Does remote work have a negative impact on employee well-being?

A qualitative investigation into the mental and physical effects caused by remote work during the COVID-19 lockdown, and the future of remote work beyond the pandemic.

Research Thesis

Course Title: MA in Human Resource Management

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Abstract

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Within weeks, more than 100 countries had instituted a full or partial lockdown. Millions of office based workers were suddenly required to transition to working from their homes. Although it was initially anticipated to be a short term measure, weeks of lockdown soon turned into months. As of August 2021, the world has yet to fully emerge from this crisis.

Thanks to advancing technology, the phenomenon of remote work has been slowly on the rise in recent years. However, what was once considered a fringe benefit has since become the norm for many. This research study asks an important question: does remote work have a negative impact on employee well-being? It takes a qualitative investigation into the mental and physical effects caused by remote work during the COVID-19 lockdown, and considers the future of remote work beyond the pandemic.

The literature review and research study conclude that remote work will become a permanent option for many employees (at least partially), although it is not without its challenges. Despite the benefits, employees' physical and mental-well being can suffer. The extent of these effects depend on a variety of factors. Employers must play their part in ensuring their employees have the right level of support. Hybrid working (a combination of office and remote based work) is a popular choice amongst employers. However, it may not provide the magic wand many would hope for. Without a focus on employee inclusion this model may lead to a divide, resulting in lower engagement and higher attrition.

This study advocates for better employer care, ensuring there is appropriate investment in physical and mental well-being support for remote workers. It is recommended that employers embrace a truly flexible hybrid model, but they must do so with employee inclusion at the top of their agenda. These recommendations are designed for HR practitioners and leadership alike, to help their organisations remain competitive in the war for talent in a post pandemic world.

Declaration

Submission of Thesis

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The world is changing, and it appears that remote work is here to stay (Popovici, 2020). Lower real estate costs (Nevogt, 2020), technology advancements (Melluso et. al, 2020) and more time for employees to spend with their loved ones (Snouwaert, 2020) have shifted the needle in a business world that has traditionally been office based. Organisations such as Dropbox, Indeed, Fujitsu and Siemens have begun closing some or all of their offices permanently (Ardill, 2020).

Despite the turning tide, recent studies indicate a concerning percentage of employees are not adapting well to remote work (Davis and Green, 2020) and some employers are taking unfair advantage of their employees (Burke, 2020). Large scale surveys warn that employees have experienced burnout and anxiety due to working from home (Davis and Green, 2020; Debouk, 2020). Ireland, alongside Finland, the Netherlands and France suffer from the highest percentage of mental health issues per person as a proportion of population in the European Union (OECD, 2018). Consequently, this sudden shift towards a remote culture beyond COVID-19 creates as many challenges as it does opportunities.

1.2 Remote Work

Remote work dovetails under the umbrella of flexible working. Flexible working is a broader term and may refer to specific arrangements with regards to when, where and how long an employee performs their work (Menezes and Kelliher, 2017). Remote work however is intrinsically linked to where the work is performed. The term indicates the employee is likely to perform their work from their own home or alternatively from another location as long as it is not on the employee's physical premises (Nash, 2021). Employee well-being considers both the employee's mental and physical health (Kolakowski et. al, 2020). These authors postulate that organisations with positive employee well-being can benefit from a competitive advantage, via higher engagement and output, lower absenteeism and lower regrettable attrition.

Previously, remote work was a trend created by digital nomads, but over the past eighteen months remote work has become a norm due to the lockdown restrictions of the pandemic (Kelly, 2020). With encouragement from the government (McGee and Wall, 2021) and public alike (Mangan, 2021), it may continue to be a norm beyond the pandemic. Therefore, this research is timely and relevant in order to help managers and organisations make better decisions in terms of their working policies (office, remote or a combination of the two).

1.3 Research Aims, Rationale & Method

It is expected that a large percentage of organisations strive to adopt a mixture of office and remote based work (known as a hybrid working model) once it is safe to return to the office (Ardill, 2020). However this has been largely untested for. Existing literature examining how remote work impacts employees is sparse, and academic studies pre-date the forced lockdown, such as Ward (2017) and Maguire (2019). In the past eighteen months, the threat of contracting COVID-19 led office based workers into a remote only working model (O'Connell, 2020), inadvertently creating quite the consequential social experiment. Hence, a gap exists in the research with regards to how well prepared employees and employers are with regards to remote work both during and beyond the pandemic. This gap exists due to the recency of the pandemic and shift to remote only.

This author attempts to answer an important question: does remote work negatively impact employee well-being? This study explores qualitative primary research via the use of semi-structured interviews and a wealth of secondary research regarding the impact remote work can have on an employee's well-being. Five sub-questions have been established to help answer this question and/or provide guidance for employers as the world continues to adjust to this new way of working. Ten previous office based employees who were compelled to transition to remote work in light of COVID-19 have volunteered to take part in this research study. This presents an opportunity to learn about their experiences regarding the switch, how remote work may have impacted them both physically and mentally (if at all) and to demystify the future of work, including what a successful hybrid model could look like.

1.4 Study Outline

Chapter 1 - Introduction: An introductory background is outlined and context is provided as to the purpose of this study, explaining what remote work is and why this topic is worth investigating. A study outline is included to help orient the reader.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review: Existing literature helps to set the scene of the world we're living in today, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and how external forces have impacted remote work. Political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal factors are examined using the PESTLE framework. The benefits and concerns associated with remote work are debated and follow thereafter.

Chapter 3 - Research Question: The research question and this author's postulation is outlined. Five sub-questions including their justification for inclusion are provided.

Chapter 4 - Methodology: The methodology for the research study is discussed, taking into consideration research philosophy, qualitative vs. quantitative approaches, research design, the data collection method, research sample and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 - Findings and Analysis: The findings of the research study are assessed and analysed via five key themes.

Chapter 6 - Discussion: The five themes identified in the Findings and Analysis Chapter are compared and contrasted against the existing literature presented in the Literature Review Chapter. Research study limitations and future research opportunities are contemplated.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion & Recommendations: A final summary is provided before the research question and its sub-questions are attempted to be answered. Four recommendations have been made to help create a successful hybrid or fully remote work model beyond the pandemic.

The Introduction Chapter merely scratches the surface with regards to this topic. Thus, the next chapter takes a deeper dive into the world of remote work.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review is broken down into four sections, thanks to a plethora of secondary research. Firstly, the PESTLE analysis will set the (remote work) scene and depict the external forces impacting the popularity of remote work. Are these forces shifting in favour of remote work, or against it? Thereafter, the benefits and the concerns associated with remote work will be examined with a specific focus on employee well-being. The conclusion provides a summary and analysis to close this chapter.

2.2 PESTLE Analysis

The PEST model can be used to outline external factors impacting employers and society by analysing relevant political, economic, social and technological factors (Johnson and Scholes, 1993). The CIPD (2020) adds that the PESTLE model also considers legal and environmental considerations. It can provide a framework for people professionals and business leaders to guide their strategies and decision making. PESTLE is well known for helping businesses to understand their environment better, anticipate future challenges and promote strategic thinking to counter such challenges (Rastogi and Trivedi, 2016).

Odey (2021) notes that this model does not focus on one particular organisation, but instead considers external factors that may affect employees, employers and stakeholders alike. He utilised the PEST model in a recent academic piece of work to discuss how Brexit and COVID-19 have impacted tech start-ups in the UK, highlighting a number of daunting challenges for organisations to consider taking this systematic approach. Thus, this model has been applied under the lens of remote work in order to dissect today's landscape.

