‘An Evaluation of the Empowerment and Engagement of Finance Sector Remote Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic’

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Abstract

The Covid-19 global shutdown forced millions of employees worldwide to adjust to remote working, many for the first time. Remote work has been promoted for years, yet the extra conditions of pandemic remote working has resulted in numerous problems. Human resource practitioners and organisations are concerned about the unfamiliarity of this nature of work, and their influence on employee and organisational performance. Though engaged employees have consistently proven to perform better, there is a dearth on literature on remote working engagement pre- and post-pandemic (Adhitama and Riyanto, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to establish if employee empowerment is correlated with employee engagement in remote working employees in the finance sector. Empowerment has cemented itself as a guaranteed means of engaging employees, with consistent positive relationships in literature (Amor *et al*., 2021). However, theorists must now detect whether this relationship has endured the massive changes imposed by the pandemic. Finance sector employees were selected as they adopted remote working in greater numbers than most, and are likely to continue remote work, in some capacity, post-pandemic (Gallacher and Hossain, 2020).

The Psychological Empowerment Scale (Spreitzer, 1995) and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli *et al*., 2002) were administered online, to measure empowerment and engagement respectively. These popularised measures have yet to be validated in pandemic remote working conditions.

After rigorous analyses, Spearman correlations detected significant positive relationships, not just between empowerment and engagement, but also the components these constructs are comprised of. This research proposes that remote working finance employees are feeling empowered and engaged, despite the challenges imposed by COVID-19. The instruments demonstrated suitability in the current environment, and their continued use is advocated, albeit with improvement recommendations, and critical analysis on the future of remote working investigations.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in most world governments implementing some form of work from home (WFH) mandate. Though many pandemics have existed through history, this is the first where technology has facilitated employees avoiding the hazards of interpersonal contact, by operating safely from home. As employees can complete work entirely from remote locations away from traditional workspaces, industries adapted to avoid collapse (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2021). This colossal shift in the location of work has been advocated for decades and gradually implemented in some knowledge-based industries (Abulibdeh, 2020). However, as the scale of this pandemic event was unprecedented, and most firms were unprepared, the abundance of intervening issues has culminated in a new working population, the pandemic remote worker.

The pandemic is currently being painstakingly researched. If scientists are not studying the pandemic directly, they are at least altering methodologies to accommodate pandemic restrictions and participant wellbeing (Bian and Lin, 2020). Those that feel conducting exploratory research is justified have experienced enormous research design obstacles (Torrentira Jr, 2020). However, as remote working existed prior to COVID-19, most academics do not treat this pandemic as a 'ground zero' for remote work. Previous remote work findings are being reviewed to determine their relevance or redundancy in a pandemic but, naturally, there is a lag in research.

Ultimately, the key issue is that no research prior to 2020 accounts for pandemic conditions. Remote working has transitioned from luxury to obligatory (Wang *et al*., 2021). Organisations implementing remote working in older studies were prepared for the transition (Van Steenbergen *et al*., 2018). Even comparable problems that prior studies highlighted, such as communication, isolation, and infrastructural issues, have increased exponentially when experienced by entire teams of pandemic remote workers mandated to stay at home (Spagnoli *et al*., 2020).

Some pre-pandemic findings will be much more applicable to contemporary remote workers than others, as only limited populations and industries were analysed. Mid-pandemic discoveries may not be reflected in remote workers when the pandemic eventually ends. Bridging the contextual gaps in these realities may take years (Como,

Hambley and Domene, 2021). As academics agree remote work is here to stay, it is crucial to conduct as much early research as possible, with samples of this magnitude unlikely to occur again for a lifetime. The finance sector is spotlighted in this study as they have the most roles that can be performed remotely and are expected to continue remote work in future (Gallacher and Hossain, 2020).

One area that pandemic researchers have taken great interest in is employee engagement. While research has primarily concentrated on employees in traditional work settings, the global pandemic has highlighted a need to encourage and maintain engagement in remote workers. The unfamiliarity and difficulties of the pandemic has underscored the significant differences in how employees are interpreting the crisis. Some researchers claimed the natural distance employees feel from their work and co-workers may inhibit engagement (Chanana, 2020), contributing to feelings of isolation and stress (Spagnoli *et al*., 2020). Others are claiming employees have found this transition increases engagement, responding to pandemic remote work with improved performance (de Klerk, Joubert and Mosca, 2021). Remote working and engagement research are no stranger to paradoxical findings with studies claiming remote working both improves and impairs work-life balance (Boell, Cecez-Kecmanovic, and Campbell, 2016). As these paradoxes have resurfaced, engagement research is more coveted than ever (de Klerk *et al*., 2021).

Theorists have highlighted many contributors to employee engagement worthy of examination. Empowerment has a lucrative history of boosting feelings of employee engagement, as employees who feel they make a difference in their company are more likely to feel engaged (Joo, Bozer and Ready, 2019). However, employers are reluctant to empower remote workers during the pandemic, hurting their organisational performance (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). Research is warranted to help address whether they should empower staff working remotely, and why they are not.

This study will examine if pre-pandemic findings on the relationship between empowerment and engagement are translatable to pandemic remote workers. If this relationship has survived this transition, it should give theorists confidence in previous assertions. HR practitioners and managers may be able to utilise this study's recommendations as well as pre-pandemic findings to improve employee feelings of empowerment and engagement.

Unfortunately, the tools for studying empowerment and engagement were not designed for pandemic remote work. Claims from COVID era studies may be contingent on results from outmoded instruments designed for traditional work settings. This investigation will also determine if existing instruments are still effective. If the pandemic has fundamentally changed the traits of engagement and empowerment, both constructs must be reconceptualised, and their measures redesigned.

Modern studies have not overhauled measures, successfully applying empowerment measures like the PES (Vatharkar, 2021), and engagement measures like the UWES (Miglioretti *et al*., 2021) to remote workers during the pandemic. Consequently, it is hypothesised that their relationship should still be significant and positive. Employees who feel empowered should also report higher feelings of engagement. Ideally, both measures should withstand meticulous analyses and endure as appropriate scales to apply to remote workers during and beyond the pandemic.

The literature review will exhibit where empowerment, engagement, and remote working research currently stands, paying particular attention to the uncommon experiments that explored interactions between these concepts. This will culminate in research questions that will address the ambiguous status of empowerment and engagement in a pandemic, alongside older unanswered questions. To solve these, a suitable quantitative methodology was constructed. This allowed for selected empowerment and engagement measures to be utilised with each step of the research design process explicated in the methodology chapter. The relationship between these concepts and the efficacy of their measures is analysed in the findings and analysis chapter. The discussion chapter evaluates this research, drawing comparisons with pre- and mid-pandemic studies to clarify where empowerment and engagement stand after COVID-19. Finally, the conclusion will assess the implications of this dissertation, signposting new directions to explore.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review will explain the current state of research on engagement and empowerment, the contributions they have offered each other, and the unavoidable influence of remote work. Though each concept is continually evolving, the mass introduction of pandemic remote working has resulted in excitement and uncertainty about the future of these concepts and work itself.

2.1 Engagement

Engagement was first conceptualised by Kahn (1990) who examined 'personal engagement' in work tasks, where individuals varied the degree to which they brought emotional, cognitive, and physical dimensions of themselves into task behaviour. Engagement has since developed into a wide net of sub-factions spread across many disciplines of psychology. Contemporary research is still divided in its definition, with some seeing it as a multifaceted construct encompassing feelings of vigour, dedication, and absorption (Amor *et al*., 2021) and others as a unitary construct because of its ambiguous relationship with burnout, as researchers cannot conclude whether they are on the same continuum or independent (Sun and Bunchapattanasakda, 2019).

Academics worry the term engagement is being misused by HR professionals to allude to a wide array of presumed positive outcomes. Engaged employees have longer tenures in companies, are willing to work longer hours and respond better to difficult tasks (de Klerk *et al*., 2021). The marketability of these benefits may have led to some employee engagement measures simply being a repackaging of older, less topical concepts, such as satisfaction and commitment (Sun and Bunchapattanasakda, 2019).

The explosion of employee engagement has resulted in various measures being available. Of these, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) is the most popular (Schaufeli *et al*., 2002). The UWES has three subscales: vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour involves high levels of energy and mental resilience at work, dedication relates to strong involvement in work and experiencing feelings devotion, enthusiasm, and challenge, while absorption describes how concentrated and engrossed in work one is (Schaufeli *et al*., 2002). Over the years the UWES has changed, and researchers have varied the items they have included, though the UWES

17 item measure is still the most popular. Seppälä *et al*. (2009) conducted a longitudinal study on the two models and found that the UWES-9 had even greater construct validity than the UWES-17 as it remained unchanged over time and populations.

Conceptually, engagement has strong links to numerous research fields such as organisational commitment and retention (Sergio and Rylova, 2018). One field particularly relevant to engagement research is the job demands-resources model, developed by several of the same theorists who advanced engagement by developing the UWES (Bakker *et al*., 2003).

Longitudinal research indicates that job resources predict engagement over time, most strongly at the organisational level (Lesener *et al*., 2020). This indicates organisations concerned about employee engagement should prioritise ensuring employees have the resources to perform their role. Job resources have played an important role in understanding engagement's relationship with remote working (Jamal *et al*., 2021).

2.2 Remote Working

Remote working was coined in the 1970s with the notion of moving work to the workers and not workers to the work (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). Advances in technology and global legislation advanced the movement, but research in the area was hampered by a multitude of definitions, including telecommuting, new ways of working (NWW), working from home, etc. Literature on remote working often finds itself bundled with conceptually similar areas such as NWW. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions about remote working when there are other facets to these constructs that cannot be ignored.

Theorists have suggested that some features of remote work (absence of daily commute, freedom from office inconveniences) may improve engagement while others (reduced feedback, increased role ambiguity, inability to disconnect) may decrease it (Gerards, de Grip and Baudewijns, 2018). Essentially, the abundance of terms means insufficient research has been conducted into sole remote working. Findings in conceptually similar areas are not as generalisable as researchers had hoped (Boell *et al*., 2016). The growing catalogue of inconsistent findings suggests ending the reductive categorisation of remote working traits into 'good' or 'bad', and

dismantling paradoxical findings, such as its improvement on work-life balance but increase in work-life conflict (de Klerk *et al*., 2021).

The field is changing very rapidly as new research is highlighting how remote working and WFH are conceptually different, with remote working more fitting of the definition of work from anywhere (WFA). When discussing these initiatives WFH focuses on the benefits of employees working at their home which is typically within commuting distance of an office they are based in. WFH benefits do not include geographic flexibility, as WFA allows employees to operate from other countries and grants greater autonomy. New working approaches are currently being developed and introduced rapidly, and this revolutionary period where industries "cut the umbilical cord" to conventional employment is likely to continue for years (Choudhury, Foroughi, and Larson, 2021). With each new scenario, there may be multiple definitions used in literature discussing them which encumbers comprehensive reviews.

Much of the contemporary interest in remote working has been from grey literature, such as Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review, etc. This literature lacks the accountability of experimental research and peer review. Scientific studies collecting evidence on remote working have trailed. The implications are that despite its advocation amongst the HR community, pre-pandemic evidence has mixed results. Omondi and K'Obonyo (2018) found that if flexible work opportunities are optional, their adoption by employees may be lower than expected, as employees perceive that overuse will have negative repercussions for their career, such as when promotion opportunities arise. This was due to organisations and management resisting the remote working movement, associating it with connotations of laziness and lack of motivation (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). With age, gender and family status among copious other factors affecting employee experiences, insufficient research was pooled to establish concrete organisational models on making the most of staff operating remotely (Chanana, 2020).

2.3 Pandemic Remote Working

In Ireland, 18% of respondents to a national survey in 2018 claimed to work from home, typically one or two days per week (Ireland, Department of Business, Enterprise, and Innovation, 2019). In March 2021, 57.1% of Irish respondents claimed to work from home, spurred by the onset of COVID-19 (Eurofound, 2021).

