal business practice in this major UK automotive company.

5.1.3 Theme 3 - Work Patterns

Four participants referred to saving time on long commutes to work but they now worked longer hours. “I could be in the car for nearly 3 hours a day on top of my working day and [...] normally an hour and a half got replaced by sitting at my desk and working longer” (Participant C). Work activity was increasingly scheduled around Microsoft Team meetings. All the participants commented that the switch to online meetings increased the number of meetings they attended which they found disruptive. These meetings occupied so much time that managers had to work longer hours to complete their work. One participant stated that on occasions he had fifteen Teams calls per day which he found exhausting. “It’s those back-to-back calls, it’s that no time to breath, it’s actually that you have no time to do the work because you have meetings all day” (Participant C).

Meetings were scheduled to start very early in the morning and also at the end of the workday which would not have happened with physical meetings in the office. “People are less worried about putting meetings in diaries you know towards the end of the day and early morning” (Participant B). The finding that Microsoft Teams meetings were highly disruptive and negatively impacted job effectiveness is unique and indicates that there is a gap in the research literature. Three participants believed that during lockdown some of their colleagues behaved unreasonably regarding the scheduling of work meetings. Staff were pressurised to attend Microsoft Teams meetings at midnight to prepare presentations and this would not have happened before the pandemic. “We’ve been in run-ups to big reviews and we’ve had Teams calls that are work-related at midnight or 1 o’clock in the morning a couple of times where we were preparing for big presentations the next day” (Participant E).

One participant noted that there was increased tension between people who wanted to work normal office hours and people who normally worked very long hours. Some managers expected staff to attend meetings even when they were not scheduled to work, which could be 8 pm. “You’ve got the people who work round the clock going “well I dial into meetings when I’m not in work so why can’t they?” And so that’s a really bad mentality to have because that’s not right” (Participant D).

There was a perceived increase in the level of intrusive behaviour by some managers who sent emails or contacted staff outside of normal working hours. “There are no boundaries in terms of when people will [Microsoft Teams] chat you or send you an email” (Participant E).

Participants noted that there was an expectation that they would still be connected and respond immediately if contacted after normal working hours. “Because you are remote working everybody thinks you’re connected constantly, like 24 hours, because you’re at work right, you’re at home and your home is work” (Participant F). One participant was concerned that the unreasonable behaviour would become a permanent feature of work after the pandemic. The findings on unreasonable behaviour by some managers during the pandemic are unique to this study and indicate a gap in the literature.

Research Area Two: To investigate the challenges of working with team members in a virtual environment during the pandemic.

5.1.4 Theme 4 - Collaboration

Seven of the participants spoke of difficulties they experienced collaborating with team members in a virtual environment. Participants commented that poor quality internet connections made it difficult to communicate effectively via video conferencing. “I know it sounds silly but peoples Wi-Fi connection, if somebody has a bad connection it’s a nightmare because if you are trying to have a call with them and their inputs all blurry and you can’t hear what they’re saying it is almost pointless” (Participant D). Participants were not satisfied with the functionality of Microsoft Teams which was believed to be inferior to more traditional methods such as the use of whiteboards or flip-charts. “And that’s one of the challenges I’ve found was you know that collaboration space on Teams for me it didn’t quite work” (Participant F).

Face-to-face meetings were seen as a better way of collaborating because participants could read non-verbal clues which are an important part of the communication process. “You can’t pick up on body language and there are so many non-verbal cues you can’t pick up on when you’re not in a room with someone” (Participant B). One of the participants felt that virtual meetings made it much easier for people to be evasive in their responses to questions, and made it more difficult for him to challenge them.

“[In an office] you can tell if somebody is not giving the full answer or being totally honest, you can push and you can challenge them more” (Participant A).

Virtual meetings were not believed to be a suitable alternative for the company’s two-day-long management meetings. The physical meetings had provided a greater quantity of information. “I came away with so much information that it enabled me to have a really good next few days because I have got all the key bits I needed from just sitting in a room with them or overhearing a conversation” (Participant D on management meetings). One of the participants noted that communicating with team members online was less effective and less productive because people were less attentive. “[in a physical meeting] you’re with that person, you are looking them in the eye and, to be honest with you, sometimes you find that the meeting is a lot more productive” (Participant F).