Political

In January the Government of Ireland (2021) published its handbook on 'Making Remote Work'. It champions remote work citing a number of benefits including lower greenhouse emissions and greater opportunities for those living in rural Ireland. In recent years, the European Union has been applying pressure on its members to reduce greenhouse emissions (Rastogi and Trivedi, 2016). The social networking organisation TikTok began building out its EMEA hub in Dublin and whilst it is keen to secure a sizable physical office Tánaiste Leo Varadkar is not so sure it is required commenting, 'things will need to be different' (McGee and Wall, 2021).

Economic

Unemployment increased drastically in Ireland from 4.8% in January 2020 to 28.2% by April that year (CSO, 2020). Remote work has helped the economy, enabling many employers to remain in operation and by providing an opportunity for substantial bottom line savings, namely in real estate (Nevogt, 2020). In 2020 Dropbox, Indeed, Fujitsu and Siemens were just some of the organisations who began closing some or all of their physical offices permanently (Ardill, 2020). During the past year, Google saved $268 million in expenses from company travel and entertainment alone, compared to the previous year (Bergen, 2021). This does not include any savings on office space which they have continued to pay for.

The Irish recruitment firm Sigmar reported that the job market in Ireland is at its most buoyant in two decades as many are choosing to change jobs ahead of the anticipated return to the office (Paul, 2021). Sigmar noted that the majority of hires in the second quarter were for remote only or remote flexible roles.

Social

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a survey on millennials reported that 85% of them desired to work remotely but this was less well received amongst older workers (Fell, 2016). By May 2020 a third of the global population were forced into lockdown and working from home became the new norm (Liam and Yoon, 2020). Snouwaert (2020) noted this gave workers the opportunity to

reduce their housing costs by moving further out, spend less time commuting and more time with family. The author reported that in 2020 IBM surveyed 25,000 workers (of all ages) reporting that 54% (across all age groups) now want to work primarily from home after the pandemic. Miley (2021) noted 6,400 employers were surveyed in the annual national remote working survey with 95% favouring some form of remote work beyond the COVID-19 restrictions. He concludes the number of employees wanting to work completely from home tripled from 12% to 36% year on year.

McKinsey conducted a survey with more than 5,000 employees (Mangan, 2021). Almost one third responded that they would likely leave their employer if forced to return to the office full time, and parents with young children in particular had a stronger preference for remote or hybrid working (a split between remote and office based working). From an employer perspective, IBEC (Ireland's largest lobby and business representative group) surveyed 370 organisations and found that more than three quarters intend to return to the office before September 2021 (Goodbody, 2021). According to the report, four in five organisations plan to establish a hybrid working model and just over half intend to place a larger focus on employee output rather than office presence in the future. From a social work perspective, this could result in a significant shift in terms of how employees are measured compared to the past.

Technological

In rural Ireland, hubs will be built to ensure those living outside of cities have access to the necessary infrastructure to do their work remotely (Government of Ireland, 2021). Over the course of the next three years, up to 10,000 remote working offices will be built in regional areas across Ireland (Boland, 2020). The author adds that high speed broadband access will be expanded with a specific focus on creating employment opportunities for those with disabilities. Technology has allowed workers to manage their work via a range of software applications (Melluso et. al, 2020). Zoom, one of the leading video conferencing organisations reported that video conferencing has more than doubled since the pandemic (Ittelson, 2021).

In 2019 before the pandemic IBM saved 100 million US Dollars in office costs thanks to technology as it helped up to 40% of its 140,000 employee base move online (Gandhi, Madan and Arora, 2021). These authors noted additional benefits such as increased productivity, employee retention and a decrease in absenteeism. On the other hand, they reported it was harder for IBM to communicate to its employees and it became more difficult to maintain accountability. Lueck (2020) warns that online security is paramount to making this work, both the storage and access of sensitive data.

Legal

The Government of Ireland (2021) will introduce a law in 2021 stating that employees now have the right to request remote work. The Health and Safety authority's guide to remote work states that health and safety is the sole responsibility of the employer, regardless of where the employee is based (HSA, 2020).

Environmental

According to the most recent census in Ireland, approximately three quarters of a million journeys were made via public transport each day in 2019 (Murray, 2021b). The same census reported one million journeys being taken by car to work each day. In 2019, Ireland had the joint fourth highest commute times in the European Union (Burke-Kennedy, 2020). In a remarkable shift, both Murray (2021b) and Molla (2021) predict the working population will move away from the bigger cities in the coming years in favour of remote work in regional areas, thus potentially lowering traffic (and greenhouse emissions). Ireland's C02 emissions are 40% higher than the EU average per capita (Crowley et. al, 2020). They add that 66% of all work trips are made by car, however by April 2020 traffic fell 80% year on year. These authors argue a long term shift towards remote work could result in substantial benefits for the environment.

2.3 Remote Work: The Benefits

Although this study explores the negative effects of remote work it is important to acknowledge the benefits from a well-being perspective, in order to provide a well balanced argument. Since the 1960s, the number of women entering the workforce has risen significantly (White and Maniam, 2020). These authors state that children with parents who are more present are more likely to to grow up with less psychological stress and anti-social issues in their lives. Remote work allows employees to spend less time commuting and more time with friends and family (Government of Ireland, 2021; Wall, 2021).

Remote work enables a more flexible way of working (Murray, 2020a). The author suggests this can increase an employee's sense of trust with their employer which can lead to better well-being and a feeling of belonging. On a similar note regarding inclusion, Klopoktek (2017) reported it may reduce office politics. Interestingly, the remote only company Hopin (2021) has created a 'Vibe Team' as part of their people team function, which includes roles such as a 'Head of Remote' and 'Culture Manager' to create a more inclusive workplace.

Virtual communication can act as a leveller when we consider two employees who differ in socio-economic status, organisational tenure and hierarchical roles (Baradello and Dibble, 2020). Some believe that remote workers are less likely to become engaged in office politics (Cook, 2019). This may increase an employee's sense of well-being and job satisfaction. Green, Tappin and Bentley (2020) agree that it can improve job performance, satisfaction and ultimately employer retention. Remote work will open up opportunities for those with disabilities (Government of Ireland, 2021). This may increase their feeling of happiness and belonging in society. According to Mai (2020), working remotely can lead to a healthier lifestyle, with better eating habits, more sleep and lower levels of stress. In a world where natural disasters and/or global pandemics are possible, remote work offers a protective shield to organisations and its employees if and when such events are to reoccur (Wilcocks, 2020).

2.4 Remote Work: The Concerns

Although remote work can lead to higher organisational commitment, job related well-being and satisfaction, these benefits come at a trade off for the ability to switch off (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). An increasing amount of evidence highlights the possible negative implications of remote work. One thousand remote working employees in the US were surveyed and 45% reported that they felt burnt out due to working remotely (Davis and Green, 2020). Qualtrics conducted a study reporting that 52% of remote employees are more anxious working from their home (Debouk, 2020). A survey by Twingate on 1,000 remote workers indicated 40% felt exhausted from participating in too many video calls (Robinson, 2020). Numerous authors have begun to call out additional concerns, which have been segregated into three distinct areas:

Physical Well-Being

Employees in highly populated cities have been struggling with larger families and less living space to do their work (Mudditt, 2020). Employees can have real difficulty living, working and sleeping in the same environment (Gitlab, 2021). Remote work can lead to negative physical implications such as headaches and eyestrain for those looking at their monitor all day (Popovici, 2020). Without an ergonomic chair or assessment it can lead to chronic back pain (Chaplin, 2020). Unum (2020) reported the term 'Tech neck', an injury in the back, neck or shoulders caused by looking at computer screens too long without proper ergonomic support. Left untreated the author reports it can cause long term damage.