When companies were forced to close their offices and their employees adapted to working remotely suddenly, there was insufficient evidence to its efficacy in many industries. Theorists stressed remote work's advantages for many years, including improvements in work-life balance, organisational commitment, and job satisfaction (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Unfortunately, remote working during a pandemic lockdown has highlighted many issues, such as its negative effects on work-life balance, communication, procrastination, and management (Wang *et al*., 2021). Most employees had little to no remote working experience, and organisations were unprepared for supporting the practice. Remote working research pre-COVID-19 lacks the contextual relevance or the scale to reflect the current working environment and its demands (Wang *et al*., 2021).

Research that is being produced mid-pandemic acknowledges major hindrances in data collection, with qualitative studies particularly declining in their credibility and timeliness (Vindrola-Padros *et al*., 2020). Investigations needed to quickly adapt to data collection from the confines of households. Dubey and Tripathi (2020) took the unique approach of analysing 100,000 tweets mentioning work-from-home and found that the sentiments were mostly positive (73.1%), and that people welcomed this alteration in working styles and trusted it would last. However, the tweets were taken from 15th March – 15th April 2020 at the beginning of pandemic remote working.

G. S. and Sangeetha (2020) also conducted research at the start of the global shutdown and found no significant relationship between remote working and productivity, stress, or work-life balance. However, their study was conducted in April 2020 when remote working had just been introduced. Their research pointed out employees were welcoming the novel approaches introduced to adapt, but now employee perceptions need to be re-examined after spending prolonged periods working at home. Long-term effects on mental health and work-life have crept in (Como *et al*., 2021), with new issues like 'technostress' to adjust to (Spagnoli *et al*., 2020). Companies are

anticipating more research in engaging remote employees, as meeting the conditions for engagement is more challenging, due to physical constraints and communication problems (Prasad, Mangipudi and Rao, 2021).

In Ireland, and most western nations, the pandemic resulted in those who could work from home, working exclusively from home. Conducting research on hybrid working or WFA would be arduous at present, as travel restrictions are still abundant, and many non-essential workspaces remain closed. A surge in investigations when restrictions end is anticipated. International studies have highlighted that research issues are likely to persist post-pandemic (Rudnicka *et al*., 2020). Longitudinal research is warranted to address the effects of intensive levels of remote working endured by the workforce for the past year, and to address the contrasting work conditions post-pandemic, when remote working becomes more voluntary (Miglioretti *et al*., 2021).

Theoretical problems in remote working suggested by Boell *et al*. (2016), like increased interruptions and social isolation, have yet to be adequately documented in pre- and post-pandemic comparisons. It is hoped comparisons will be quickly detailed when employees return to predominantly traditional settings. Employers and HR professionals have a responsibility to put remote working accommodations at the top of their agenda, as inadaptability can lead to reduced engagement. If employees do not feel that an environment of online collaboration is encouraged, engagement deteriorates, and employees will divert their interests elsewhere (Yarberry and Sims, 2021).

2.4 Engagement and Remote Working

Consensus for years has dictated that since remote working would inevitably increase, employers were concerned about how it would affect engagement. Studies indicated that even its availability improves engagement (Masuda, Holtschlag and Nicklin, 2017), but analysis is lacking into its long-term consequences. Older remote work research used social exchange theory principles to highlight remote working's impact on engagement, as employees felt obligated to increase their outputs when they were granted the privilege of remote working, while peers were confined to the workplace (Golden, 2007).

Research conducted before the pandemic, that claimed facets of remote work would increase engagement, were problematic. Increased autonomy, reduced time pressure,

and greater access to knowledge were all significantly correlated with engagement (Gerards *et al*., 2018). Though their effect was so weak, autonomy was the only facet to have a noticeable direct effect on engagement. Inhibitors like reduced feedback and support were recognised but were not examined thoroughly.

Van Steenbergen *et al*. (2018) conducted one of the first longitudinal studies on the transition of a financial services company to NWW. Employee engagement remained constant through all stages; before the transition, three months post-transition and one year after NWW (which included autonomy over working hours and location) were introduced. It was suggested that NWW only manifests in improved engagement when it is voluntarily chosen (the NWW transition was mandatory for all participants), coinciding with Golden's (2007) research involving social exchange theory. It was also posed that the relative stability of job characteristics of financial services employees working remotely, meant there was truly no cause to expect engagement levels to change (the transition had been prepared meticulously). Van Steenbergen *et al*. (2018) applied a six item UWES to measure engagement, finding very high reliability consistently, which will be alluded to in the methodology section.

Both the findings discussed above, and recommendations by Gerards *et al*. (2018) for HR practitioners to only focus on ensuring employee autonomy when implementing NWW, contrasts other studies conducted during the pandemic. Miglioretti *et al*. (2021) studied pandemic remote working and claimed it should be treated as a comprehensive model composed of agile work settings, flexible employees, and virtual leadership. Employee engagement was significantly higher for employees who experienced a comprehensive organisational approach to telework, over traditional employees and employees who reported low-quality teleworking conditions, where workers reported facing organisational obstacles (Miglioretti *et al*., 2021). The 9-item UWES they utilised to measure engagement showed very high reliability, discussed in the methodology section.

The job demands-resources model (Bakker *et al*., 2003), mentioned earlier, is vital in understanding the wealth of convoluting factors that interfere with remote working and engagement. Employees' perceptions of the changes in demands and resources can be subjective. For example, decreased communication with peers can be experienced as social isolation for some, discouraging engagement, while others

applaud the reduction in needless conversations and distractions (Nakrošienė, Bučiūnienė and Goštautaitė, 2019). The extreme differences in resources and demands of remote employees is currently impacting engagement research, with many quantitative studies finding inconsistent results. Offices are uniform and promote consensus on behaviours in work regarding work engagement, etiquette, performance, etc., which remote working cannot guarantee. Some theorists attribute failure to find consistent results to the abundance of confounding factors that cannot all possibly be accounted for (Jamal *et al*., 2021).

Current research needs to be conscious of whether results are generalisable outside pandemic conditions. Mindful researchers are determining if variables should remain consistent post-COVID, like destructive leadership's negative bearing on remote working employees' engagement (Dolce *et al*., 2020). Others examining pandemic specific traits, like pandemic health stress, may not be generalisable and could be seen as time-specific (Prasad *et al*., 2021).

Koekemoer *et al*. (2021) decided the pandemic justified conducting exploratory work into the relationship between engagement and remote working. When engagement was used as a predictor variable, it positively predicted adaptivity and proactivity in relation to remote working. Other cross-sectional studies performed during the pandemic found that flexible work arrangements had no effect on employee engagement, though, in this case, working remotely was included among other scenarios, such as compressed workweek and overtime (Fazlurrahman *et al*., 2020). This research suggested the restrictions enforced due to the pandemic have altered the mindset of the remote workforce to decelerate engagement.

2.5 Finance Sector

Boell *et al*. (2016) found that acknowledging clear distinctions in the requirements of remote workers, such as technology and intensity of work, assists in tackling the paradoxical findings of remote working literature. Therefore, it was important to home in on a particular field to add context to findings and break the chain of contradictions.

The finance sector has provided fascinating results, such as Steenbergen *et al*. (2018), discussed above. Another major longitudinal study on the implementation of NWW in a financial services company found there were no consequences on job characteristics, well-being, or performance (Nijp *et al*., 2016). They noted that the

sample reported favourable work characteristics before NWW conditions were instituted and were pleased it remained high throughout but admitted that NWW encompassed too many elements. If quality and quantity need to be monitored, so too does the introduction (whether NWW it is optional) and implementation (the structures the organisation implements to facilitate NWW). All these matters reinforce the perception that findings may not be industry-specific, but company specific (Nijp *et al*., 2016).

As uncertainty remains and employees are reluctant to return to offices full-time, employers are implementing long-term remote working arrangements. While other industries can claim that, once initial problems from adjusting to remote work were resolved, their performance was on par with, or exceeded, in-office performance, financial services reported pervasive issues. The sector had to drastically scale up collaboration platforms, reduced meeting times to 10 minutes, and increased the frequency of performance reviews to address the declining performance of employees (Conger, 2020).

The absence of a major longitudinal study on the engagement of remote working finance employees has been noted recently (Kotera and Correa Vione, 2020). The finance and insurance industries were found to have the highest share of jobs that could be performed at home during the pandemic, at 62% (Gallacher and Hossain, 2020), so further research is urgently needed. Though many techniques have assisted the finance sector to engage employees, empowering employees remains a consistently popular technique in literature (Hirzel, Leyer and Moormann, 2017).

2.6 Empowerment

One of many concepts related to employee engagement highlighted in research has been employee empowerment, with many academics adhering to the psychological empowerment definition offered by Spreitzer (1995). Spreitzer theorised that it is composed of four cognitions that together contribute to an individual's orientation to their work role; meaning – the value of a work goal judged in relation to the individual's own standards; competence – the individual's belief in their capability to perform activities; self-determination – the individual's intrinsic desire to start and complete tasks; and impact – an individual's sense that they influence outcomes at work (Spreitzer, 1995). This definition is generally accepted, and Spreitzer's

Psychological Empowerment Scale (PES) is still the most widely used empowerment measurement device (Turnipseed and Waa, 2020). However, much empowerment research also incorporates a structural approach to empowerment, independent of how employees experience their work. The structural approach examined organisational and managerial conditions, such as the processes of power and information sharing, leadership style, and access and control over resources and rewards (Coun *et al*., 2021). Structural empowerment research has been reinforced by studies showing that dissemination of power amongst employees, by giving them posts of responsibility and decision-making, boosts feelings of empowerment (Kim and Beehr, 2020).

Psychological empowerment is not considered a constant trait and is dependent on work environment and other situational factors, though empowered employees typically have a consistent empowered mindset (Turnipseed and Waa, 2020). Empowered employees usually exhibit extra-role behaviours and subrogate personal goals for the needs of their organisation, so during the global shutdown, they adapted creatively and competently to the extra demands and rapid changes (Siswanti and Muafi, 2020).

Employers who value empowered employees typically try to enrich jobs with meaning, direction, and visible results (Joo *et al*., 2019). The absence of visible results may potentially affect the impact empowered employees feel their work makes, and new research is necessary to determine if the present methods of recognising empowerment are still valid in the current climate, and how working remotely has affected empowerment in general.

2.7 Empowerment and Remote Working

Prior to COVID-19, employees associated remote working with prestige and trust from their employer, leading to feelings of empowerment, and subsequently, performance (Peters *et al*., 2016). Most theorists believes that autonomy allows remote workers extra freedom to structure work activities, with many electing to work according to their optimal productivity cycles and times (Boell *et al*., 2016). However, some believe the promise of being capable of completing work anywhere reduces empowerment, as WFA "morphed into an expectation to work everywhere, all the time." (Von Bergen and Bressler, 2019, p. 62). Empowering employees working remotely potentially poses difficulties, as the challenges of isolation and

communication may inhibit the receiving and interpretation of vital feedback, which has been shown to ultimately reduce performance (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020).

Interestingly, empowerment has not been sufficiently examined in remote working. Though literature on COVID-19 era empowerment is scarce, the pandemic appears to have improved employees' feelings of empowerment (Yarberry and Sims, 2021). According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1969), employees' feelings of self-efficacy improve when they are forced to overcome challenges. Employees new to remote working adapted to radical work-life changes. Their feelings of empowerment consequently improved as they have expanded their skillset (Yarberry and Sims, 2021). These findings also suggest positive consequences on employee empowerment from employees learning to self-discipline and motivate themselves when remote working.

Remote working demands that power dynamics shift from direct supervision and top-down structures to more subtle forms of management (Peters *et al*., 2014). Managers can no longer demand performance, engagement or monitor progress through line-of-sight. The manager's role has evolved to empowerment and trusting employees' self-directness. Pandemic literature centres around the difficulties managers have in relinquishing power, citing security concerns around granting employees too much access to data (Malecki, 2020), and difficulty adjusting to ever-changing working conditions (Crawford and Butler-Henderson, 2021). The distance and decreased communication with employees resulted in managers being incapable of micromanaging and direct governance. In fact, empowering employees became a necessary and involuntary means of maintaining organisational performance (Hejase, 2020). Managers do not cede control easily (Maynard, Gilson, and Mathieu, 2012) and many are expected to attempt re-establishing old ways of working by reclaiming their surrendered power when the pandemic ends (Parker, Knight, and Keller, 2020).