Research Area Three: To investigate how work-life boundaries were impacted by remote working during the pandemic.

5.1.5 Theme 5 - Boundary Management

Four managers referred to the importance of having a separate place to work. Having a quiet space to work became an issue for remote workers when schools closed at the start of the pandemic. “[Having] peace and quiet, the ability to sit and focus, and I think for the first month that was the biggest adjustment that I had to make and my team as well?” (Participant A).

The participants were in constant online meetings and found it stressful to be on video calls with children or family members visible in the background. “[It was] a real culture shock trying to work with children in the background, with maybe someone else’s partner who is also working from home” (Participant D). Family members did not always observe the boundaries that participants tried to establish to separate work and home life. “I think there was a temptation at the beginning for interruptions, whether it is the kids or the partner who knock on the door asking a question [...] just because you’re around” (Participant G).

Four participants referred to their commute as being the boundary between work and home. Travelling to work in an office enabled managers to make the mental transition between the home and work environments but now that boundary was missing. “The door behind me, that’s all the separates me from work and family time, and it used to be a 30-minute drive” (Participant A).

One participant noted that leaving the office at night had allowed her to create a boundary as she put her laptop in her bag and drove home. “The difference [...] is you’re not driving home from an office to finish your day. [Pre-pandemic] if you had to log on at night you would, but you wouldn’t intentionally go home and switch your computer on” (Participant D). The absence of clear boundaries, coupled with increased pressure to attend Microsoft Team meetings and work longer hours, had a negative impact on the work-life balance and well-being of the participants. One manager recalled missing family meals because he forgot to stop working. “I find that even myself I’ll miss dinner. I’ll be in the middle of something and just keep going so you miss certain things during the day” (Participant A).

Participants noted that when working from home they remained connected to the office email and Microsoft Teams. One participant referred to struggling to disconnect from work as if it was an addiction. “I struggled to switch off pre-pandemic and I struggle even more now because it’s 9 o’clock at night and my laptop is still logged on” (Participant E). Another participant also had difficulty disconnecting and dialled into work meetings and checked emails while on annual leave because she believed it would help to do her job better. She also said that during the first three months working from home she put her son to bed and immediately went back to work for several hours. “When he came home from preschool it would be sort him out, bath, bedtime [story], as soon as he had gone to bed, straight back on the computer and online until probably 10 or 11 o’clock most nights” (Participant D).

Participants stated that they had not been sufficiently disciplined about disconnecting from work while working remotely and this had resulted in increased work intensity and fatigue. “You have to make a conscious decision to shut down your laptop” or you end up working until 10 pm (Participant F). Some participants began to adopt boundary management strategies after they had been in lockdown for several months.

They began to introduce temporal boundaries and set a definite time to finish work each day and to not work at weekends.

One manager created a digital boundary by leaving his work phone in his home office and turning off his laptop at night. Other managers tried to avoid scheduling online meetings during lunch breaks or late in the evening. Based on the data collected it appears that managers began to adapt their behaviour and adjust to remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Area Four: To consider the aspects of remote working that managers would like to retain and those they would change.

5.1.6 Theme 6 - Positive Aspects of Remote Working

The study participants were asked to identify aspects of remote working that they wished to retain and four areas emerged.

Flexibility

All of the participants stated that they liked the flexibility associated with remote working because it improved their work-life balance. “Having the flexibility is great and as I do the school run every morning, I can pick him up every evening” (Participant D). Participants stated that they had more time for physical exercise, the freedom to run errands during the day without the need to take time off work. All participants felt remote working allowed them to spend more quality time with their families.

Trust

Four participants said that the experience of remote working had shown that staff could be trusted to do their work from home. This was a positive development that would improve staff morale and job satisfaction. “The trust employees are being given to deliver empowers them and helps and supports their development as well” (Participant A).