A survey was conducted with 1,000 participants who had worked from home for at least four months (Franklin, 2021). Less than half of the participants were offered a workstation risk assessment or had the appropriate equipment (desk, chair and monitor). Approximately one quarter had been suffering with headaches, back pain, a stiff neck and/or strained eyes as a result. Lastly, the author noted that almost two thirds had to pay for additional equipment themselves, and therefore it was not surprising to learn that one in five did not believe their employer cared about their well being. O'Kane, Walton and Ruwhiu (2020) organised a similar study, with 2,500 employees in New Zealand. Almost two thirds reported that they had to

provide some or all of their own equipment. A similar number believed that a lack of support from their manager would lead to challenges in working from home in the future.

In an Irish poll, 1,087 employees were surveyed and revealed that employees on higher salaries (€50,000+) tended to work from a home office, as opposed to employees earning closer to €35,000, working from their bedroom or kitchen (Cunningham, 2021). This suggests that those on a lower income may not be as well set-up from a physical well-being perspective. Maura Quinn from the Institute of Directors believes working from the kitchen or bedroom could impact mental well-being, as there's little separation between work and relaxation (Murray, 2021a).

Mental Well-Being

Remote employees lose the opportunity to spend physical time with their colleagues which can lead to less rapport and trust (Azasu and Babatunde, 2020). Wang et. al (2021) report procrastination as an adverse effect. Physical daily interactions can reinforce our feeling of well-being and belonging, and according to one study, 19% reported loneliness (Staglin, 2020). On a similar note, a senior fellow at Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research stated that remote work can lead to depression and loneliness (Jacobs, 2020). Coleman et. al (2020) reinforce this opinion, arguing that working without colleagues can lead to loneliness and social isolation. They report that Laya Healthcare discovered that up to 91% of Irish employees have struggled with anxiety during COVID-19, yet only 10% reach out for assistance.

Remote employees are more likely to work a greater amount of irregular and longer hours (Popovici, 2020). IIngusci et. al (2021) highlight the term 'techno stressors', which relates to an employee's need to always be available via their phone, laptop etc. These authors argue that technology has created expectations for faster responses, therefore increasing pressure on employees and impacting their well-being. In a survey with more than 2,000 German and Swiss employees more than 30% reported that working remotely full-time had negatively impacted their well-being, with younger employees in particular citing loneliness as a cause. Working

from home has led to a greater amount of family conflict, as many have struggled without the boundaries of their office (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020).

Additional reports indicate some employers are taking advantage of their remote employees. In the case of O'Hara vs. Kepac an employee accused her employer of obligating her to respond to emails after midnight and to be available 24 hours a day, seven days per week (Burke, 2020). To counter such incidents, the Workplace Relations Commission commenced work on a code of practice regarding the right to disconnect from work (Government of Ireland, 2021).

Carnevale and Hatak (2020) argue that people are attracted to companies they identify with and an office space forms a large part of that. Without an office space they believe it can be harder for interviewees to judge whether their potential new employer is the right fit or not. In addition, with conversations being more intentional rather than situational in a remote environment, new employees may struggle to form genuine bonds, increasing the chances of a misfit and potentially an early exit. This could be harmful to both the employer and employee.

Hybrid Working

CEOs from organisations such as Netflix and Goldman Sachs have publicly said they oppose remote work (Mangan, 2021). However, it is anticipated that many companies will adopt a hybrid working model thereby offering employees a mix between working from the office or from home (Ardill, 2020). Google (Bergen, 2021), Twilio (Sabin, 2021), Microsoft, Salesforce and Facebook (Mangan, 2021) are just a handful of examples. In an interview with Atlassian's Co-CEO Scott Farquehar he warned companies not to be too prescriptive, adding, "I think a lot of companies that are just doing it two days a week, they're going to really struggle because they are not going to attract or retain talent, and I think they'll end up going back to the old way because it's inertia" (Waters, 2021). Green et. al (2020) support this opinion, arguing that history indicates that organisations will simply revert to previous behaviours. Therefore it remains uncertain as to whether the hybrid model will become the norm long term.

The financial firm PWC published an article stating that hybrid set-ups risk alienating remote employees in favour of those who are physically in the office (Sethi, 2021). Bhushan Sethi

(PWC's People and Organisation Leader) believes a subconscious bias may result in an 'us versus them' culture, increasing the chance of discrimination in the workplace. Bartel et. al (2012) state that employees who choose to work remotely in a hybrid model may be more inclined to endure the negative effects of physical isolation and less perceived respect compared to their office counterparts.

Ardill (2021b) suggests that people are creatures of habit and a shift to hybrid may not be as straightforward as it seems. The author highlights that cultural differences and introverts vs. extraverts are just two of the differences amongst employees and could lead to challenges relating to inclusivity in this new set-up. It is worth noting that it has only been eight years since Yahoo's CEO infamously banned remote work, with its employees feeling that they weren't trusted as a result (Henderson, 2015). It is therefore unclear whether employers are truly ready for a flexible hybrid set-up.

2.5 Conclusion

The PESTLE analysis concludes that five of the six external factors overwhelmingly point towards a future for remote work. Politically speaking, the Irish government is firmly behind the move, citing environmental benefits and job opportunities in rural areas as key motivators. Economically, companies have experienced substantial savings and this may bias their perspective on what approach to take in the future. Due to a tight labour market employers compete heavily for talent. From a social perspective, public opinion has pivoted strongly in favour of more flexible working options since the lockdown. As a result, at least some employers have pivoted to prioritise output as a key metric with regards to performance management. Technology has been the enabler for remote work. Without it, this shift simply would not have been possible. That leaves a solitary but important outlier in the PESTLE analysis, the legal factor. As previously stated, the Health and Safety Authority (or HSA) has been clear that the employer remains responsible for their employee's health, regardless of whether they are working from the office or not. That raises a question, whether employers take adequate care of their employees?

The benefits of remote work are not to be underestimated. Families in particular have been enjoying more time with one another, which has positively impacted both parents and children. For many it has led to a healthier lifestyle. Remote only set-ups have reduced office politics and increased trust amongst employers and employees.

However, the concerns associated with remote work simply cannot be ignored. An increasing amount of evidence suggests that employers have not been adequately catering for their employees' health and safety. This puts them at risk, as much as their employees (as per the HSA guidelines). From a physical well-being perspective, many employees have been left to take care of their own health, resulting in physical discomfort and potentially long term injuries associated with an incorrect ergonomic set-up. In terms of mental-well being, loneliness, being overworked and significant challenges in switching off at home are concerning. The research suggests these instances are not isolated. Employers believe that a hybrid set-up is the solution yet there is little evidence available to reassure employees that those wishing to continue working remotely at least for the most part will be properly catered for. It remains unclear whether the vast majority of employers embracing hybrid working beyond COVID-19 have carefully considered how an inclusive and successful working environment may appear.

During this literature review, a gap in the research was identified. Although remote work has won enthusiastic support amongst employers and employees alike, the recent HSA legislation and concerns reported suggest that neither are prepared for remote work long term. Therefore, this author has a number of additional questions to answer via the research study, which will be discussed further in the next chapter, the research question.