Coun *et al*. (2021) found that workplace flexibility had a significant positive relationship with psychological empowerment. However, in their study, remote working was only one of many options encompassed in workplace flexibility, the diverse methods employees could select to complete work. Naturally, there is a need for more research into empowering employees across industries new to remote work.

2.8 Empowerment and Engagement

While some research has focused on the direct association between empowerment and engagement, many prevalent examinations have found that empowerment can indirectly increase engagement too. Mediating concepts tend to be utilised in research, such as job insecurity (Stander and Rothmann, 2010), psychological contract (Sandhya and Sulphey, 2020) and leadership (Kim and Beehr, 2020). Empowering leadership predicted subordinates' self-determination and needs satisfaction which, in turn, predicted subordinate work engagement. This reinforces the powerful influence of leadership on feelings of empowerment, mentioned above.

While most studies incessantly detect significant relationships between empowerment and engagement, few have attempted to address the issues that have arisen in their measures. The relationship between the four components of the most prevalent empowerment measure, the PES, and the three components of the UWES have not been adequately scrutinized. Many studies utilising these scales designate empowerment and engagement as solitary constructs. When Jose and Mampilly (2014) conducted a study using both scales, self-determination showed no predictive power over engagement. Intriguingly, when self-determination was removed, the remaining model (meaning, competence, and impact) predicted 72% of the variance of employee engagement. Subsequent research has not addressed this shortfall and continued to implement these measures. Years of studies may have involved three predictive components of the PES successfully compensating for self-determination.

Stander and Rothmann (2010) are responsible for the most cited work on employee empowerment and engagement (on Google Scholar). They highlighted significant relationships between all four components of empowerment and engagement, but self-determination was the only component to report a weak effect (meaning, competence and impact had moderate effect sizes). This milestone study also suggested that meaning overlaps with an item on the UWES. No consequent research has raised the alarm for an artificially inflated relationship between empowerment and engagement.

Employee empowerment and its four components have all had significant relationships with engagement, historically, though some discrepancies have appeared. Impact and self-determination have both had their relationship with engagement questioned, and further study is warranted to examine the connection

between empowerment and engagement's components (Amor *et al*., 2021). Research has yet to establish whether the correlation between these two constructs is affected by pre- or post-pandemic remote working conditions.

Chapter 3: Research Question

Employers anxiously await research informing them how to engage their remote working employees. The drought of remote working engagement literature is exacerbated by the hindrances researchers are experiencing in research design and sample recruitment (Torrentira Jr, 2020). Research examining finance sector employees working remotely is crucial, as they will likely continue remote work in some capacity in future, though it is hoped the additional pandemic conditions will end.

The relationship between employee empowerment and work engagement has not been verified in pandemic remote working. Do finance sector employees who feel more empowered have greater feelings of work engagement when remote working during pandemic circumstances? The PES (Spreitzer, 1995) and UWES (Schaufeli *et al*., 2002) will facilitate answering this question, as quantitative means are required to accurately measure both employee empowerment and engagement.

Employees who report higher empowerment consistently report higher feelings of engagement. Consequently, it is hypothesised that finance employees with greater feelings of empowerment will also report higher levels of engagement, like in similar studies (Joo *et al*., 2019), despite the challenges of pandemic remote working. This investigation hopes to detect a significant positive correlation between employee empowerment and engagement. As previous research has conceptualised empowerment and engagement as the sums of various components, it is hypothesised both components should be related with each other. Each component of empowerment should have a relationship with engagement, and empowerment should be tied to each component of engagement. Finally, components are hypothesised to demonstrate significant relationships with other components.

The second research question is ‘are the current measures of engagement and empowerment appropriate following the introduction of pandemic remote working?’ No empowerment or engagement research instruments have been developed to incorporate remote working factors. This question relates to whether the current empowerment and engagement measures need to be revised. The PES and UWES-17 were selected as the most appropriate measures. Despite their pre-COVID-19

popularity, their reliability and validity has yet to be sufficiently scrutinised in the current climate.

As multiple UWES models are available, the internal consistency of the 9 and 17 item UWES and the PES need to be examined, to determine their suitability for pandemic remote workers. As theorists have not reported any major concerns in applying the PES (Vatharkar, 2021) or UWES measures (Miglioretti *et al*., 2021) to remote working employees in the pandemic, it is hypothesised that both reliability and validity will be satisfactory.

Principal component analysis (PCA) facilitated validity's assessment, and consistency analysis will be used to test reliability. Former research highlighted concerns about an overlap between items on the PES and UWES (Stander and Rothmann, 2010) over the similar wording of the first dedication item and second meaning item (See Appendices 1 and 2). These concerns will finally be addressed. As no research has highlighted issues over these 2 items, it is hypothesised there will be no evidence of an artificially inflated relationship.

The phrasing of items will be scrutinised on the PES and UWES for problems exclusive to pandemic remote work. Some items include terms like "at my work" and "at my job", which may be interpreted as referring to a physical place of work. Participants may have confusion over these items and results may deviate from the rest of the scales. However, as mentioned above, no issues have been emphasised in literature, so it is hypothesised remote workers should report no difficulties with such phrases.

Any recommendations for revisions will subsequently be made if necessary. It is hoped this exploration will contribute substantial findings to the research field. This study may offer theorists and HR practitioners some guidance in how empowerment and engagement are beneficial, interdependent, and vital to the success of remote employees. The research design and methodology should also function as a guide to making extra accommodations when conducting research during a pandemic. These processes and modifications may not be necessary post-COVID-19. Just as previous research in employee engagement, employee empowerment and remote working may not be directly applicable to the contextual challenges enforced by the pandemic, any findings from studies during this period may not be as relevant post-pandemic.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The reality of this research is that the large-scale introduction of remote working in the pandemic may negatively influence its reputation. Its implementation was not unanimously welcomed by employees and managers, as countless mediating factors affected their subjective experience of the first year of remote work. For example, employees enduring distractions and difficult home lives may yearn for office environments, while others are content with no commutes and being closer to their families, and never want to return to the office (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020**)**.

Remote working research is still devoid of a popularised scale/measure. The variety of untraditional working scenarios and even names (remote working, work from home, telecommuting) are constantly expanding, preventing 50 years of research from culminating in a generalised model. Key mediating variables would need to be addressed, including the influence of superiors, peers, the organisation, living conditions, access to internet/resources, and countless others.

Remote work has yet to be accurately quantified. Attempts have been made, e.g., Grant *et al*. (2019), but due to critical omissions, such as failure to measure time spent remote working or freedom to choose working hours, no measure has prevailed. Since new working scenarios are being introduced rapidly, such as activity-based working (Engelen *et al*., 2019), it is unlikely a new measurement of remote working would be embraced effectively at present.

4.2 Philosophical Assumptions

From an ontological perspective, the extra conditions imposed by the pandemic are very different to remote working research conducted pre-COVID-19. This makes it harder to guarantee assertions from current remote working research will apply post-pandemic. This methodology is designed to address a previously answered research question ("does empowerment promote engagement?") with a key condition no previous research could implement ("in pandemic remote working conditions"). This crucial element may result in contrasting findings to previous studies. If differing results are detected in a relationship that has been consistent throughout years of engagement literature (Stander and Rothmann, 2010), then there may be a need to

acknowledge that social research conducted in a pandemic is subjective to its time/reality.

The inconsistencies with remote working research prior to the pandemic are fated to be exacerbated, unless contemporary studies acknowledge that that they cannot adhere to the same values earlier theorists discussed (Jamal *et al*., 2021). A remote working model that will outlast the pandemic cannot be composed at present, as extra mediating factors like disease anxiety and extent of government restrictions weigh heavily on the remote working experience (Adhitama and Riyanto, 2020). The involuntary nature of present remote working means findings may not be generalisable, and research will be irreproducible post-COVID-19. Showing due caution to subjectivities of this period, and how they may not be auditable in future, makes this methodology post-positivist (O'Leary, 2009). This research will give future scientists insights into the applicability of research, conducted during this period, to future remote working studies.

As empowerment and engagement have historically had a robust relationship (Jose and Mampilly, 2014), researchers traditionally take a positivist approach to analysing both constructs. This research does not intend to account for all the confounding variables detected by literature (Kim and Beehr, 2020; Sandhya and Sulphey, 2020), but instead plans to address the continued presence of quantitative research in a time of great change and uncertainty. While academics continue to implement scales on empowerment and engagement, which were not designed for remote working populations, the suitability of these tests should be scrutinized. To establish whether using these deductive methods are justified, this study must replicate these methodologies and analyse them for pandemic-specific faults. Should fatal shortcomings be detected, it would substantiate a potential shift to interpretivist research.

4.3 Design

To answer the primary research question, this study attempted to quantify empowerment and engagement. In doing so, it would allow for the visualisation of these constructs and their analysis. A variety of approaches to conducting research were available. An experimental method would have allowed for the consequences of remote working to be analysed across time, while providing greater control and data on empowerment, engagement, and remote working. The issues of remote working

samples (discussed below) and inability to influence empowerment (the independent variable) led to the logical method of retrieving data being a non-experimental methodology (Khaldi, 2017).

The primary means of qualitative data collection, including focus groups and interviews were made substantially more difficult with ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. The issues experienced by exploratory and experimental researchers, conducting study during the pandemic, were incorporated into the decision to adopt a quantitative research design (Torrentira Jr, 2020). Fortunately, correlational research could still be conducted.

The overall design of the study is to examine a methodology that previous engagement researchers have had great success with (Jose and Mampilly, 2014). By implementing it in unfamiliar, remote working conditions, this may demonstrate a contextual nature to engagement research. It was necessary to replicate their correlational research designs to achieve this. Non-experimental quantitative research relies considerably on questionnaires to provide cross-sectional data (Khaldi, 2017).

The experiences of remote working employees in specific pandemic conditions may have justified the decision to conduct exploratory research. However, this quantitative research design allowed not just the research question to be addressed, but also the secondary questions, which relate to the composition of popular empowerment and engagement measures. Even employees who were familiar with working remotely were now exposed to new pandemic conditions that involved different experiences, primarily difficulties, they would not have experienced before. Should the experiment fail to find consistent findings with previous studies, theorists may attribute this to pandemic-specific conditions.

4.4 Research Instrument

To address the research question, employee empowerment and engagement needed to be quantified for further analysis. Employee empowerment would need to be measured as the predictor variable. No exclusive "employee empowerment" measures exist, and alternative empowerment measures were appraised. The Conditions for Work Effectiveness Questionnaire II which measures structural empowerment (Laschinger *et al*., 2001) and organisational empowerment scale (Matthews, Diaz, and Cole, 2003) were considered. However, the mandatory dissemination of power and information to

employees would inevitably inflate scores on organisational or structural empowerment. Items on these scales devoted to access to information and resources may come back higher for employees who have authorised access to organisational data on their personal computers (Laschinger *et al*., 2001). Scales examining empowerment at a structural level emphasise empowerment as a matter of access; access to support, information, opportunities, and resources, but not how employees interpret these psychologically (Laschinger *et al*., 2001). It was imperative to gauge how employees reacted to the enormous changes to the nature of work.

The PES (Spreitzer, 1995) was selected as the components allowed for empowerment to be subject to interpretation by the employee. The success of the PES would also facilitate greater comparisons with other studies. The PES is comprised of 4 components. Meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact are all allocated 3 items, with empowerment as the sum of all 4 components. PCA and the reliability of other research were utilised to determine if the PES was suitable for administration without alteration. As other researchers found high reliability and validity, no modifications were made (Vatharkar, 2021).