Fewer distractions

Four of the participants felt that the option of working from home would permit them to be more productive and perform certain types of tasks better. Tasks that require concentration and focus can be accomplished more effectively at home, away from the distractions of the office. “It’s been easier to switch off when you need focus time [...] and it is a good element of working from home” (Participant G).

Commuting

Four participants stated that the time saved commuting to work was a major advantage. “[...] driving back and forth to work is non-value-added time whereas now you can kind of almost make that time up with more productivity” (Participant F). However, participants felt that a hybrid working model would be adopted in the future so it would be necessary to commute to work two or three days per week.

5.1.7 Theme 7 - Negative Aspects of Remote Working

The study participants identified aspects of remote working they believed should be changed and four issues emerged.

Collaboration

Seven of the participants felt that collaborating with their teams using video conferencing software was not satisfactory. This was the main reason that managers wanted to return to working in the office at least two days a week. “The other thing I find really difficult with virtual working is collaborative working, it’s very hard to work collaboratively through virtual means” (Participant A).

Face-to-Face Contact

Seven participants stated that lack of face-to-face contact with colleagues was a disadvantage of remote working. Spending time with colleagues and interacting socially was perceived as a way to reduce feelings of isolation. “Working from home you’ve [only] got yourself haven’t you, so that can be a struggle sometimes. For me, just the interaction with people is something that I miss” (Participant B). Communicating with staff in training sessions or making important presentations was also believed to be more effective when people were physically present.

“Initially people sort of were locked in so you couldn’t even see their faces to know are they participating, are they interested and [...] definitely that is an issue” (Participant G).

Constantly connected

Five participants stated that feeling that they were constantly connected to work was a disadvantage. The expectation that staff working remotely were always available to answer emails or answer Teams calls was viewed as unacceptable.

Back-to-Back Meetings

Six participants felt that back-to-back Microsoft Teams meetings were very disruptive and reduced their work effectiveness.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

6.0 Summary of the Main Findings

The purpose of the research study was to identify the positive and negative aspects of working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of managers in the UK automotive industry. The research focused on identifying the factors that impacted job effectiveness, working with team members in a virtual environment and work-life boundaries.

The findings generated from the in-depth interviews and a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the managers felt remote working during the pandemic was associated with increased work intensity, difficulty collaborating with team members, and the erosion of work-life boundaries. The use of Microsoft Teams to create a virtual work environment was perceived to have changed the pattern of work, reduced productivity and caused some managers to behave unreasonably in their interactions with colleagues.

6.1 Comparison of Findings to Key Literature

6.1.1 Social Support

The study revealed that the company had installed Microsoft Teams prior to the pandemic and the participants had not been fully trained. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the level of technical support and guidance they received while working remotely.

This finding is consistent with the results of quantitative research conducted by Bentley et al, (2016) in New Zealand. They investigated teleworker perceptions of organisational social support on employee well-being. The research indicated that organisational social support was directly linked to improved job satisfaction and reduced psychological strain. Their research also indicated that increased levels of technical support and training are required as the intensity of remote working increases and this can result in increased job satisfaction.

A number of the current study participants referred to the challenges they faced because they were working on laptop computers without large monitors or keyboards. Some of the participants did not have a desk or a suitable office chair. Working conditions are a hygiene factor (Herzberg et. al., 1959) and when employees perceive them to be inadequate they act as a de-motivator and reduce employee satisfaction. The study participants believed that the office environment had provided an opportunity for casual “water-cooler” conversations that were an important source of information, including progress reports from team members.

This is consistent with mixed methods research conducted by Rockmann and Pratt, (2015) in a US Fortune 100 company that allowed staff to work remotely. That research study indicated that remote working had depopulated the office, making it less likely that colleagues would meet and have casual conversations and so knowledge sharing and learning were disrupted. The current study also indicated that participants believed that the communication process had become more time consuming and inefficient using Microsoft Teams.