Chapter 3 - Research Question

Although the previous chapter outlined the benefits of remote work it also warned of the possible dangers associated with it. Thus, this study examines the negative effects associated with remote work from a well-being perspective, and explores whether employers and employees are providing adequate care to counter such risks. This chapter outlines the research question and its sub-questions to provide further clarity as to the intent of this study.

3.1 The Research Question:

Does remote work negatively impact employee well-being? The postulation in this research study is that remote work does negatively impact employee well-being.

3.2 Sub-Questions

1. Does the long term future of work include remote work? This sub-question was established as the existing literature suggests the landscape has significantly shifted in favour of remote work and therefore should be further validated in the research study.

2. How does remote work impact an employee's physical health? This sub-question was established to understand how remote work can impact an employee physically e.g. physical injuries, impact to diet and exercise etc.

3. How does remote work impact an employee's mental health? This sub-question was established to understand how remote work can impact an employee mentally e.g. stress, anxiety and/or depression associated with working in isolation.

4. To what extent are employers providing a meaningful level of care to their employees with regards to remote work? This sub-question was established to understand the various levels of support provided by employers. It has been included in order to provide recommendations as to what a best practice approach could look like for employers based on learnings from the existing literature and research study.

5. Beyond COVID-19, what are the perceived challenges & opportunities in a hybrid working model? The existing literature suggested that hybrid is the preferred working

model for many organisations after the pandemic, but it may lead to a divide amongst employees who favour more time in the office rather than remote. As such, this sub-question has been established to understand where the challenges and opportunities lie.

The research question and its sub-questions were used to guide the entire research project and the research methodology. Thus, the next chapter will take a deep dive into the methodology behind the research study before the findings and analysis can be discussed.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

4.0 Introduction

The Methodology Chapter outlines the theory and method behind this research study. It considers the two most popular types of research from a philosophical perspective. It then details the research design, the participant sample involved and informs how the data was analysed. Ethical considerations and a conclusion complete this chapter.

4.1 Research Philosophy

Methodology involves the strategic design and decisions taken by a researcher in their chosen method (Kennedy, 2017). Decisions taken to help inform research strategy, data collection and analysis fall under the umbrella of what's known as scientific research philosophy (Zakauskas et. al, 2018). These authors name two main approaches: ontology and epistemology. Holden and Lynch (2014) name a third, human nature.

Ontology is a philosophical approach concerned with reality, relates to a limited amount of knowledge and can be difficult to process in the social world (Bryman and Bell, 2011). General assumptions are made in order to understand the real nature of society (Zakauskas et. al, 2018). It aims to understand the classification and explanation of entities, and existence itself (Collis and Hussey, 2014).

On the other hand, epistemology focuses on how knowledge is created, obtained and developed (Horn, 2009). It aims to separate justified belief from opinion (Zakauskas et. al, 2018). Holden and Lynch (2014) define human nature as an approach whereby the researcher takes an active decision as to whether humans are in control or being controlled. Taking a holistic view of research philosophy, they suggest that organisational science argues that knowledge is readily available, waiting to be discovered.

This study considers the experiences its participants have towards the subject of remote work. By nature it is subjective. Therefore, the research philosophy applicable in this case is the epistemology approach. It takes an interpretivist approach by interpreting those feelings and opinions, in order to derive a set of conclusions.

4.2 Qualitative vs. Quantitative

There are two main types of primary research, quantitative research and qualitative research. Quantitative research is the process of analysing and collecting numerical data (Edwards, 2019). It can be used to look for patterns, anomalies and to provide generic results across larger sample sizes. Quantitative research is regarded as being objectivist, and is quantitative, scientific and experimentalist (Holden and Lynch, 2004). In other words, it values data and factual results over theory and feeling. Interval, ordinal and nominal studies are popular methods in quantitative research (Dobrovolny and Fuentes, 2008).

Bearman (2019, p. 2) describes qualitative research as "the systematic study of social phenomena, expressed in ways that qualify - describe, illuminate, explain, explore - the object of study". Namely, qualitative research involves the study of opinions, concepts or experiences (Busetto et. al, 2020). Qualitative research is considered to be subjectivist, and is humanistic, interpretivist and phenomenological (Holden and Lynch, 2004). It is concerned with assessing how humans feel and respond to real world situations. Interviews, focus groups and observation are popular qualitative methods, focusing on the 'how' and the 'why' (Dobrovolny and Fuentes, 2008).

Despite their differences, both qualitative and quantitative research studies share a number of characteristics in common. Both are based on a conceptual framework, involve decision making and are therefore subjective (Dobrovolny and Fuentes, 2008). A significant number of researchers favour a mixed method approach (Parylo, 2012). By including both qualitative and quantitative data a research study can have a more holistic feel, accounting for pure data as well as the 'how' and the 'why'.

4.3 Research Design

Qualitative research was chosen as the methodology for the research study. The purpose of this study is to assess how employees feel about remote work with regards to their mental and physical health, and whether their employers are taking action to support them. This study is exploratory and aims to explore an idea currently underdeveloped within existing literature. Therefore, exploratory qualitative research aligns best to understand the initial themes, although a quantitative approach could be considered thereafter.

Quantitative research was briefly considered but as Devault (2020) highlights it can put too much focus on statistics which could result in an oversight regarding how the participants feel, and importantly why. Quantitative research has also been increasingly criticised in the field of social science due to the complex nature of humans (Holden and Lynch, 2004). A mixed approach including qualitative and quantitative research was also considered but unfortunately due to time limitations it was excluded.

Wang et. al (2020) contend that when concepts and behaviours are being assessed qualitative data can provide a better mechanism for demystifying the 'how' and the 'why' in comparison to quantitative research. It is worth noting other research studies on the topic of remote work utilised qualitative research as its primary methodology and with rewarding findings (Ward, 2017; Maguire, 2019).

A focus group was initially considered but ruled out as it would have been more challenging to speak with each participant as in-depth . Writing (2019) warns participants may not feel as comfortable expressing their honest opinions in a group setting. Given the sensitive nature of employee well-being and mental health, the semi-structured interview was chosen as the type of qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews can be time consuming but they are beneficial in understanding independent thought or "unchartered territory with unknown but potential momentous issues" to uncover (Adams, 2015, p. 494). This afforded the opportunity for consistency but equally the chance to further explore an interesting discovery, if necessary. Best practice approach includes asking open ended questions that are generative rather than

interrogative, focus on real life experiences and in a setting where participants feel comfortable (Bearman, 2019).

4.4 Data Collection Method

Participants were asked a total of fifteen questions, excluding additional follow-up questions during the interview where deemed necessary. The vast majority were open ended questions affording participants the time to open up and share their personal experiences. On occasions where a few closed questions were helpful to ask, participants were asked to elaborate further, beyond a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer.

The interview schedule was split into four sections:

1. Overall feelings and experience regarding remote work during the lockdown
2. Physical well-being
3. Mental well-being
4. Hybrid working (Post COVID-19)

Interviews took place between April and May 2021. Due to health and safety concerns interviews were required to take place via the video platform Zoom. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and one hour, depending on the length of the participants' answers. Although in person interviews may have felt more natural, this author believes participants felt at ease with video interviewing given their experience operating in this model for more than one year. Interviews were recorded and auto-transcribed with permission. The participants' responses were manually transcribed during the interview due to errors with the auto-transcriber. Recordings were listened back to thereafter to ensure nothing was missed.