Work engagement would also need to be measured as the dependent variable. Engagement has many measures, but Schaufeli *et al*. (2002) developed the most heavily implemented engagement scale, the UWES. Khodakarami, Dirani and Rezaei (2018) conducted an evaluation of each of the engagement scales and concluded that no one measure was best, and researchers should decide based on their criteria. This study utilised the UWES as it facilitated addressing the primary research question, and by examining the most popular engagement scale, answered the secondary question regarding the appropriateness of current measures.

Though originally designed with 22 items, versions over the years have been implemented with as low as 3. However, the 3 item UWES allocates only 1 item to vigour, absorption and dedication which would not allow for Cronbach's alpha to be calculated and data would be unreliable. The 17-item measure remains the most popular to date. The UWES-17 is comprised of 3 dimensions; vigour has 6 items, dedication has 6 items, and absorption includes 5 items. Work engagement is comprised of all three dimensions.

No studies have adequately discussed the possible issues of implementing the UWES on a remote working sample as it was not designed for this purpose. After conducting PCA, items including phrases like “at my job” and “at my work” were deemed potentially problematic, as participants may still assume this refers to their traditional workplace. As other research (Miglioretti *et al*., 2021; Van Steenbergen *et al*., 2018) on remote working utilising the UWES had satisfactory reliability and validity, the UWES was administered without any alterations. This allowed for the second research question on reliability/validity to be resolved.

4.5 Population

The target population of this study were full time employees in the financial sector, working remotely during the pandemic. Though remote working existed prior to the pandemic, the government mandated restrictions drastically increased the population working at home. After examining research stating financial sector employees were the most likely to continue remote working in some capacity in future (Gallacher and Hossain, 2020), they were the ideal population for study. Seeking WFH participants exclusively was considered, but remote working was chosen as employees would likely be met with analogous obstacles and benefits.

Participants were asked to confirm that they had spent the majority (> 6 months) of the previous year working remotely. An entire year of remote work was not demanded for participation, as many organisations reopened their buildings temporarily as countries progressed through various stages of increasing and decreasing restrictions. ‘Greater than 6 months’ of remote working was deemed satisfactory time to claim it was an employee’s primary method of work.

4.6 Sampling

In-person administration of questionnaires were unviable due to the presence of COVID-19 restrictions. Online questionnaire administration was deemed a more practical administration means than postal questionnaires. Postal research would have involved increased costs and finance sector organisations will no longer disclose the addresses of employees, making random or snowball sampling unattainable. An online questionnaire was generated using Qualtrics software which allowed for ease of administration to the population via website link.

Various methods of achieving random sampling to increase reliability were considered. Random sampling was made significantly more difficult considering the travel restrictions emplaced and the difficulty recruiting those working remotely, who naturally spend less time outside their home and have reduced contact with others.

The research was conducted with snowball sampling. Participants in finance sector roles were contacted on social media (LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit) and asked to participate. Participants were also asked to assist in snowball sampling by forwarding the questionnaire to peers. By using snowball sampling the study was exposed to self-selection bias from both researcher and direct recruits. Non-response rate could not be ascertained. This posed threats to the generalisability of the research as participants do not recruit randomly, tending to choose subjects of the same geographical area, ethnic and cultural background (Johnston and Sabin, 2010).

The population of remote working finance sector employees is unclear. In Q1 2021, an estimated 120,500 people worked in finance, insurance and real estate combined, and no major census of how many, or to what extent, people are remote working has been completed (Central Statistics Office, 2021). As most finance sector employees were working remotely, with a population ranging from 10,000 to 100,000, a sample of 264 was aspired towards, to reduce margin of error to an appropriate 5% (Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins, 2001).

4.7 Data Collection / Handling / Analysis

After participants confirmed they met the parameters of the experiment, demographic data was collected from participants on age category (18-24/25-34/35-44/45-54/55-64/65+) and gender. Participant data was gathered and stored on the Qualtrics website. Upon closure, the questionnaire data was downloaded to a USB stick, to be stored before its destruction after 5 years.

Each item for empowerment was presented on the questionnaire with a corresponding Likert scale. 7 categories of responses were selected, according to Spreitzer's original work (1995). 12 statements were presented to participants who would select the most appropriate response from the following list: Strongly disagree; disagree; somewhat disagree; neither agree nor disagree; somewhat agree; agree; strongly agree.

Responses for the 17 items of engagement were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale based on its original design. The responses were presented in order of frequency, from rarest to most frequent, as such: Never; a few times a year or less; once a month; a few times a month; once a week; a few times a week; every day (Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova, 2006).

Evenly distributed intervals between responses would have allowed for parametric tests to be conducted on interval data. However, no labelling system allowed for intervals to be equidistant. Maintaining the original design of the questionnaires avoided measurement errors associated with wording, and potential bias in researcher implemented alterations.

Participant data was examined for response times and completion levels. Those with inappropriately low response times and incompletion were omitted from further analysis. As the data was ordinal, it did not meet normality of distribution requirements. The remaining participant data was then entered into SPSS for analysis. The data was then assigned to the appropriate variable type. Data was not transformed as all statements were positively phrased. Appropriate non-parametric tests were then performed. To solve the research question, SPSS allowed for Spearman tests, which do not assume normality, to detect a correlation between empowerment and engagement.

Empowerment data was entered as the sum of its 4 components (impact, competence self-determination, and meaning), allocated 3 items each. Engagement was composed as the sum of vigour, absorption, and dedication. Spearman tests were conducted on empowerment and engagement results to determine the primary hypothesis. Spearman tests were then performed on components of empowerment and work engagement, to detect which facets had the strongest relationships, solving secondary research questions.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

The purpose of the research was presented in a brief statement to participants to explain their role and ensure they could give informed consent. Contact information was given if participants needed questions answered before contributing. Because data was anonymous, prior to submitting any data, participants were informed they could not access their data under GDPR. Participants were advised their participation was

voluntary and consent was withdrawable at any time, by discontinuing, prior to submitting data.

Candidates were screened prior to their submission of data to the experiment by enforcing minimum requirements in the online questionnaire. Participants were forced to confirm they met criteria before supplying their data to the study, otherwise they could not activate the link to submit data. Participants were asked to confirm they were over 18 years old to avoid the consensual issues and ethical considerations of examining minors. Age was collected as a categorical variable to reduce the risk of participants being identifiable, ensuring anonymity.

The threat of disease to participants meant a research design, involving in-person interviews, was unethical. Online data collection reduced risk of COVID-19 infection. After carefully considering the nature of the research, the questionnaires and the subjects, the experiment was conducted, after identifying no potential source of harm to participants.

4.9. Limitations

This methodology suffers from a variety of limitations. Engagement questionnaires are largely ignored, even when mandatory. Finance sector employees regularly encounter phishing emails attempting to breach cybersecurity (Oliveira *et al*., 2017). Recruiting by directly contacting institutions was not deemed to be beneficial as employees show unfamiliar websites and emails caution. Incentives could not be used to increase response rates. The promise of potential rewards would increase suspicions around the online questionnaire link (Oliveira *et al*., 2017). It would also demand gathering more identifiable information from respondents. Rewards also encourage recruits to complete questionnaires multiple times to multiply returns (Wright, 2005).

Data protection rules prevented access to contact information or mailing lists and prevented recruits from disclosing the details of their peers. No control over the snowball recruitment method was retained after the first stage, as recruits sent the questionnaire link to colleagues at their discretion.

If participants did not meet the criteria, they should be unable to continue submitting data for analysis. As data is self-reported, information could not be verified. This research may also be hindered by the nature of participants likely to respond to online

questionnaires, particularly since engagement was being examined. There is a systemic bias in the voluntary nature of online questionnaires that facilitates potential participants choosing whether to partake or ignore invitations (Wright, 2005).

The isolated nature of remote workers hampered participant recruitment. Government imposed restrictions prevented employees from being pooled in a single location, reducing accessibility, prompting the study to be designed solely using online means. The reliance on participants having internet access and moderate English literacy may have unknowingly excluded participants with infrastructural issues or literacy challenges, who wished to submit data or feedback but could not. In attempting to minimise data collected from respondents, this may have prevented potential participants from conveying their difficulties in completing the questionnaire. Just as digital technology has facilitated remote working, modern social research is heavily impacted by its presence, or worryingly, its absence (Traxler and Smith, 2020).

The context of this research occurring in a pandemic is evident in the participation criteria. Remote working was included as a constant, due to a WFH mandate and the absence of a remote working scale, noted in the literature review. Academics may have frustrations replicating this research, as future researchers may attempt recording remote work to the day, even hour, but cannot account for pandemic restrictions. These restrictions discouraged the development of a scale, without the likelihood of a diversified remote working sample.

Longitudinal research could not be conducted due to the brevity of the dissertation period. Sufficient time would be needed to test measures for reliability and validity. As the study is cross-sectional, tests could only determine if empowerment and engagement were related, while longitudinal research could examine power/effect size.

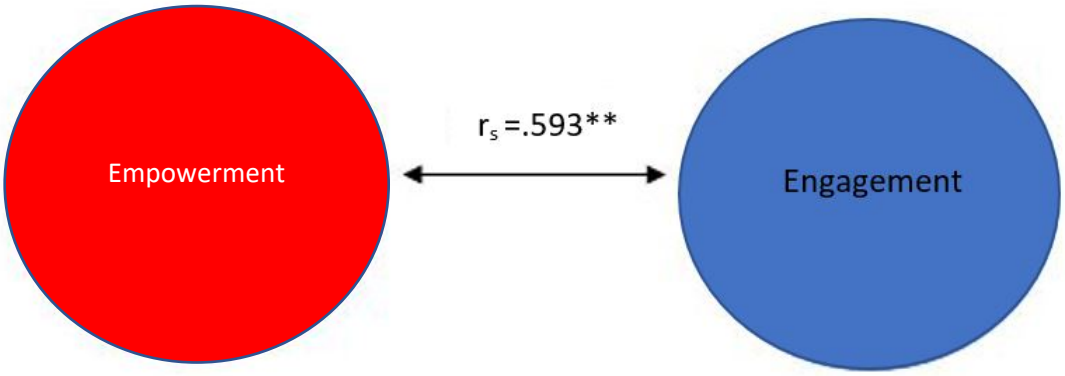
Chapter 5: Analysis and Findings

Standard response time was between 2-4 minutes. After screening, data from 2 respondents who completed the survey in under 2 minutes were removed from further analysis, leaving 70 compatible responses. The remaining participants (n=70) were composed of 32 males, 37 females, and 1 non-binary. 2 participants were aged 18-24, 59 were in the 25-34 category, 6 were in the 35-44 category and 3 in the 45-54 age range.

The data was explored using SPSS (V.27). Skewness and kurtosis figures for meaning, competence, self-determination and impact were outside acceptable ranges. The data was transformed to try achieving normal distribution. When data was logged to a base 10, all 4 components were still outside acceptable ranges, so the data did not meet assumptions for parametric analysis.

An ordinal regression was generated with SPSS. Upon inspection, analyses failed the test for goodness of fit ($p < 0.001$), indicating data violated parametric assumptions for normal distribution. Spearman correlation analyses were generated with SPSS and strength was categorised by according to criteria by Schober, Boer, and Schwarte (2018). Each Spearman correlation reported a positive relationship (between 0 and 1), no negative relationships were detected.