The managers noted that their circle of work contacts was reduced and they only spoke to colleagues about work-related topics. Lack of social contact with colleagues resulted in feelings of isolation and anxiety. Study participants indicated that they wanted to return to the office two or three days a week to maintain contact with colleagues. The importance of social support was also highlighted in recent mixed methods research conducted in China during the pandemic, Wang et al., (2020) found that social support appeared to have become the most powerful of the characteristics of virtual work and their empirical findings indicated that it had a positive indirect impact on both performance and well-being because of its direct positive effects on the remote work challenges of loneliness, procrastination, work-home interference and communication.

6.1.2 Trust

Lister and Harnish, (2011) found that in the US, a disproportionate number of management professionals worked remotely because their employers trusted them to do so.

The participants in the present study stated that they were permitted to work from home occasionally, but felt that the organisational culture had not been supportive of remote working. Study participants believed that there was a perception that if they were not in the office they were not working. This perception of remote workers was also evident in research conducted by Bloom et al., (2015) who found that senior management believed remote workers would be lazy and shirk their responsibilities.

Qualitative research by Baruch, (2000) indicated that if an organisation has a culture of trust it increases work effectiveness. The findings of the present study indicate that the managers believed that their work effectiveness had been affected by a lack of flexibility. Before the pandemic, managers were required to come to the office to dial into conference calls with colleagues in overseas markets spanning several time zones stretching from Brazil to Australia.

The lack of trust was initially a problem for some participants. One manager commented that when he began to work remotely, his immediate superior contacted him daily but that as time passed the frequency of contact reduced as his work was still being performed to the same standard. This finding is consistent with quantitative research conducted by Peters et al., (2016) in 1,577 organisations across eighteen countries. They found that organisations use softer controls mechanisms when the level of remote working is low because the perceived risk is lower. Their research also indicated that professional staff are expected to be self-disciplined, and guided by their professional standards and peer pressure.

Participants indicated that they had more trust in their own staff working remotely. One manager stated that he knew his staff took time off during the day to care for young children but he trusted them to finish their work later. The positive views of the study participants differ from the more negative findings from a large scale quantitative research study conducted during the pandemic by Parker et al., (2020).

Their preliminary analysis of survey responses from 215 managers and supervisors indicated that sixty per cent of respondents believed that their staff working remotely performed worse than their office-based colleagues, suggesting entrenched negative views about remote working.

Participants in the current study stated that the company continued to use performance monitoring during the pandemic and they were expected to achieve their objectives. Previous qualitative research by Grant et al., (2013) found that when employers and workers agree on objectives in advance it can reduce the extent of overworking that is frequently associated with remote working. The current study found that although the participants had clear objectives this did not help eliminate overworking, and this was partly due to issues relating to adapting to using new technology and staff shortages during the pandemic.

6.1.3 Work Patterns

Time saved on commuting was perceived to be a benefit of remote working. Four managers specifically mentioned that they saved time by not having to commute but noted that they spent a significant portion of that time working. In his paper on the benefits and limitations of remote working, Mello, (2007) noted that remote workers underestimate the amount of extra time spent working which is a significant benefit to the employer. The increased level of autonomy and schedule flexibility meant that staff could switch between work and family roles during the day.

The female managers stated that they were able to care for young children and then return to finish their work in the evening. This is consistent with quantitative research conducted by Chung and Van der Horst, (2017) into the working patterns of women returning to work after childbirth. Their research findings indicate working mothers benefit from increased flexibility and combine childcare with work activities. It also supports the findings of qualitative research by Mustafa and Gold, (2013) into the management of temporal and physical boundaries by self-employed remote workers. Their research found that working mothers match their work schedules to home-life and children.

Some of the study participants noted that they worked longer hours and the working day extended from 7.30 am to 8 pm or later during the pandemic. This is consistent with the findings of mixed methods research conducted by Eddleston et. al., (2017) who indicated that remote workers experience problems because the work role becomes embedded in their family home.

Remote workers were more likely to overwork than office-based workers and also experienced greater work-home interference. Recent quantitative research conducted during the pandemic by Palumbo, (2020) also found that remote working resulted in the extensification and intensification of work leading to increased levels of fatigue which made it difficult for workers to manage their workload and negatively impacted work-life balance.