The following information below details the sub-questions detailed in Chapter Three. Below each sub-question are the questions which were asked in the research study, linking the interview questions back to each sub-question. The order of the questions below do not necessarily reflect the order in which questions were asked during the actual interviews, as it was important to ensure there was a suitable flow. Additionally, the two questions listed under

Sub-question Four were asked twice in order to differentiate physical and mental well-being support from employers (or lack thereof).

Sub-Question 1: Does the long term future of work include remote work?

1. What are the first three words you would use to describe remote work, and why?
2. What flexibility has your employer offered once it is safe to work from the office again?
3. What would be your ideal preference and why?
4. Overall, how do you feel about the switch to remote work?
5. What advice would you give to employers to ensure remote work can be successful for them and their employees?

Sub-Question 2: How does remote work impact an employee's physical health?

1. In what way has remote work impacted your physical health?

Sub-Question 3: How does remote work impact an employee's mental health?

1. In what way has remote work impacted your mental health?
2. Have you worked more or less hours since moving to a remote set-up? Why?
3. Have you found it easier or harder to switch off after closing the laptop? Why?

Sub-Question 4: To what extent are employers providing a meaningful level of care for their employees with regards to remote work?

1. What steps has your employer taken to support you working remotely?
2. What additional steps could your employer have taken to benefit your well-being?

Sub-Objective 5: Beyond COVID-19, what are the perceived challenges & opportunities in a hybrid working model?

1. Imagine a hybrid model where some workers spend more of their time in the office than others. What challenge would that present?

2. What steps could an employer take to mitigate against such challenges?

4.5 Research Sample

Prior to the research study taking place, considerable thought was given regarding the participants themselves, the methodology involved and the questions themselves. Ten employees were asked to take part in the research study. Non-probability convenience sampling was used, inviting participants who were a mixture of friends and colleagues from work and university (past and present). Convenience sampling can be a helpful method in acquiring primary research easily, is cost effective to implement but one disadvantage is that the sample lacks clear generalisability (Jager, Putnik and Bornstein, 2017).

To provide an appropriate comparison, they were required to be full-time working office professionals, of similar age, working for the same employer both before the pandemic (primarily office based) and since the pandemic (remote only).

If participants had changed employer during the pandemic their input may not have been as easy to compare as this author wanted to understand how participants felt about their employers and working life since the switch to remote. Therefore potential participants who had switched employers were excluded from this study. Equally, potential participants who had not been working in an office environment were excluded as the nature of their work may not have lent itself as well to remote work e.g. hospital or factory workers.

4.6 Pilot Study

A pilot study can be a helpful aid in ensuring the questions being asked are appropriate, clear and fit for purpose (Nunes et. al, 2010). It allows you to test your methodology, gather initial insights with regards to proof of concept and affords you the opportunity to refine and improve (Kuhn, 2018). Thus, an initial pilot study was undertaken with two participants (participants A & B). Each participant was asked for feedback on the interview afterwards with both providing positive feedback as to the structure, flow and content covered. Both interviews went smoothly

but following the pilot study two additional questions were added to the interview and retrospectively assessed with both participants. These two questions were:

1. Have you worked more or less hours since moving to a remote set-up? Why?
2. Have you found it easier or harder to switch off after closing the laptop? Why?

Both questions were added as this author had noted during the existing literature study that despite the enthusiasm for remote work many employees had also reported working longer hours and found it more challenging to switch off (Felstead and Henseke, 2017; Davis and Green, 2020; Burke, 2020). This author wanted to validate this theory in the research study with direct questioning on this subject matter rather than leaving this discussion to chance.

4.7 Data Analysis

Relevant findings are summarised and presented in the Findings and Analysis Chapter. Below is a visual image regarding how this information was coded, using colour to draw out patterns. Green represented a positive comment, red represented a negative comment and orange represented a neutral comment.

Participants:	A	B	C	D
Remote - First 3 Words	Productivity	Flexible	Flexible	Stay at Home
	Mental Health (Neg. Impact)	Economic	Slightly More Pressure	Easy Transition
	Work Life Balance	Family Friendly	Very Do-Able	N/A
Physical Well-Being	Negatively	Mixed	Negatively	Negatively
Why?	Less Exercise	Less Exercise	Less Exercise	Less Exercise
		Less physical discomfort at home		Neck Aches
Employer Support	Equipment Provided	Partial Equipment Provided	250 Euro Budget for equipemnt	Budget for equipment (exl. desk)
				Ergonomic/injury check
Additional Support Desired (related to remote set-up)	None	Stand up desk	None	Suitable desk - current living room table is not suitable / lower than it should be
Mental Well-Being	Mixed - some anxiety/depression (mix of Covid + remote)	Mixed feelings	Mixed feelings	Mixed feelings
Why?	Felt isolated from colleagues -> However, has since self readjusted	Lives with partner and child, no issues herself. However misses the opportunity to spend time with colleagues + meet new colleagues	Hard to judge due to COVID. Needs to be judged more after the pandemic. May not be for everyone e.g. those earlier in their careers.	Less commute time and more sleep has been positive. Negative - expectation to be seen online / tied to your desk e.g. on chat apps. Can be draining. + Longer Hours.
Employer Support	Wellness Days	Mental well-being program including EAP	Well-being classes, EAP	No additional support for mental health
	Mental Health App + Free counselling	Manager is v. supportive	Additional time off	
Additional Support Requested	None	More social events	More empathy for parents and assistance	Survey the staff to understand their needs, similar to the ergonomic/physical check

Figure 1: Participant Response Analysis Extract

This data was analysed for themes and patterns using a thematic analysis process. A thematic analysis enables the researcher to identify, analyse and interpret patterns via the frequency of words or phrases (Spiteri, 2021). The transcripts were submitted to Edwordle.net, a free online tool which provides a word cloud, or graphical representation of the most common topics.

Figure 2: Graphical Representation (via Edwordle.net)

Using the aforementioned techniques this author was able to identify five primary themes, explored in the Findings and Analysis Chapter.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research can be prone to ethical violation (Myers, 2013). Although vulnerable members of society were not assessed several steps were taken to ensure this research was ethically conducted. Participants were initially asked to take part on a voluntary basis and the nature of the study was explained to them.

Once agreed, participants were provided with the questions in advance and a consent form was signed by all ten prior to the interview. This was done via email due to health and safety concerns in person. Interviews were booked on a time and date that suited participants and permission was sought regarding the auto-transcriber and video recording. Leading questions were avoided in order to ensure participants felt that the interviewer was neutral on the subject, creating a safe space to openly share without judgement.

Participants' data will only be held for the purpose of this research study and will be disposed of as per NCI's guidelines. A copy of the consent form and interview questions can be found in the Appendices Chapter.

4.9 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter detailed the methodology behind the research study. It considered long established research philosophy before comparing qualitative and quantitative research methods. A qualitative research approach was selected and justified. In addition, the approach undertaken to conduct a satisfactory research study was outlined, including the design, collection method, data analysis techniques and ethical considerations taken into account.

The theory and framework behind the methodology has been established, paving the way for the findings and analysis of the research study to be thoroughly examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 - Findings and Analysis

5.1 - Introduction

This chapter centres around the primary research undertaken as part of this thesis, and aims to answer the sub-questions outlined under the research question. Ten full-time and permanent employees were interviewed over the space of several weeks in April and May 2021. All participants worked primarily from their office prior to March 2020 (pre COVID-19) and have since been working 100% remotely from home. Their ages ranged from 29-39 years old.