Figure 1. Correlation between empowerment and engagement



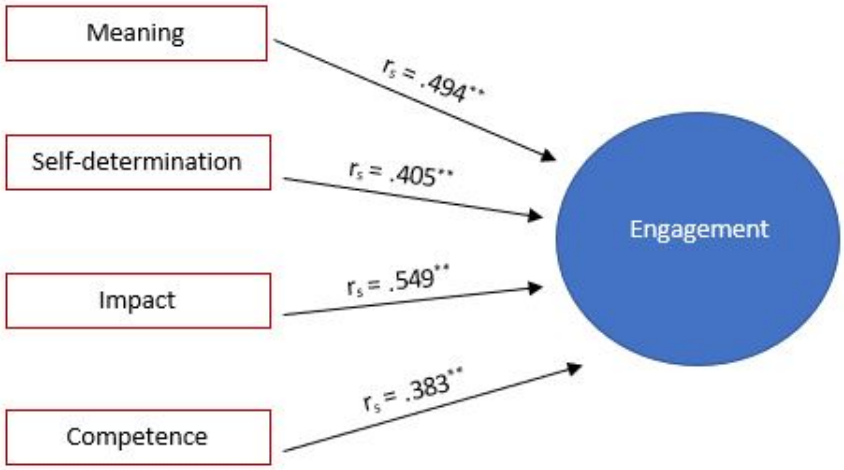
****p < .001**

Hypothesis 1: Empowerment will have a significant positive relationship with engagement

To test Hypothesis 1, a spearman correlation was generated between the empowerment and engagement variables. Empowerment reported a positive relationship with engagement $r_s(70) = .593$, $p < .001$ (See Appendix 3). Experiencing higher levels of empowerment was associated with higher levels of work engagement. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. The correlation had moderate strength, despite not accounting for mediating variables discussed in other literature **(**Kim and Beehr, 2020; Sandhya and Sulphey, 2020; Stander and Rothmann, 2010**)**. This provides no cause to believe pandemic remote working has fundamentally distorted the relationship between employee empowerment and work engagement. This suggests researchers can apply, with due caution, previous empowerment, and engagement research in contemporary discussions regarding pandemic remote working.

Empowerment figures appear positive (M = 5.381 ± 0.828) indicating most participants averaged a response between 'Slightly agree' and 'Agree'. Engagement also appears positive (M = 5.288 ± 0.967), as the most prevalent response was between 'once a week' and 'a few times a week'. Since the points on the scale were not equidistant, making generalisations from these figures is ill-advised without normal distribution (Sullivan and Artino Jr, 2013).

Figure 2. Correlations between 4 components of empowerment and engagement



****p < 0.01**

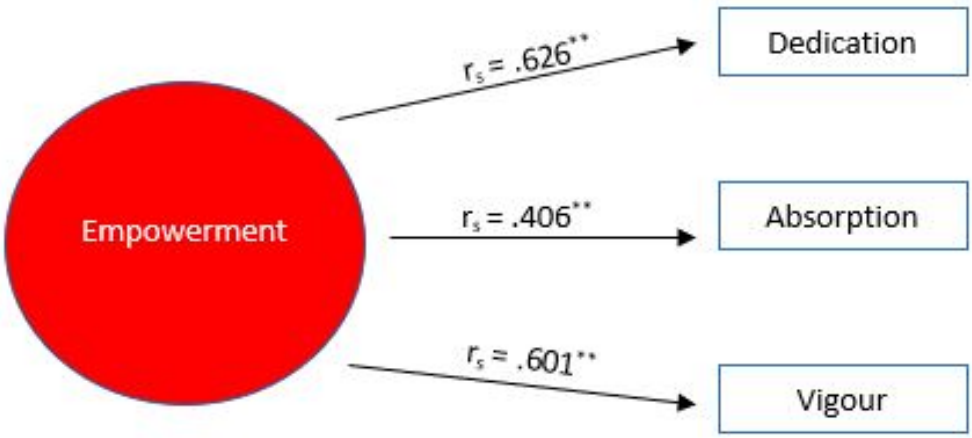
Hypothesis 1A: All 4 components of empowerment will be positively associated with engagement.

The hypothesis was tested with Spearman correlations. Correlations ranged from weak to moderate. Impact reported the strongest correlation ($r_s(70) = .549$, $p < .001$), while competence reported the weakest ($r_s(70) = .383$, $p = .001$) (See Appendix 4). As all 4 components reported significant positive relationships, the hypothesis was supported.

This demonstrates that each component of empowerment contributes to work engagement. The presence of pandemic remote working has not inhibited any component of empowerment's capacity to improve engagement. Notably, impact had the strongest correlation, despite concerns that the physical distance from work may inhibit these feelings in remote workers. Impact had the lowest mean score out of all components examined ($M = 4.662 \pm 1.433$). It is unclear how the pandemic has affected how remote working employees personally experience feelings of impact from their work. This figure suggests those who easily derive feelings of impact may be especially prone to feelings of engagement. Competence had the highest average score of all components ($M = 5.919 \pm 0.714$). The introduction of pandemic remote working may have improved feelings of competence in employees, according to Gerards *et al*. (2018). This figure, though significant, hints competence may simply be a base requirement for engagement, with weightier contributions coming from its

peers. Overall, there is no basis to contest empowerment as a driver for engagement, as each component shares responsbility for increasing feelings for work engagement.

Figure 3. Correlation between empowerment and 3 components of engagement



****p < .001**

Hypothesis 1B: Empowerment will be positively associated with all 3 components of engagement.

Empowerment was positively correlated with all three facets of engagement, supporting the hypothesis. Absorption produced the weakest relationship though it was still moderate ($r_s(70) = .406$, $p < .001$). Empowerment had noticeably stronger correlations with vigour ($r_s(70) = .601$, $p < .001$) and dedication ($r_s(70) = .626$, $p < .001$) (See Appendix 5).

The strength of the correlation between empowerment and dedication is not surprising, considering the research highlighting empowerment as central to conceptually linked areas, like commitment and retention (Sergio and Rylova, 2018). Vigour encompasses not just energy at work, but also the energy to remain resilient (Yang *et al*., 2017). this strong correlation is unsurprising as the success of pandemic remote working has been linked to the endurance of trusted, empowered employees (Yarberry and Sims, 2021).

To identify why the absorption correlation was weaker than its counterparts, items were removed to maximise results. Removing Absorption1 and Absorption6 resulted in the strongest correlation, which was still weak ($r_s(70) = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$). Absorption

may be less related to empowerment in pandemic remote workers. Employees who feel empowered may conduct more task-oriented work, distancing themselves from work after task completion (Von Bergen and Bressler, 2019). This research did not discern whether participants were in a management role, and they may have composed a significant cohort of responses. If manager roles have changed to being less hands-on, they may be able to easily dissociate themselves from work (Crawford and Butler-Henderson, 2021).

Figure 4. Correlations between 4 empowerment components and 3 engagement components

	Spearman Correlations	Meaning	Competence	Impact	Self-determination	Absorption	Vigour	Dedication
Meaning	Correlation Coefficient	**1.000**	.395**	.432**	.484**	.341	.437**	.584**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.000	.000	.004	.000	.000
Competence	Correlation Coefficient	.395**	**1.000**	.312	.418**	.262	.389**	.385**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.009	.000	.028	.001	.001
Impact	Correlation Coefficient	.432**	.312	**1.000**	.550**	.405**	.566**	.520**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.009		.000	.001	.000	.000
Self-determination	Correlation Coefficient	.484**	.418**	.550**	**1.000**	.260	.452**	.408**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.030	.000	.000
Absorption	Correlation Coefficient	.341	.262	.405**	.260	**1.000**	.681**	.563**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.028	.001	.030		.000	.000
Vigour	Correlation Coefficient	.437**	.389**	.566**	.452**	.681**	**1.000**	.726**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000	.000	.000		.000
Dedication	Correlation Coefficient	.584**	.385**	.520**	.408**	.563**	.726**	**1.000**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000	.000	.000	.000	

****Significant at p < 0.0024 level**

Hypothesis 1C: Components of empowerment will report significant positive relationships with components of work engagement.

Jose and Mampilly (2014) previously used a backwards stepwise regression to measure how much of the variance each empowerment component accounted for in engagement. As the data did not meet the assumptions of normal distribution, the

relationships were examined with non-parametric correlation tests. As relationships were examined without a specific hypothesis, a Bonferroni correction was used. Alpha values were divided by the number of tests conducted (0.05/21 = 0.0024).

Spearman correlation tests yielded interesting results. Impact was the only empowerment component to report a significant relationship with absorption ($r_s(70)$ = .405, p = .001) (See Appendix 6). Significant relationships were detected between meaning, impact, self-determination and competence and engagement's dedication and vigour. This result refutes the hypothesis, indicating absorption may need to be examined with more extensive work for its relationship with dimensions of empowerment. Remarkably, in each case of a non-significant result, the adjusted alpha level was responsible for the failure, as each result was below p = .05.

These findings contradict Albrecht and Andreetta (2011), who claimed there was little evidence of any relationship between impact and engagement, while they were satisfied with the other components' relationships. It is worth noting that impact had the lowest mean and highest standard deviation (M = 4.662 ± 1.433). Feelings of impact may be more volatile due to the pandemic, as Jose and Mampilly (2014) reported noticeably lower standard deviations (M = 3.44 ± 0.843).

The inability of meaning, competence, and self-determination to report significant relationships with absorption, may suggest that absorption be examined in finance sector remote employees specifically. Absorption includes items on feelings of inability to detach oneself from their work and working intensely. These may be viewed as negative traits in an industry that is regularly subjected to engagement research. Workaholism and burnout have major historical ties to engagement, and informed employees may try to avoid exhibiting such traits. Competent employees, familiar with burnout, could be in an empowered position to avoid excessive work absorption, explaining competence and self-determination's lack of significance. The failure to link meaning with absorption is surprising, as it was the greatest predictor of engagement in Stander and Rothmann's study (2010). Their experiment only examined engagement as an amalgamated construct and avoided reporting correlations between meaning and engagement's components.

Figure 5. Descriptive statistics

Scale	Variable (No. of items)	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Confidence Interval (Lower)	Confidence Interval (Upper)	Internal Validity
PES	Meaning (3)	5.481	1.167	5.667	5.203	5.759	.890
	Competence (3)	5.19	.714	6	5.749	6.089	.711
	Impact (3)	4.662	1.433	5	4.320	5.004	.892
	Self-determination (3)	5.462	1.104	5.667	5.199	5.725	.822
	Empowerment (12)	5.381	.828	5.542	5.183	5.579	.872
UWES-17	Absorption (6)	5.324	1.087	5.667	5.065	5.583	.812
	Vigour (6)	5.224	1.030	5.5	4.978	5.469	.831
	Dedication (5)	5.317	1.098	5.6	5.055	5.579	.841
	Engagement (17)	5.288	.967	5.639	5.058	5.519	.923
UWES-9	Absorption (3)	5.271	1.154	5.667	4.996	5.547	.630
	Vigour (3)	4.986	1.303	5.333	4.675	5.297	.860
	Dedication (3)	5.214	1.275	5.667	4.910	5.518	.860
	Engagement (9)	5.157	1.136	5.5	4.886	5.428	.913

Hypothesis 2: the internal consistency of the PES, UWES-17 and UWES-9 will be satisfactory.

The internal consistency of the PES and the UWES were examined with Cronbach's Alpha. Empowerment's subscales consisted of 4 items which each reported acceptable Alpha figures: meaning (α= .892), impact (α= .890), self-determination (α= .822) and competence (α= .711) (See Figure 5). The combined subscales in empowerment conveyed a high internal consistency (12 items: α= .892).

Each UWES-17 component reported formidable Alpha figures: dedication (5 items; α= .841), vigour (6 items; α= .831) and absorption (6 items; α= .812). The Alpha coefficient for the UWES-17 was extremely powerful (17 items: α= .923).

The UWES 9 and its 3 subscales were also examined. Vigour (3 items) and dedication (3 items) each reported a good Alpha level of .860, but absorption (3 items) had a less than satisfactory level (α=.630). Despite the 9-item UWES reporting an impressive

reliability figure (α= .913), the low absorption figure contests the UWES-9's practicability for remote working populations. The moderate alpha value for absorption in the UWES-17, and unacceptably low value in the UWES-9 imply that the remaining three items compensate for the 3 items used in the UWES-9. The internal consistency of the remaining absorption items supports this (α=.706).

The remarkable internal consistency of each questionnaire challenges the notion that they are not suitable for remote working populations. Despite not being designed with remote work in mind, the reliability of the PES and UWES-17 has stayed consistent with prior research. Spearman tests on components of each scale showed that all 3 components of the UWES-17 had significant relationships with each other. This adheres to previous research that considers all 3 as essential to work engagement. Researchers tend to conceptualise engagement as either a unitary construct or as the sum of three components. Few have attempted to remove a component (Borah and Barua, 2018), though this research demonstrates that two components are unlikely to embody engagement in the absence of a third.