Participants noted that they spent several hours each day on Microsoft Teams calls. One manager stated that in the early months of lockdown he spent six or seven hours per day on calls and another stated that he sometimes had 15 Teams calls per day which he found exhausting. Qualitative research by Grant et al., (2013) found that communications technology was a major cause of overworking by remote workers and had a detrimental effect on well-being because it reduced the time available for recuperation. Research by Karr-Wisniewski and Lu, (2010) into technology-based productivity losses, indicated that team members working remotely engage in excessive levels of communication and the complex technology platforms used to connect team members can inhibit productivity.

Several participants believed there was a perception they should be always available to chat on Microsoft Teams or to answer emails. Quantitative research conducted by Parker et al., (2020) also found that managers expected remote workers to be constantly available because they doubted that they were working.

The company began using Microsoft Teams just before the pandemic and staff were not fully trained or experienced in its use. Participants noted that brief conversations with staff had now become 30-minute Microsoft Teams meetings. This indicates that the technology used to connect team members made communication less efficient due to over-communication.

This finding is supported by research conducted by Marlow et al., (2017) into the communication process in a virtual team environment. They found that when remote workers are required to use new technology they can be slow to adapt and fail to distinguish between information that is relevant and irrelevant which can lead to oversharing and disruption to team productivity.

Participants stated that they were under pressure to attend meetings outside normal working hours. One manager noted that he had attended Teams meetings at midnight on two occasions and this would not have happened when meetings were held in the office. Participants felt that some managers behaved unreasonably and insisted that meetings be scheduled at times when all team members were available, which might be 8 pm. Participants felt that this behaviour would not have been tolerated before the pandemic. One manager stated that this behaviour could be difficult to reverse. The findings of the study relating to unreasonable behaviour in a virtual remote work environment during the pandemic are unique and additional research should be conducted in this area.

6.1.4 Collaboration

The study participants found it very difficult to collaborate with team members while working remotely. The poor quality of internet connections caused video links to freeze which disrupted the flow of communications making it difficult to maintain concentration and reducing effectiveness. This finding is consistent with recent research by Wang et al., (2020) which indicated that during the pandemic ICT-mediated communication was unsatisfactory and slow in comparison to face-to-face communications, and negatively impacted the efficiency of remote workers.

Participants stated that the absence of non-verbal clues and body language made it difficult to communicate using Microsoft Teams. One participant stated that he found it easier to tell if colleagues were not being truthful in face-to-face meetings and the virtual environment made it possible for people to be more evasive. This is consistent with findings by Grant et al., (2013) who noted that the use of technology, such as video conference software, resulted in the performance of remote workers being impaired because of the absence of non-verbal forms of communication.

Participants felt video conference calls were not suitable for collaboration with team members and that physical meetings had been more appropriate for planning and problem-solving. This finding is supported by recent research.

The difficulty of virtual collaboration was addressed in a research paper by Mancl and Fraser, (2020) that analysed the impact of Covid-19 on the work practices of high performing teams of software developers working virtually during the pandemic. Virtual collaboration tools were judged to be inferior to face-to-face contact for certain informal team interactions such as brainstorming, white-boarding and corridor conversations, particularly in the early conceptual design stage of project development. However, the research paper stated that routine communication between team members was better because of the absence of distractions in the virtual environment.

The participants in the current study stated that they believed that physical meetings were more suitable for long management meetings and planning sessions as it was not possible to replicate two-day meetings effectively in a virtual environment.

6.1.5 Boundary Management

Four of the study participants commented on the importance of having a separate workspace at home. At the start of the pandemic schools and childcare facilities in the UK closed. Participants noted that home-work interference was more evident during the pandemic and they found it difficult to adjust. Two of the participants moved house and created a home office in their new home. A mixed methods research study by Greer and Payne, (2014) found similar results as remote workers adapted their home environment to create a separate workspace to minimise distractions, outsourced childcare, and adopted a work-oriented mental attitude to increase their effectiveness.