Participants:	A	B	C	D	E
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Male	Male
Parental Status	No Children	Children	Children	No Children	Children
Age	39	34	38	37	38
Job Title	Customer Success Manager	HR Operations Specialist	European Media Manager	Technical Support Engineer	Managing Director
Industry	L&D Software (Tech)	Car Rental (Transport)	FMCG	Semiconductor (Manufacturing)	Crypto Currency
Interview Date	April 14th, 2021	April 19th, 2021	May 3rd, 2021	May 3rd, 2021	May 4th, 2021
Participants:	F	G	H	I	J
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Female	Male
Parental Status	No Children	Children	No Children	Children	No Children
Age	29	38	38	37	37
Job Title	Account Executive	Manager, Customer Success Team	Digital Marketing Specialist	Finance Officer	Global Change Lead
Industry	HR Software (Tech)	Cloud Computing Software (Tech)	Car Rental (Transport)	Charity/Foundation	Pharmaceutical
Interview Date	May 5th, 2021	May 10th, 2021	May 12th, 2021	May 13th, 2021	May 13th, 2021

Figure 1 - Participants' Background Information & Interview Calendar

Each participant worked for a different employer across a mix of industries including software, transport, pharmaceutical, charity and FMCG. This was intentionally done in order to gain a broader understanding of employer care across a mix of organisations and industries. Five participants were male, five participants were female. In addition, five participants reported having children, the other five reported that they had none. Again, this was intentionally done to gain an understanding as to whether remote work may be suited to those with children compared to those without. This author was not aware of the participants' feelings towards remote work prior to asking them to take part.

Five themes were identified and will be presented in the following order:

1. The Future Of Work
2. Physical Well-Being
3. Mental Well-Being

4. Employer Care

5. Hybrid Working

This sample of information was retrieved via the use of semi-structured interviews, enabling this author to draw on large amounts of data to provide a thematic analysis.

5.2 - The Future Of Work

Evidently, remote work scored very favourably with eight of the ten participants feeling positive overall, with just one neutral and one negative response. However, digging into this topic in more detail revealed mixed and negative feedback. Each participant was asked to describe the first three words they would use to describe remote work. Just over half of these words (55%) were deemed positive with flexibility being the dominant theme. Freedom of choice, less travel and additional time with loved ones were cited, e.g. "I can plan my day around my work" (Participant C) and "I can work from anywhere" (Participant F).

One third of these words were deemed negative, with longer hours, more pressure, exhaustion and a feeling of isolation being reported. Participant E, who has three young children was by far the most critical, describing remote work as "frustrating, tiring and erratic". He added, "A huge amount of work has been done from my car which is not comfortable. It's what I've had to do due to my toddlers screaming. In the office I wouldn't have had those interruptions".

Eight of the ten participants reported working longer hours since moving to a remote set-up and exactly half of the participants felt that it has been harder to switch off since the transition. Participant G noted "I make myself available constantly. I check my emails from home". Participant H commented, "At home it's easier to roll on until 7pm or 8pm with a project. Sometimes you can get an early call or receive late emails". On a positive note, Participant B praised the new set-up. "I'm working less hours, as I'm already home. At work I'd have people constantly coming up to me. At home I don't have this issue".

Despite these mixed feelings, all ten participants expressed a desire to continue with a remote work option, with seven participants favouring a preference for being at home the majority of the time or the decision being left to them entirely (without being dictated to). Three of the participants suggested a 50/50 hybrid whilst none of the participants favoured a return to the office, or a hybrid where the majority of the time was spent in the office. Participant A stated that he enjoyed the additional time with his dog but missed his colleagues. He added, "Twice per week feels like a nice compromise".

Participants without children trended slightly more favourably when it came to identifying the first three words associated with remote. This is believed to be because those with children had experienced additional challenges compared to those without. It appears that the participants are willing to work longer hours as a trade off for greater time and flexibility. That raises a number of questions: is it ethically ok for employers to allow their employees to work longer hours (in lieu of a commute) and secondly, will this lead to burnout, lower morale and higher attrition in the long term.

5.3 - Physical Well-Being

Taking a closer look at physical well-being and how remote work may have impacted it, the participants' response trended unfavourably. Half reported negative effects, two had mixed feelings, two reported positive effects and for one respondent it had no impact either way. Participant D felt negatively, stating, "I worked on a large site, had a commute etc. I was getting far more steps in. Now I'm confined to the apartment, to the living room. My steps have decreased dramatically". He added "I've noticed slight aches in my neck. My ergonomic set-up isn't as good. I'm more confined to the chair than in the office". Participant I had mixed feelings, "I've exercised less, it has made me lazier. However, I'm eating better. I can cook dinners, soups etc. My eating habits have improved".

Approximately half of the participants felt positively about the support their employer had given them, but four in ten felt unsatisfied (with two mixed and two negative responses). Those

that felt positive were provided with all of the necessary equipment or a budget to purchase it i.e. a desk, chair and monitor. Two had been offered fitness classes. "They organised work outs via Zoom with dance trainers and yoga teachers" (Participant G). Another participant spoke about similar offerings but highlighted additional efforts from their employer to promote healthy physical habits, "They've also encouraged walking meetings (on your phone), or without the camera on".

On the other hand, Participant H had no equipment provided (despite his manager asking for it) and another was offered only some of the equipment. Participant J referenced a seniority/grading system in place "They [his employer] covered certain items depending on the grade of your role. As I was not senior enough, I had to pay for that out of my own pocket". Participant F noted, "The desk was a cardboard desk. In my eyes it was not good quality. They could have offered me a better quality desk, similar to the actual office set-up".

Just one participant reported that their employer had surveyed them and their colleagues about their physical health and their own specific needs. Participant D commented, "They wanted to check that nobody was having injuries at home". Parents trended slightly more favourably when it came to working remotely and their physical health. This is possibly due to parents needing to be more mobile for their children, outlined by Participant E.

It remains to be seen whether employers will be required to provide suitable equipment in the future (that's fit for purpose), especially for employees working most or all of the time from home. If not, it is uncertain whether employees will invest in it themselves. Linking equipment support to seniority or grade (as per Participant J's employer) may be counterintuitive as employees operating in more junior roles would likely be receiving a lower salary, therefore requiring the assistance the most.

5.4 - Mental Well-Being

The deep dive into mental well-being revealed mixed results, with six participants reporting both a positive and a negative impact on their mental health. Two trended negatively and another two reported it had not impacted them either way. Interestingly, given the overall praise for remote work across the group not one participant reported a purely positive impact.

The subject of family was referenced on multiple occasions. Participant B shared that additional time with her daughter was a positive aid with regards to her mental health but flagged a disconnect with colleagues since the transition, "You don't get to know the new person or have exposure to other people in the building who you can build a relationship with. That's gone". Participant C felt living with her husband and two children prevented the feeling of isolation, commenting, "If you're working alone at home that could be very difficult". In contrast, Participant E found working from home with his family challenging, "It has caused fatigue, primarily due to trying to work from home and with three young children. My anger, stress etc. has been tested. One of my biggest issues is dealing with all of the noise in the house, trying to concentrate on my work".

Although participants spoke about the convenience in working from home, technology was referenced as being both a help and a hindrance. Participant D mentioned, "You feel a bit more tied to your desk. You're expected to be online. If you're offline people may think you're not working. That can be draining". In contrast, Participant I found that technology had been a great leveller. "I feel it has democratised the workplace. In the office it felt like there was more of a hierarchy. Now your leader is also at home, in more casual clothing and may have a cat in the background. So it feels like they're being themselves".