The PES showed one inconsistency, from spearman correlation analyses, in its failure to detect a significant relationship between competence and impact ($r_s(70) = .312$, $p = .009$). In Spreitzer's original work (1995), the Pearson correlation between competence and impact was weak ($r_p = .32$, $p < .05$). However, modern teleworking research claimed the shift to NWW should naturally improve employees' confidence (Coun *et al*., 2021). Competence scores from this sample are higher than in Spreitzer's original empowerment experiment (1995), but impact has decreased. This suggests employees have grown in self-reported competence, but the distance from their workplaces and peers may be inhibiting their ability to experience the fruits of their labour. However, the significant correlations with other components of empowerment would challenge this, warranting further examination.

Hypothesis 2A: the validity of the PES and UWES will be satisfactory for application to pandemic remote workers.

This hypothesis is tested under 2 dimensions, both related to phrasing. The first is the potentially inflated relationship between the Dedication1 item on the UWES and the Meaning2 item on the PES (See Appendices 1 and 2). Both items refer to finding

meaning in work. It was hypothesised that an excessively strong relationship would not be detected.

The hypothesis was tested with Spearman correlations. Meaning2 reported a strong relationship with Dedication1, $r_s(70) = .643$, $p < .001$ (See Appendix 7). This figure is higher than the correlation between meaning (3 items) and dedication (3 items), $r_s(70) = .584$, $p < .001$. Meaning and dedication shared the strongest construct relationship across both measures. When both Meaning2 and Dedication1 were removed, the correlation decreased to $r_s(70) = .436$, $p < .001$ (See Appendix 8). The relationship between the 2 items was stronger, but not excessively so, leaving the issue somewhat unresolved. Without alarmingly high correlations, there is little justification for alleging components of empowerment and engagement have artificially inflated relationships, so the hypothesis was not supported.

The second dimension is the potential reference to a physical location of work on the UWES. Vigour1 and Vigour6 mention “at my work”, while Vigour2 and Vigour5 refer to “at my job”. It was hypothesised that these items would not pose problems for participants, and they would not impair the internal consistency of the UWES.

Cronbach’s alpha was used to examine the UWES before and after these 4 items were excluded. The internal consistency of the UWES including the items ($\alpha = .923$) was higher than after they were removed ($\alpha = .900$). This suggests that participants have no confusion over these items, with the four items improving the reliability of the UWES, supporting the hypothesis.

Pandemic remote workers do not have any major issues using either the PES or the UWES, as no major concerns around their reliability and validity have been highlighted. Nonetheless, this research provides some grounds for the revision of empowerment and engagement measurement techniques. However, as their status was unknown prior to the widescale introduction of mandated remote working, the relationships that failed to report significance, and the meaning/dedication issue, may have been problematic irrespective of the pandemic.

It is key to highlight some issues with these findings. The insufficient sample size increases the margin of error to a substantial level (approximately 12%). This harms the external validity of the study. Making generalisations about the remote working finance sector population would require a sizeable increase in participants, and results

from this research should be regarded with caution. Similar prudence is warranted regarding the reliance on Cronbach's alpha to accept these measures' reliability, as researchers assert it is misused (Sijtsma, 2009). Additionally, the centre of Likert scales should not be treated as a baseline level of either empowerment or engagement, and may instead represent indifference, neutrality, or the absence of each construct.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Empowerment and Engagement

Though this research examined a relationship that has been consistently studied since engagement exploration began, the new pandemic conditions presented a scenario that was never addressed before. These findings do not deviate greatly from most pre-pandemic research. Fundamentally, the positive correlation between empowerment and engagement has persevered, despite the vast changes to the nature of work due to COVID-19.

Ultimately, this research suggests that the top-down transition of power, induced by COVID-19, has resulted in psychologically empowered employees rewarding their organisations with engagement. This research did not examine the dynamic organisational and individual changes that led to this point, though it is apparent that employees have adapted well mentally. Reported levels of both constructs are even more favourable than in prior studies. Feelings of competence and self-determination are abundant, and employees can find meaning in their work, seeing their efforts have an impact on their departments. Remote working employees have proven these feelings can be harnessed into work absorption, dedication, and vigour for the benefit of their organisations. Rather than ruminate over why remote working does not offer a clean slate for empowerment and engagement, theorists can now map previous works onto this unfamiliar territory.

The impressive empowerment and engagement median scores suggest that employees would report their remote working experiences positively (See Figure 5). The strong relationship has endured major changes in technology and working circumstances, which many researchers were concerned would alter the hallmark traits of engaged employees (Borah and Barua, 2018). As technology advances and the nature of work evolves, there is a risk that current measures for empowerment and engagement will continue to be utilised, when they eventually become obsolete. For example, items related to absorption appear to place value on working excessively and work impacting personal lives, when research continues to highlight that these are tenets that companies, not employees, value (Von Bergen and Bressler, 2019).

This is the first investigation in which all the components of empowerment had significant relationships with engagement as a single construct, just as a combined empowerment had a significant relationship with engagement's three components. Most research examining both constructs tend to combine work engagement into a single construct. This is normalised due to the abundance of UWES forms continuously reporting high validity, regardless of length (Borah and Barua, 2018).

These consistent positive results may have lured theorists into complacency. Data must meet assumptions for parametric analyses. Several landmark studies conducted analysis using regressions and other parametric tests, which Likert scale data for empowerment and engagement should not have facilitated. The data in this research was rigorously tested and failed to meet normality requirements for tests conducted in other studies. These include stepwise regressions (Jose and Mampilly, 2014), hierarchical regressions (Ugwu, Onyishi, and Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2014) and multivariate analysis of variance (Stander and Rothmann, 2010).

As some theorists advocate using parametric tests on data without normal distribution (Sullivan and Artino Jr, 2013), it is possible that popular studies have been conducted with critical errors. The wording of the research question was carefully selected, assimilating this caution. In asking whether empowerment had a correlation with engagement, it prevented the embellishment of what non-parametric tests could reveal about the relationship between empowerment and engagement, and their components.

This comprehensive study addressed the lack of analyses in literature between components of empowerment and engagement. Most components had significant relationships. However, the complex relationships engagement and empowerment's components exhibited means their amalgamation into unitary constructs is opposed. Nonetheless, engagement components appear to be more interrelated than empowerment, where some components did not report significant relationships at all. The scarcity of research makes it unclear if pandemic remote working has improved or damaged these relationships. In fact, this research's cross-sectional nature cannot discern whether empowerment and engagement's relationship persevered despite, or perhaps profited from the pandemic, regrettably leaving the dearth of longitudinal research posing issues for theorists.

The cross-sectional nature of this research has shortcomings in failing to acknowledge that engagement is not constant. In contrast to Steenbergen *et al*. (2018), who believed that remote working could take over a year to affect engagement, other prominent engagement theorists believe engagement fluctuates daily (Bakker and Albrecht, 2018). Using the current means of measuring engagement is unfeasible in verifying these fluctuations. Promoting technological advances in work engagement measurement is likely the optimal method of confirming this theory. While pulse surveys and other real-time methods are implemented more regularly on employees, they collect very limited data and have low reliability (Turner, 2020). Machine learning and other capable software are likely to breach data protection guidelines and meet resistance from empowered employees and unions. Engagement research is forecast to experience clashes between researchers who welcome these new technologies, and those who advocate for already established techniques (Maltseva, 2020). This study demonstrates that empowerment is still an effective means to engage employees and warns against surveillance due to its potentially devastating effect on empowerment.

6.2 The State of Engagement

The second research question examined the ways we measure empowerment and engagement, and whether traditional measures were suitable for this population in the current climate. This uncertainty around such measures do not just affect researchers. Many organisations, frustrated with the paucity of measurement instruments for remote workers, have abandoned studying their employees and organisations until employees return to conventional workplaces (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2021).

This research measured work engagement, a feeling that can be experienced at the very top and bottom of organisations but did not discern the positions participants had in organisations. This research has not remedied the conceptualisation issues of engagement, due to the multiplicity of terms (Borah and Barua, 2018), but instead demonstrates that, regardless of position, work engagement benefits from empowerment.

Prior to this study, there was ambiguity regarding how remote working influences engagement. The overreliance on social exchange theory principles (Tate, Lartey and Randall, 2019) was ineffective when employees knew remote work was not a privilege

enjoyed by some, but mandated for everyone, though this may become relevant again post-pandemic. Pre-pandemic longitudinal research claimed engagement in remote workers should remain constant before and after WFH implementation, if job characteristics are managed (Van Steenbergen *et al*., 2018). Though job characteristics were not controlled for, the changing restrictions and uncertainty around COVID-19 would suggest job characteristics could easily change, so it is puzzling that this study's respondents reported noticeably high engagement.

Various intriguing results came from the thorough analyses of the UWES. The high reliability indicates it is not simply a repackaging of previous HR concepts, as some theorists suggested (Turner, 2020). Each component appears vital to the presence of other components, and together they are detectable in a working population the UWES was not originally designed for.

PCA may have failed to detect some fatal flaws in the UWES. If the nature of work has changed, then the responses on the UWES may be unsuitable. If the traditional workweek has become a shortened workweek or flexitime, then having no response between '2-3 times per week' and 'every day' may cause a ceiling effect. The scale was designed assuming employees work 5-day weeks. The same flaw exists for activity-based workers, who can operate in a shortened workweek (Turner, 2020).

Gerards *et al*. (2018) claimed the inability to disconnect from work can lead to decreased engagement. This involvement with work is incorporated into the UWES as an engagement benefactor, notably on Absorption6 (See Appendix 1). The high internal consistency of absorption, and the UWES in general, seems to suggest that the inability to disconnect is not an inhibitor to engagement, but promotes it instead. The failure of absorption to reach satisfactory reliability in the UWES-9 contests previous meta-analyses (Seppälä *et al*., 2009), signifying a potential shift away from its advocation in populations where remote work reigns.

The UWES-17 remains the optimal choice in detecting absorption, dedication, and vigour. The additional 8 items not included in the UWES-9 measure perseverance, resilience, and ability to work for long periods, and it is hoped this research will encourage organisations to continue seeking these traits in their employees.

6.3 Empowerment and its Measures

The most difficult decision in designing this research was the selection of psychological empowerment over structural empowerment. Structural empowerment would inevitably have changed due to mandated WFH, guaranteeing interesting results. Psychological empowerment's unphased relationship with work engagement also provides fascinating data. This study confirmed that the fears numerous researchers expressed in employees being unable to experience the impact of their labours were unjustified (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). Moreover, since it reported the strongest relationship with engagement, and was the only PES component to have significant relationships with each engagement component, finance sector organisations having major engagement issues should emphasise this relationship first and foremost.

The wealth of measures used to examine empowerment is due to no measure satisfactorily encapsulating what researchers are trying to examine. Structural empowerment neglects the psychological experiences of employees, while the PES can appear overly subjective to employees. The PES fulfilled its purpose, facilitating results which adhere to Yarberry and Sims' (2021) research claiming employees found the pandemic to be an empowering process. Social learning theory (1969) principles were also exhibited in employees who overcame challenges and learned necessary skills to embrace pandemic remote working.

While empowerment figures were exceedingly positive, there remains a risk that with decreased supervision, this is not leading to desired organisational outputs (Coun *et al*., 2021). In pandemic times, managers are facing a struggle to justify their existence, so a tug-o-war for power, over a remote working battleground, is likely to ensue over the coming months (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2020). If empowerment is sacrificed, the fruits of empowerment, like the impressive engagement recorded, and extra-role employee behaviours, also suffer (Siswanti and Muafi, 2020). Organisations are concerned about a dark side to overly empowered employees, who might not work to benefit the company, and even exhibit increased revenge or deviant behaviours (Bani-Melhem, Quratulain and Al-Hawari, 2020). Insufficient work examines the organisational/managerial experience of employee empowerment.