The commute between work and home had been an important boundary mechanism that enabled participants to transition between their personal and professional roles. Time spent commuting creates a temporal boundary which, as indicated by Kossek, (2016) in her research paper on boundaries in the digital age, helped separate the feelings and emotions associated with work-life and home-life.

The participants made a rapid transition to remote working and had not developed new techniques for mentally separating the two aspects of their lives. The participants struggled to maintain work-life boundaries and spoke of the negative impact it had on work-life balance. One manager spoke of missing family meals because he forgot to stop working and leave his home office at the end of his working day.

This finding is consistent with earlier research by Gajendran and Harrison, (2007) who found that experience of remote working is an important aspect of the adaptation process which enable people to adjust their behaviour. The longer a person has been working remotely the better they can adapt, and the more positive the impact on work-life balance. Five participants stated that while working from home during the pandemic they had remained connected to the company computer system outside of normal working hours. One participant spoke of checking emails and dialling into work meetings while on annual leave. This finding is consistent with research by Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, (2006) who found that technology eroded the boundary between work and home-life and increased work-life conflict because individuals were able to remain connected. Research by Grant et al., (2013) also found that remote workers became addicted to turning on their computers and working during the evening.

Three participants of the current study stated that they felt they had lacked the self-discipline to disconnect while working from home. Qualitative research by Baruch, (2000) into the factors that impact the effectiveness of remote workers found that self-discipline is a critically important attribute. The study indicates that managers had begun to implement boundary management strategies. One of the participants created a digital boundary by leaving his work phone in his home office and switching off his computer. Participants stated that they set temporal boundaries and tried to finish work at a reasonable time and not work weekends.

Other participants noted that a policy of not scheduling meetings at lunchtime or late in the evening had been introduced so that staff could return to working more normal hours. These findings are consistent with the findings in a recent quantitative study by Rudnicka et al., (2020) into remote working during the Covid-19 who found that respondents reported creating digital and temporal boundaries to minimise work-life conflict.

6.1.6 Positive and Negative Aspects of Remote Working

Analysis of the research findings permitted the identification of the positive aspects of remote working that the participants wanted to retain, and negative aspects that they believed should be changed.

Participants valued the increased flexibility when working remotely. The increased level of trust, the ability to avoid office distractions and time saved on commuting were also identified as benefits they wished to retain.

Figure 3: Positive and Negative Aspects of Remote Working			
(Number of participants that mentioned the positive or negative aspect)			
Positive	Participants (Frequency)	Negative	Participants (Frequency)
1 Flexibility	8	1 Lack of face-to-face contact	7
2 Greater trust	4	2 Poor quality virtual collaboration	7
3 Ability to avoid distractions	4	3 Too many MS Teams meetings	6
4 Time saved on commuting	4	4 Constantly connected	5

The lack of face-to-face contact with co-workers was perceived to be a major drawback. Virtual collaboration was perceived to be unsatisfactory due to the limitations of the video conference software and the poor quality of internet connections. The participants also highlighted the disruptive effect of back-to-back Microsoft Teams meetings and the perception that they should be constantly connected as issues that should be addressed to improve the experience of remote working.

6.2 Practical implications of the study

There are several practical implications for the company. The adoption of a hybrid remote work model appears to be the most appropriate strategy for the company. It should adopt a more supportive approach to remote working and develop an organisational culture that views remote working as a normal business practice.

A key element of this change in approach must be the development of a contractual framework that establishes the expectations of the company and the employee concerning remote working. Increased levels of institutional support will be required including investment in equipment to facilitate remote working, and additional technical support and training in the use of video conferencing software.

Clear guidelines should be developed to ensure that staff are not required to attend remote meetings outside of normal working hours except in exceptional circumstances relating to communication with company offices in different time zones. All remote workers should have the right to disconnect from work and should be trained in how to work effectively in a remote setting.