Seven of the ten participants felt well supported by their employer with regards to mental health. Additional time off (wellness days), employee assistance programs (free counselling), social events and mental health apps were all reported by more than one participant as a benefit they appreciated. Three reported that no additional support had been provided. When

asked what additional support would be helpful two participants spoke about greater support and empathy for parents, whilst others asked for 'no meeting weeks' and more social events.

It is interesting to note that men appeared to be slightly more negatively impacted in terms of mental well-being, whilst women were slightly more in favour of spending the majority of their time from home. Overall, participants felt more satisfied with the support they've received from their employer regarding their mental health as opposed to their physical health. However, the longer working hours and an increased difficulty in switching off from work for many (as referenced in theme one) has not been conducive in maintaining a healthy mind. Participant C called out COVID-19 as a negative contributor, stating, "The pandemic has put more stress on people working from home. Remote work needs to be assessed post pandemic". Time will tell.

5.5 - Employer Care

Looking to the future, each participant was asked what advice they would give to employers interested in pursuing a successful remote work set-up (including hybrid). The vast majority (eight in ten) provided a number of suggestions under the broad umbrella of employer care.

Participants A and H spoke to the importance of trust. Participants C and I stated that listening to your employees was key. Participants F and G recommended showing your employees that you care, you appreciate them and that you're willing to support them. Participant D added "engage regularly with your employees".

On a practical note, three participants believe a working from home policy may help bridge the transition. "Put clear policies in place. Be very clear on what's expected from people, and what's not expected. Be flexible, and the best approach is to give choice to employees" (Participant B). "Sit down with your employees, have a remote work policy in place. Set out targets and expectations. Look after your employees". Participant J advised, "Embrace it. People want the flexibility to decide for themselves. People want to see that there's a flexible policy".

Participant J believes remote work is essentially a double edged sword, adding "It will impact how talent is attracted". Half of the participants were either unsure of their employers' intentions after the pandemic or were already informed about a return to the status quo pre-COVID-19. This may provide food for thought for employers who may see a decrease in employee engagement, a spike in attrition and/or additional challenges when it comes to talent attraction.

In short, participants recognised this has been and this will continue to be a significant change for some time to come. Aside from employer care, communication (both ways) appears to be a key common denominator.

5.6 - Hybrid Working

One of the unanswered questions according to our participants is, will the vast majority of employers return to their previous office set-up, a hybrid model, or move to a 100% remote work set-up? Only two participants could speak with confidence, with Participant E confirming a hybrid model. Participant J praised a new hybrid program his employer had introduced last year. "It's called Choice, with responsibility - we can decide if we want to return to the office or continue working from home. We drive it but need to ensure it aligns with our team. We may need to be in once a week for our team but it gives us more ownership".

All ten participants would prefer a hybrid set-up. Two believe their employer will ask them to return to the office. Three were unsure with Participant G stating "I'm worried about this, that they'll decide to have everyone go back full-time". Half of the participants reported that they are expecting a hybrid model, yet when asked what challenges that may pose, equally half of the participants believed it could lead to a divide between remote and office based employees. "I think people will be skeptical about who is going to the office e.g. 'If I'm here, everyone else should be here'. But that says more about the individual" (Participant B). Participant C questioned "Will people feel like they need to be in the office as they're not being seen. Politics could come into play. Will you still need to be seen to be doing your job?". Participant D added,

"There could be some conflict" while Participant H warned, "There could be an 'Us and them'' mentality. You might be seen as lazy if you're working remotely'. Participant I herself had concerns about remote workers once there is a return to the office, "How productive are they?".

Participant H spoke about connectivity and inclusion, stating, "Encourage everyone to have their videos on during meetings. If one person dials in [to a meeting], everyone should". Participant J made a similar point, "We should all be dialing into meetings so it's more inclusive. If you're a manager you should be aware of how your team is feeling, regardless of whether they're in the office or not".

Based on the participants' answers, a hybrid model seems likely to be embraced by at least a significant percentage of employers. The question remains, how committed will employers be to making hybrid work? Simply adopting a hybrid approach may not provide a magic wand in appeasing employees who do not wish to give away their feeling of additional flexibility. Therefore, it is critical that employers truly embrace hybrid for what it is and provide a genuine sense of belonging for all, regardless of location. This may be easier said than done.

5.7 - Conclusion

In summary, it appears that working from home is here to stay. Participants could not have been more clear that they wish and expect to retain a strong degree of flexibility in the future, regardless of the additional hours and increased difficulty in switching off. Employers have therefore arrived at a fork in the road. Some have made genuine efforts to support these participants with suitable working from home equipment and going the extra mile to ensure their mental health has not suffered. However, others have not. This could lead to physical injuries longer term and the onus may be on the employer.

What is clear is that remote work still feels a bit like 'the wild wild west'. Participants have asked for policies, guidelines and rules. Employers and political parties have the opportunity to think

through what is fair, and what is not e.g. enforcing stricter working hours enabling employees to switch off and rest. This must be communicated clearly. What's in-scope vs. out-of-scope? Only then can both the employer and the employee protect themselves, one from physical and/or mental health damages, the other from a potential lawsuit. Taking a holistic view beyond the legalities and basic minimum requirements, employers should ensure its HR teams place employee care near the top of their strategic agenda. Failure to do so could lead to disconnect, lower engagement and in time higher attrition. This could lower an organisation's value proposition making it harder to attract great talent in the future. Hybrid may not be the quick fix solution employers currently have in mind. It will take a great deal of care to go above and beyond, to ensure all employees feel like they belong. Trust appears to be a vital ingredient.

The research study represents only half of the narrative, so it will be interesting to revisit the existing literature and compare. Finally, it is important to acknowledge there have been limitations, and naturally this creates an opportunity for future research opportunities. The comparison of the research study and existing literature, study limitations and future research opportunities are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

6.0 Introduction

The discussion chapter brings the research findings and existing literature together, enabling this author to compare and contrast, highlight themes and uncover new insights. This has been done in order to answer the research question, including its subset of questions. Ultimately, this study asks, does remote work have a negative impact on employee well-being? This question will attempt to be answered in the Conclusion and Recommendations Chapter, following the research findings and existing literature discussion presented in this chapter.

6.1 The Future of Work

Existing literature emphatically declared that remote work is here to stay. Political parties are promoting remote work beyond a temporary measure and outside of cities into rural areas, providing access to jobs away from compressed cities (Government of Ireland, 2021). Society has changed since COVID-19. Recorded benefits tied to remote work are plentiful, and include an increased level of employee trust (Murray, 2020a), higher job satisfaction (Green et. al, 2020) and new opportunities for those with disabilities (Boland, 2020). Research findings correlated strongly, with the vast majority of participants reporting positive feelings about remote work when asked. As per the existing literature, increased time with loved ones, less travel and in general greater flexibility drove this overall feeling.

All ten participants indicated that they would prefer to continue working remotely at least some of the time, with seven in ten having a preference for working from home the majority of the time, or at least having the option to choose themselves. A study by IBM validated this feeling further, reporting that employees no longer wish to spend considerable time commuting to work (Snouwaert, 2020). Remote work has given them flexibility and time to enjoy with their loved ones. A deep dive beyond the surface however revealed that the majority of participants are working longer hours and find it more difficult to switch off working from home. External reports reinforced this view, indicating that employees have since been working longer hours (Popovici, 2020).