Because leadership affected self-determination historically, some would believe that self-determination should suffer due to the disconnection between leaders and their employees (Kim and Beehr, 2020). The impressive median figure for self-determination, and its significant relationship with engagement challenges many signature studies where correlations with engagement were not recorded (Joo *et al*., 2019; Jose and Mampilly, 2014; Stander and Rothmann, 2010). The need for employees to discipline themselves, without supervision, may have fostered self-determination, in a way that traditional work environments could never achieve. This research also contests work which claimed self-determination had little evidence of a relationship with impact (Amor *et al*., 2021), with employees reporting a substantial relationship between these components.

The aptness of the PES in answering each hypothesis, vindicates its status as the empowerment measure of choice. Nevertheless, the tests conducted on the PES justify some improvements. The high internal consistency of the PES contrasts with the generally weak, or non-existent, interrelationships of the components. Measures need to become more specific to quantify empowerment. Broad scales will inevitably become less beneficial as the nature of work continues to evolve, and researchers have a duty to identify if the current four components are the most relevant. The amalgamation of some psychological and structural empowerment scale (Laschinger *et al*., 2001) components, and the introduction of items on power employees have over working hours and location, may encapsulate more of the remote working experience. Despite these concerns, they provide no cause to discontinue encouraging employers to empower their workforce.

After 26 years of rewarding research on empowerment, it remains an area where despite its approval from the academic community, linkages to organisational change are implicit at best. This is mused in the final empowerment paper by the creator of the PES, who has not attempted modifying it since (Spreitzer and Doneson, 2005). This present work illustrates a picture of employees who have responded well to massive organisational adjustments and taken ownership of a crisis, but unfortunately, most organisations still perceive remote working as a temporary crisis response (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2021).

6.4 Remote Working

The upcoming years will be very telling for remote working research, as the mass introduction of pandemic remote working will be remembered differently by employees and organisations. The issues that arose from a lack of preparation may serve as justification for some companies to attempt to end alternative working accommodations (Aguinis, Villamor and Gabriel, 2020).

Companies that spent millions on designing innovative workspaces promoting productivity and collaboration are unlikely to consider their offices a sunk cost when they cannot impose these principles in employees' home environments (Parker, 2020). Despite this study, among others, claiming employees working remotely can feel empowered and engaged, many organisations have invested in modifying their buildings, prioritising health and safety, over remote work. These alterations involving social distancing and hygiene may be very costly for engagement, as offices no longer represent environments of knowledge sharing, and teamwork, if employees are prohibited from being in proximity to each other (Parker, 2020).

The pandemic saw employees operate from their own homes in the (physical) absence of their leaders (Kim and Beehr, 2020) and the uniformity of offices (Jamal *et al*., 2021). Though many managers believed this would lead to chaotic working conditions, the opposite appears true. Empowerment and engagement have survived the transition to pandemic remote working, although this research neglected to examine employee or organisational performance, which may have deteriorated, despite claims remote worker engagement leads to performance (Renard *et al*., 2021). The efforts by organisations to return employees to offices indicate empowerment and engagement research is one-sided towards employee benefits/issues. Consequently, there is a need to address if the benefits are mutual (Renard *et al*., 2021).

When the mandatory nature of working from home ceases, policies will be contingent on organisations. Rather than continue to allow employees to operate entirely remotely, many organisations are likely to discourage remote working despite this study's participants reporting higher empowerment and engagement over similar studies. Attempts to end remote working will negatively affect empowerment, engagement, and their relationship in remote employees post-pandemic (Peters *et al*., 2014). Crucially, organisational resistance to remote work when its compulsory nature

ends, is likely to increase hesitant sentiments in employees (Omondi and K'Obonyo, 2018). This potentially impairs the pertinence of this study to future research.

The highly engaged population in this study had a median age category of 25-34. These results are consistent with pre-COVID research where young people were more likely to avail of flexible working arrangements, who subsequently reported higher engagement (Rudolph and Baltes, 2017). The consistent higher engagement in young people should encourage HR practitioners to facilitate remote working, as these sentiments should persist post-pandemic.

The embrace or rejection of remote work means empowerment may be imperative in the battle to retain and attract employees. Remote working options will be heavily incorporated into career decisions, especially in employees who have become accustomed to feeling empowered (Coun *et al*., 2021). Notably, if organisations enforce returning to the workplace before employees feel it is safe, it is liable to have dire consequences on work engagement (Aguinis *et al*., 2020).

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

The pandemic resulted in a substantial dip in research quality, as theorists struggled to adjust to COVID-19 restrictions (Bian and Lin, 2020). Though the pandemic particularly caused qualitative works to decline (Vindrola-Padros *et al*., 2020), this study was also hampered. This threat of Covid-19 permeated the process from inception to end, as the research question, experimental design and recruitment methods all integrated extra accommodations needed for the safety of all involved. Pandemic restrictions limited the working scenarios e.g., WFA, hybrid work, etc., that organisations could implement. The awareness that finance sector employees were working almost exclusively from home helped frame the research question. This work successfully adhered to its responsibility to elaborate the extra accommodations and restrictions that pandemic researchers should consider. These should assist future researchers in acknowledging the context and philosophical positioning of contemporary research. Regulations vary by country and region, inevitably affecting the experience of researchers and remote working participants. Unfortunately, replication may become impossible post-pandemic (Bian and Lin, 2020).

Despite these issues, the research was successful in resolving the research questions. Theorists can rejoice in remote working research remaining somewhat consistent pre- and mid-pandemic, and can continue implementing strategies for optimising remote work, that worked before the pandemic. Though both the PES and UWES were utilised successfully, all scales, and importantly, the information they provide should be scrutinised in this digital age.

Measures of engagement, empowerment, and countless other constructs rely on self-reported figures. However, the future of Likert scales looks uncertain, with many researchers questioning their viability on internet populations (Fryer and Nakao, 2020). This study adhered to the exact specifications set out by Spreitzer (1995) and Schaufeli *et al*. (2002). Self-reporting has obvious shortcomings in the gap between what is reported and what is experienced, so it is unlikely employee empowerment and engagement will ever be accurately quantified, but developments can still be implemented.

The chosen population for this research, should have sufficient technological prowess to confidently use modern scale formats like slider, swipe, or emoticon (Fryer and Nakao, 2020). Continuous interfaces (sliders and swipes) provide the most robust data. By allowing for greater variety of responses, they outperform Likert scales, which are ordinal at best (Fryer and Nakao, 2020). This may have help future researchers achieve normal distribution, which would facilitate conducting parametric tests on empowerment and engagement data.

Other literature claims the ways engagement is measured are overdue a colossal transformation (Burnett and Lisk, 2019). The internet has exploded in popularity since the PES and UWES were developed. As finance sector employees require the internet to work remotely, these measures can justifiably be modified. If machine learning and statistical modelling can be used to accurately monitor these constructs, then the continued use of self-reported measures is somewhat primitive. However, the methods being continuously developed to measure engagement are likely to breach European GDPR principles, while being tolerated in less regulated countries. There are concerns that the highly competitive global market is likely to worsen, decreasing Ireland's attractiveness to operate in, since employees are protected from having the latest engagement technologies implemented on them (Burnett and Lisk, 2019).

Technology's continued use in monitoring employees under the guise of maintaining engagement is impacting the turnover intentions of employees across sectors (Blumenfield, Anderson and Hooper, 2020). Technologies range from computer software that monitors screen-time, to wearable technologies like glasses and wristbands that monitor eye-movement, heartrate, movement, etc. (Maltseva, 2020). This application of surveillance technologies functioned as a substitute for trust when employers were forced to empower employees to operate remotely. Employees are justifiably concerned they are being dehumanised when forced to submit excessive data to companies, as employers are attempting to colonise employees' homes (Maltseva, 2020).

Whether in office or at home, privacy in the Irish workplace is protected by law. This study's participants demonstrated that organisations should opt for trust over surveillance (Parker *et al*., 2020). As over-surveillance could theoretically affect feelings of self-determination and competence, it may jeopardise the high

empowerment remote workers reported, which, would consequently impair engagement. Ultimately, more successful studies utilising current scales is the best insurance against this.

While this study showcased remote workers exhibiting psychological empowerment, the role of physical resources cannot be overlooked. The resources organisations allocate to remote working has been pivotal to its success (Miglioretti *et al*., 2021). Though addressed in the literature review, it was not incorporated into research design and should be added to future measures of remote employee empowerment and engagement. Many companies provide employees chairs, fans, keyboards, etc., to maximise productivity. Finance sector organisations have an acute awareness of ergonomic and physical environment factors affecting employees (Duque *et al*., 2020). The engagement levels of these participants reflect this.

The issues countless remote workers had with connectivity has been well documented in academia (Wang *et al*., 2021). These internet issues will unquestionably affect remote workers and the studies conducted on them. Interviewers have difficulty probing for information when job candidates have connectivity issues, meaning applicants with poorer connection are disadvantaged, as their issues may well persist throughout remote work (Johnson, Scheitle and Ecklund, 2019). These hindrances will also affect the data gathered from remote workers in qualitative research.

Ireland has an internationally renowned broadband network, where 90% of Irish households have internet access as of 2019 (Bergin and McGuinness, 2021). Connectivity issues do not appear to have negatively affected most participants, who were based in Ireland. From a job resources perspective, this justifies connectivity's consideration as an essential resource to remote working engagement (Lesener *et al*., 2020).

However, some resources are not as easily acquired. The availability of sensitive data on employees' home computers remains a major risk for finance organisations. While remote working kept the wheels running during COVID-19, many see it as an unnecessary risk if offices with well-monitored security are available (Graham, 2021). Measuring structural empowerment would have addressed the extent employees were empowered with access to company data. Regrettably, future research is required to monitor this.

Remote working should now be an integral component in business continuity plans. Finance companies were among those mandated to have contingencies in place for force majeure events, as they are subjected to regular business continuity research (İrkey and Tüfekci, 2021). This preparedness may have contributed to participants' impressive empowerment and engagement figures. Subsequently, these promising finance sector engagement figures may be an anomaly, and other industries may have declined in engagement. Substantial exploration is warranted to establish how each industry fared in the pandemic.

This would address the incongruent perspectives of employees, managers, and organisations towards remote work, explaining why some studies unearthed managerial resistance (Dolce *et al*., 2020). Worryingly, unequal attitudes are also evident when participants are categorised by age (Rudolph and Baltes, 2017), and gender. The future of remote working is particularly concerning to women, as they are more likely to reduce their hours and opt for increased WFH hours to tend to domestic duties (Clark *et al*., 2020). It is possible that remote working mothers may be placed at an immense disadvantage when it comes to prospective pay and promotion opportunities, as they may be seen as less committed than their male counterparts (Clark *et al*., 2020).

Education around remote working is needed to resolve misconceptions, or gender inequality and negative consequences, for those who avail of remote work, may continue to materialise (Clark *et al*., 2020). The ends of pandemic restrictions should not only improve the experience of remote working, but also give researchers greater freedom to choose methodologies to settle concerns about the 'new normal'. Unfortunately, despite this study and numerous others lauding its benefits, remote work will undergo scrutinization for years before it is considered an equal alternative to traditional work.

7.2 Recommendations

The primary recommendation of this study is for organisations to ensure employees have all necessary resources for remote working. Immediately after hire would be the most appropriate time to assess this. Employees could complete a self-reported checklist on the employee's work environment. This should be completed within two weeks of hiring. The HR staff assigned to monitoring the well-being of employees would then address potential hazards to employee health. A budget can be set aside to buy necessary resources, such as ergonomic chairs (€100-€800), keyboards (€70), work surfaces (€80-€600), etc. This HR employee should complete regular assessments of workspaces and monitor remote employees' health and safety. This may be economically advantageous to employers, despite the potential need to employ an additional HR associate, specifically for this role, entailing salary costs, pension, etc. By promoting health and safety in this fashion, the risk of compensation claims for repetitive strain and similar injuries, associated with non-ergonomic conditions, is quelled (Gerding *et al*., 2021). This should be prioritised as it occurs from the outset of remote work. With these physical resources ideally leading to psychological empowerment, employees should respond with increased engagement (Renard *et al*., 2021).