There are also practical implications for managers working remotely. The findings indicate that managers worked excessively long hours during the pandemic due to a combination of increased workload and a lack of self-discipline. Managers should set clear physical, digital and temporal boundaries to ensure that they have a better work-life balance and adequate time for rest and recuperation. Managers should engage with the company on the development of a hybrid work model that facilitates effective team collaboration in a physical environment and increased productivity and flexibility in a remote work environment.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

This qualitative research study was conducted using a small sample of managers from one company in the UK automotive industry. Since the small sample was drawn from one company in one industrial sector in the United Kingdom the findings cannot be generalised to a wider population. Two female managers were included in the sample but this may not reflect the gender balance of the management group in the company.

Additionally, the study was conducted to gather data on the positive and negative aspects of remote working from the perspective of managers in the UK automotive industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the purpose of the study was to investigate the impact of remote working in the context of the pandemic, it must be acknowledged that because of the unique situation, the findings of the study may not be applicable in a post-pandemic situation.

Chapter 7 – Conclusions

7.0 Conclusions

The current research project is novel because it was designed to gather data on how managers in the UK automotive industry perceived job effectiveness, virtual team work and work-life boundaries had been affected by a rapid transition to remote working during the pandemic.

The managers felt that their job effectiveness had been negatively affected by remote working. Microsoft Teams became the main communications channel between managers and their teams and was considered to be an inefficient and time consuming way of getting progress reports. Informal, face-to face interactions and “water cooler” conversations had been an important method of knowledge transfer in the company and video conference software was believed to be a poor substitute. A surprising finding was that the use of video conferencing software caused a substantial increase in the number of management meetings. Managers were frequently scheduled to attend back-to-back Microsoft Teams meetings which forced them to work longer hours to complete essential work. A second unexpected finding was that managers perceived that colleagues began to behave unreasonably by scheduling online meetings late at night and expected all invitees to attend because they were working from home. Managers were concerned that this new behaviour could be difficult to reverse.

The finding that a lack of social interaction increased feelings of isolation and demotivated managers was expected. The managers suffered from fatigue due to increased work intensity and some managers were emotionally exhausted at the end of a working week. The company continued to operate a formal performance monitoring system but managers perceived that there was an increase in trust as the organisation adapted to the new normality of remote working.

Poor quality internet connections and limitations of video conferencing software made team meetings unsatisfactory. Video conferencing was perceived to be unsuitable for some forms of collaboration, e.g. white-boarding, that require more intense interaction between team members.

Managers felt that communication was less effective because they could not interpret body language and other non-verbal clues. Managers felt that in a post pandemic environment they would prefer a hybrid form of remote work with management teams meeting physically for more intensive planning and business review sessions. Work-life boundaries had been eroded during the pandemic. School closures at the start of lockdown increased home-work interference. Commuting had provided managers with a mechanism to transition between family and work roles. The managers worked longer hours and work interference with family life was significant.

They initially lacked the self-discipline to disconnect from work but as the pandemic continued they began to create digital and temporal boundaries. This is consistent with previous research which indicated that remote workers learn from experience and adapt their behaviour. Managers identified increased flexibility, the absence of office distractions and time saved on commuting as benefits of remote working they would retain. Managers identified the lack of face-to-face contact with colleagues, poor quality of collaboration via Microsoft Teams and the excessive number of online meetings as things that should change.

The adoption of a hybrid form of remote work would allow managers to retain the benefits of remote work and resolve many of the problems that were encountered by managers. The company should develop a formal remote working policy, including a contractual framework, to clarify what is expected from remote workers and to identify the support that will be provided to facilitate remote working.

The current research study has limitations. The qualitative data was collected from a small sample of UK based managers which may cause concern about the generalisability of the findings. However, as remote working was a new experience for this group, the research provided an opportunity to gather data on the personal experiences of managers of a rapid transition to working from home. The study was also limited to the experiences of managers in one company and organisational culture has an influence on individual behaviour. However, by studying a group of managers in one company it was possible to gather data on behavioural changes that occurred as a result of communication taking place in a virtual environment.

7.1 Future Research

The study found evidence of unreasonable behaviour by some individuals in a virtual work environment. Further research should be conducted into the effect of online communications on the behaviour patterns of individuals working remotely. The evidence of unreasonable behaviour in the research study may be an unusual outcome related to remote working during the pandemic, but may also be related to the nature of the communications channel. Additional research should be conducted on the disruptive impact of video conferencing technology on the productivity of remote workers. This area may need to be more closely regulated by companies using the technology to place limitations on the time spent by staff on video conference calls.