The secondary recommendation relates to educating organisations/employees on the benefits of remote working. Many issues stemmed from an organisational resistance to remote work, as managers dislike relinquishing control (Parker *et al*., 2020) and still view it as a luxury (Wang *et al*., 2021). Training should first be provided for HR employees, who can then ensure policies are implemented to foster remote work. Its success, particularly the sense of empowerment associated with remote working, is contingent on enthusiasm from the organisation (Miglioretti *et al*., 2021) and managers (Dolce *et al*., 2020).

A remote working consultant can be hired to assess the remote working capabilities of the company. A virtual health assessment can determine best practice and risks to the company. The same companies are typically willing to provide workforce training. This education clarifies remote working advantages and costs, so both organisations and employees can make informed decisions. While these expenses may be significant, they are substantially less than the financial and reputational costs

associated with cybersecurity issues and mishandling of confidential data. This process may be lengthier than allocating resources, but employees should recognise organisational commitment if employees who utilise remote work receive equal promotional opportunities (Clark *et al*., 2020).

The final recommendation regards monitoring engagement in remote working employees. Many firms focus on whether to check engagement frequently, with pulse surveys, or extract substantial data with larger measurements like the PES, conducted annually or bi-annually. HR associates can be trained with ease to analyse this information, as modern engagement software prioritises user-friendliness. If organisational resources are stretched thin, an external company can be used. The significant costs running into the thousands make this more appealing to larger businesses, as when firms have hundreds or thousands of employees, the cost per person decreases.

Another technique may be to explore the factors driving engagement in finance remote workers, considering their impressive engagement figures. Internal analyses could determine if engagement stimulates performance, retention, etc. Finance sector organisations may be a benchmark that other industries should aspire towards. If HR teams could develop a step-by-step model of how they achieve engagement, the information would be invaluable from a competitive advantage or seller standpoint. Investing in engagement is not prioritised last, but is a long-term investment that includes indirect benefits e.g., retention, commitment, perseverance, etc. These fruits may take longer to bear but will ultimately manifest in immeasurable long-term advantages.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (17-item) (Schaufeli *et al*., 2002)

1. At my work, I feel that I am bursting with energy (Vigour1)*

2. I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose (Dedication1)

3. Time flies when I'm working (Absorption1)

4. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous (Vigour2)*

5. I am enthusiastic about my job (Dedication2)*

6. When I am working, I forget everything else around me (Absorption2)

7. My job inspires me (Dedication3)*

8. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work (Vigour3)*

9. I feel happy when I am working intensely (Absorption3)*

10. I am proud of the work that I do (Dedication4)*

11. I am immersed in my work (Absorption4)*

12. I can continue working for very long periods at a time (Vigour4)

13. To me, my job is challenging (Dedication5)

14. I get carried away when I'm working (Absorption5)*

15. At my job, I am very resilient, mentally (Vigour5)

16. It is difficult to detach myself from my job (Absorption6)

17. At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well (Vigour6)

* Shortened version (UWES-9); VI = Vigour; DE = Dedication; AB = Absorption

Appendix 2. Psychological Empowerment Scale (Spreitzer, 1995)

Meaning

The work I do is very important to me (Meaning1).

My job activities are personally meaningful to me (Meaning2).

The work I do is meaningful to me (Meaning3).

Competence

I am confident about my ability to do my job (Competence1).

I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities (Competence2).

I have mastered the skills necessary for my job (Competence3).

Self-Determination

I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job (Self-determination1).

I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work (Self-determination2).

I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job (Self-determination3).

Impact

My impact on what happens in my department is large (Impact1).

I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department (Impact2).

I have significant influence over what happens in my department (Impact3).

Appendix 3. Correlation between engagement and empowerment.

Correlations

			engagement	empowerment
Spearman's rho	engagement	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.593**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	70	70
	empowerment	Correlation Coefficient	.593**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	70	70

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Appendix 4. Correlation between 4 components of empowerment and engagement.

Correlations

			meaning	competence	impact	selfdetermination	engagement
Spearman's rho	meaning	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.395**	.432**	.484**	.494**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001	.000	.000	.000
		N	70	70	70	70	70
	competence	Correlation Coefficient	.395**	1.000	.312**	.418**	.383**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.	.009	.000	.001
		N	70	70	70	70	70
	impact	Correlation Coefficient	.432**	.312**	1.000	.550**	.549**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.009	.	.000	.000
		N	70	70	70	70	70
	selfdetermination	Correlation Coefficient	.484**	.418**	.550**	1.000	.405**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.	.001
		N	70	70	70	70	70
	engagement	Correlation Coefficient	.494**	.383**	.549**	.405**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000	.001	.
		N	70	70	70	70	70

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Appendix 5. Correlation between empowerment and the 3 components of engagement.

Correlations

			empowerment	absorption	vigour	dedication
Spearman's rho	empowerment	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.406**	.601**	.626**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.000
		N	70	70	70	70
	absorption	Correlation Coefficient	.406**	1.000	.681**	.563**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000
		N	70	70	70	70
	vigour	Correlation Coefficient	.601**	.681**	1.000	.726**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.	.000
		N	70	70	70	70
	dedication	Correlation Coefficient	.626**	.563**	.726**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.
		N	70	70	70	70

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Appendix 6. Correlations between 4 components of empowerment and 3 components of engagement.

Correlations

			meaning	competence	impact	selfdetermination	absorption	vigour	dedication
Spearman's rho	meaning	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.395**	.432**	.484**	.341**	.437**	.584**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001	.000	.000	.004	.000	.000
		N	70	70	70	70	70	70	70
	competence	Correlation Coefficient	.395**	1.000	.312**	.418**	.262*	.389**	.385**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.	.009	.000	.028	.001	.001
		N	70	70	70	70	70	70	70
	impact	Correlation Coefficient	.432**	.312**	1.000	.550**	.405**	.566**	.520**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.009	.	.000	.001	.000	.000
		N	70	70	70	70	70	70	70
	selfdetermination	Correlation Coefficient	.484**	.418**	.550**	1.000	.260*	.452**	.408**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.	.030	.000	.000
		N	70	70	70	70	70	70	70
	absorption	Correlation Coefficient	.341**	.262*	.405**	.260*	1.000	.681**	.563**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.028	.001	.030	.	.000	.000
		N	70	70	70	70	70	70	70
	vigour	Correlation Coefficient	.437**	.389**	.566**	.452**	.681**	1.000	.726**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000	.000	.000	.	.000
		N	70	70	70	70	70	70	70
	dedication	Correlation Coefficient	.584**	.385**	.520**	.408**	.563**	.726**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000	.000	.000	.000	.
		N	70	70	70	70	70	70	70

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Appendix 7. Correlation between Meaning2 and Dedication1.

Correlations

			meaning2	dedication1
Spearman's rho	meaning2	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.643**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	70	70
	dedication1	Correlation Coefficient	.643**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	70	70

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

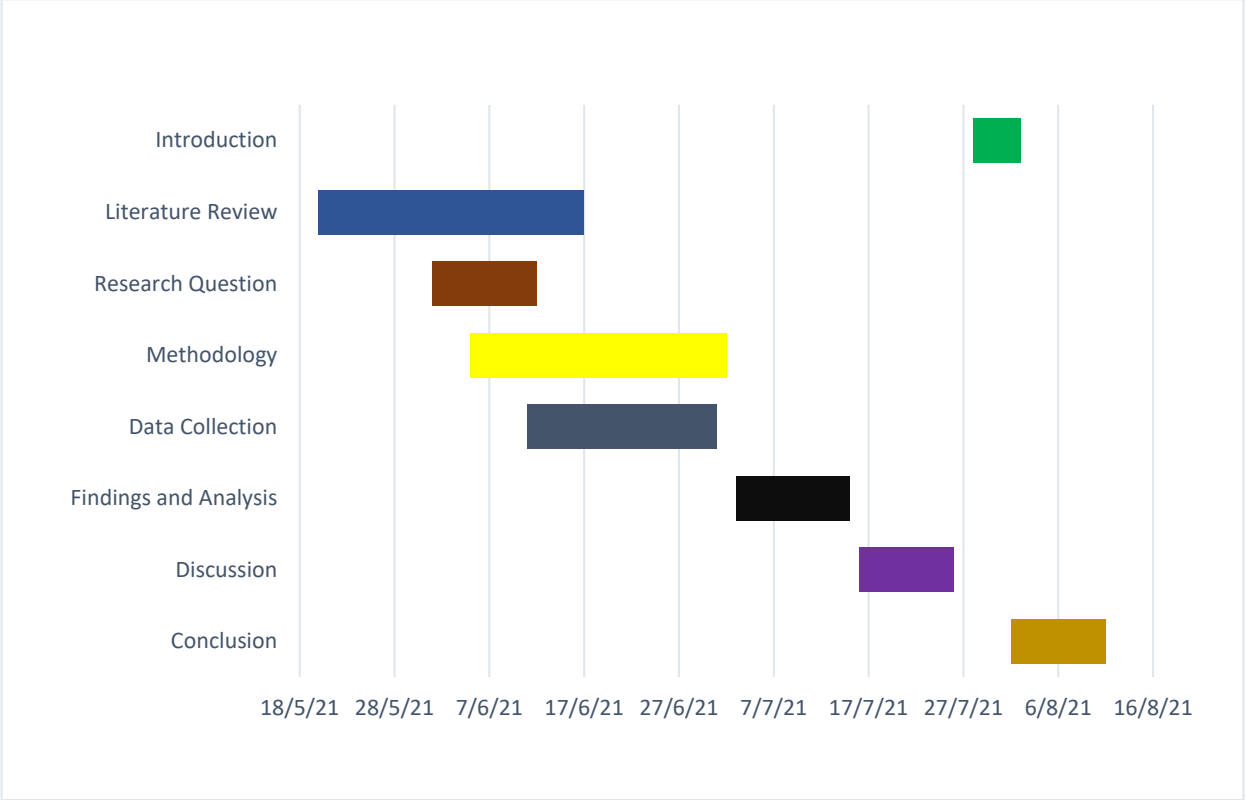
Appendix 8. Meaning (2-items) and dedication (4-items) correlation without Meaning2 and Dedication1.

Correlations

			meaningwithout	dedicationwithout
Spearman's rho	meaningwithout	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.436**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	70	70
	dedicationwithout	Correlation Coefficient	.436**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	70	70

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Appendix 9. Dissertation Timeline.



Personal Learning Statement

While the pandemic introduced mostly problems to the world, one area that many will reflect on positively was the mandatory introduction of remote working. This research was important to me, as it allowed me to explore an unprecedented period of history. I experienced growth through adversity by conducting research with enormous pandemic hurdles. These sentiments are shared by the millions of employees who rose to the challenge of pandemic work. Engagement stood out to me as a research topic, as it was an integral ingredient in capitalising on this unusual college experience. My motivation to undertake a master's dissertation during a pandemic surprised me. The Gantt chart above demonstrates my steady productivity, which reflects my engagement (see Appendix 9).

By conducting an entire dissertation from my home, I understand the empowerment technology provides. This study also helped me brush up on my SPSS and Microsoft Office knowledge, which will be important as technology continues to be more integral to HR functions. I can now appreciate varying perspectives on the changing nature of work, including virtual teams, remote leadership, technology dependency, technostress, etc., after having numerous novel experiences myself.

This research helped me prepare for my transition to a career in HRM. Many employers struggle to understand the costs/benefits of remote working, and this unfamiliarity is likely to harm organisations if they are incapable of adapting to the changing labour market. By exploring this understudied yet promising area, it should give me an edge when companies develop and implement progressive strategies, as remote working continues to expand. I will continue to monitor remote work research, as I feel it will be an important element in the battle to attract and retain talent. This passion for knowledge should benefit me in the HRM industry, which values self-improvement and lifelong learning.