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Appendices

1.0 Consent Form

Working Remotely in the UK Automotive Industry during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Managerial Perspective

I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves taking part in an interview that will last approximately 25 to 30 minutes.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the researcher's Dissertation.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on a personal computer in a secure password protected folder until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact Adam O'Mahony to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

1.1 Information sheet

TITLE OF THE STUDY: Working Remotely in the UK Automotive Industry during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Managerial Perspective

Hello,

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in a research study. To help you make an informed decision on whether to participate it is important that you are aware of why the research is being conducted and what you will be required to do. Please take a few moments to carefully read the information set out below. Feel free to ask questions if any of the information is not clear or you would like additional information about the study. Also, please do take time to decide on whether you wish to participate or not.

Who I am and what the research study is about?

My name is Adam O'Mahony and I am currently studying for an MSc in International Business at the National College of Ireland, Dublin. I am undertaking qualitative research into the experience of managers in the automotive industry who have been working remotely during the pandemic.

What will taking part involve?

Taking part in the study will involve answering a limited number of questions to gather information on your experience of working remotely during the pandemic. The questions will be focused on gathering information on specific topics.

- Factors that you feel influenced your effectiveness while working from home
- Any issues that arose because team members were working remotely instead of face-to-face
- Your views on work-life boundaries while working from home

Participating in the research will involve taking part in an interview that will last a maximum of 25-30 minutes. The interview will take place online using Microsoft Teams if possible and the interview will be recorded for the purpose of transcription.

Why have you been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the research study because of your experience of working in the automotive industry in a management position. Your name was provided by a colleague in the industry who considered that your knowledge and experience made you suitable for the interview process.

Do you have to take part?

Participation in the research study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. You may refuse to answer any question and you may withdraw from the interview process at any time.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

There should be no risks involved in taking part in the study. You may withdraw from the interview any stage.

Will taking part be confidential?

The interview process is confidential and the data collected will be anonymised so that it will not be possible to associated anyone with the information provided. The information will only be used for the purpose of academic research. Data collected in the non-anonymised consent form and in the interview recordings are collected and retained as part of the research process.

How will the data you provide be recorded, stored and processed?

The interview will be recorded and the recording will be stored on the researcher's personal laptop in a secure password protected folder. The information will be stored until the examinations board has released the dissertation results. The researcher, the researcher's dissertation supervisor and the external examiner will be the only people with access to the data.

The signed consent forms and the interview recordings will be retained in the secure folder on the researcher's laptop until the degree has been conferred. The transcript of the interviews will be retained for a further two years but all identifying information will be removed. You have the right to access the information that you provide under the freedom of information act at any time.

Contact information

If you require any further information you may contact me by email as follows: ["Email Here"]

Dissertation Supervisor name: Dr. David Mothersill

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form that is attached and keep this information sheet for your personal records.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in the research study.

1.2 Email to participants

To: xxxxxxx

Subject: Research study on remote working in the UK Automotive Industry

Hi xxxxxxx,

I was given your contact details by (name of manager that assisted in recruiting the participants) who told me that you may be prepared to take part in my research study on remote working in the UK automotive industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. I am very grateful that you are willing to consider taking part.

I am in the process of preparing my dissertation for a Masters in International Business at the National College of Ireland, and I am hoping to interview a number of managers in the company about their experience of working from home during the pandemic. I have prepared an information sheet which gives a brief description of the study and a copy is attached to this email. If you require any additional information or have any questions about the research please feel free to contact me.

If you are happy to proceed then the next step is to arrange a time to have a short 30 minute conversation on Microsoft Teams. I am free to meet at any time that is suitable for you. Before we do the interview I will need you to sign a standard consent form so that the information collected can be used in my dissertation project. A copy of the consent form is attached and if you have any questions about it please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you again for your interest in the research and I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Adam O'Mahony