There was an expectation that remote work would indeed be reportedly this popular. This author was aware that some employees had reported negative effects from remote work, but was surprised to learn in the research findings that the same group of employees who are undoubtedly enthusiastic about remote work are spending more time working, and finding it harder to switch off once the laptops are closed. That represents quite the trade off, and raises a number of questions: does the elimination of a commute represent such a value that employees are willing to spend a greater amount of time (both physically and mentally) working from home? Both the research findings and existing literature (Snouwaert, 2020; Mangan, 2021) indicate that it does. Secondly, does an employee's perceived sense of greater flexibility hold true if they are working longer hours, and find it harder to detach? This remains unclear, and warrants further investigation.

6.2 Physical Well-Being

From the results in the Findings and Analysis Chapter, a concerning finding emerges. Seven in ten participants reported at least some negative effects from a physical well-being point of view. Participants listed a number of causes which included less forced opportunities to walk (via their commute and/or at work), inadequate environments (the family car) and a poor ergonomic set-up leading to physical discomfort. Equally, existing literature warned of the risks of working from home without proper support. Chronic back pain (Chaplin, 2020), neck injuries (Unum, 2020) and inadequate working space (Mudditt, 2020) were cited.

Employer satisfaction on this topic was split between the group based on what equipment they were provided with (if any). Some were provided with all of the necessary equipment whilst others felt frustrated at the lack of support. Worryingly, nine in ten participants had not been risk assessed at home. An external report on this topic also suggested that many are not being risk assessed, have not been provided with adequate equipment and as a result are suffering from physical injuries (Franklin, 2021).

It is unclear as to whether employers in Ireland understand that the health and safety of their employees lie in their responsibility, regardless of where the employee is based (HSA, 2020). The correlation between the existing literature and research findings is a cause for concern. The pandemic forced employers and employees alike into an unfamiliar working environment for many. However, employers have a duty of care. It is understandable that many have been slow to act due to other priorities, but as time progresses the greater the expectation will be for organisations to risk assess and support their employees.

6.3 Mental Well-Being

A number of challenges for organisations and employees were highlighted in the existing literature with regards to remote work. These included the feeling of isolation (Staglin, 2020), depression (Jacobs, 2020), procrastination (Wang et. al, 2021) and increased family conflict from living and working in the same space (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020). The findings of this research shared some of these concerns but the topic provided a mixed response from the group, with just over half of the participants sharing both positive and negative impacts. Technology was called out by one participant as a contributor in feeling the need to be seen online, reducing that sense of freedom one would have in the office. In contrast, another felt it was somewhat of a leveller, with senior leadership in the same situation leading to a greater sense of rapport.

Longer working hours (Popovici, 2020) and an expectation by some employers to be responsive at unreasonable hours (Burke, 2020) has led to the Government of Ireland (2021) creating a code of practice for remote work which includes the right to disconnect. However, the research study indicated a more favourable finding. Seven in ten participants felt well supported by their employer with regards to their mental health. Support included wellness days, counselling and online events. Less meetings and additional support for parents were called out as two possible benefactors their employers could introduce. In the research study, the topic of family caused a divide in opinion with two parents commenting that their children had helped them mentally during the pandemic. In contrast, another participant found it very challenging with three young children at home, leading to fatigue and an increased level of stress.

Interestingly, mental well-being and employer support trended more favourably than physical well-being. The concerns raised in the existing literature such as depression and loneliness (Coleman et. al, 2020; Jacobs 2020) were not reported by participants in the research study. It is clear the pandemic has not helped employees' mental health but there are positive indicators that should employers and employees choose to embrace remote work long term they have every chance of doing so successfully. The pandemic stripped employees of their choice to work from the office, from home or in a hybrid form. Perhaps the solution here is simply a matter of choice. Remote work may be successful for some, for others it will not. Employers should continue to listen to their employees' needs, such as better support for parents.

6.4 Employer Care

Uncertainty around future flexibility was raised in the research findings. The majority of participants simply do not know what is next. They asked to be listened to, and to be trusted to do their work away from the office. They asked their employers to engage with them and ultimately agree on a long term remote work policy that would work for all. Some participants were also aware that failure to get this right could impact their employer's retention and future hiring. Communication came through as a key theme.

Evidence that the organisational landscape we live in today is changing was presented throughout the existing literature. The Irish government's public acknowledgement and support of this change is clear (McGee and Wall, 2020). The majority of employees do not wish to return to an office only culture (Miley, 2021), and a significant percentage of employees would consider leaving their employer without the flexibility they've experienced since the pandemic (Mangan, 2021). Other studies contrast this popularity, reporting that employees feel burnt out and exhausted working in a remote set-up (Robinson, 2020; Davis and Green, 2020; Debouk, 2020). Despite this, employees have already begun switching roles for more remote friendly options beyond COVID-19 (Paul, 2021). It was therefore unsurprising to learn that four in five employers are now willing to embrace some sort of flexible remote model (Goodbody, 2021).

Although existing literature indicates that the vast majority of employers are willing to evolve beyond purely an office based culture, participants in the research study did not provide the same level of confidence. However, it is possible that many organisations at this time of writing are still working through the finer details, before communicating anything publicly. There is work to be done, and this author hopes that the participants will feel valued and heard. The topic of employer care is quite the umbrella, and a remote friendly policy is just one cog in a larger wheel. As indicated previously, physical well-being has been neglected in a large percentage of organisations, and although mental health findings have been less concerning there is still an opportunity to do more. The existing literature and research findings suggest that a high level of employer care demonstrated would be received very favourably by employees, promoting higher engagement and lower attrition. It may also enhance an organisation's talent acquisition prospects in the war for talent. This warrants further study, but should this hypothesis hold true, employers must prioritise employer care.

6.5 Hybrid Working

A hybrid working model appears to be the favoured approach for many organisations, according to the existing literature (Bergen, 2021; Mangan, 2021; Sabin 2021). This could represent the best of both worlds, with time spent both at the office and at home. In the research study, only two in ten participants could confirm their employer was adopting a hybrid model, although others held that expectation, without assurance at this time of writing.

However, some authors predict organisations may revoke that decision (Green et. al, 2020; Waters, 20201) whilst others warn that we as people may simply struggle to adapt (Ardill, 2021b). Although hybrid working was unanimously favoured by all research participants, approximately half believed it could create divide, possible conflict and lower the feeling of trust amongst those working from home compared to the office. There is a risk that those who choose to spend more of their time working remotely may feel excluded (Sethi, 2021). Therefore, it may not be the quick fix solution many would hope for.

The research findings correlate with the warnings in the existing literature and therefore should be taken seriously by employers. A 'one size fits all' approach may not be the solution. A tailored approach with flexibility in mind and an emphasis on inclusion may serve employers and employees alike better, creating a sustainable model that is more likely to succeed for all long term. It is important that employers don't recreate an environment where employees need to be physically seen in order to be perceived as working.

6.6 Limitations

There have been limitations with regards to this research. Qualitative research is prone to its own limitations, as it does not lend itself as well to hypothesis testing or a larger sample size assessment (Yu et. al, 2021). The focus on participants' experience and feelings (Dobrovolny and Fuentes, 2008) may have resulted in less subjectivity, and greater bias (Vaughan, 2019). Semi-structured interviews can be time consuming (Adams, 2015) and unfortunately due to time constraints it was only possible to conduct the research study with ten participants. It is possible that another pool of participants may have yielded a different set of results.

At the time of writing there was a lack of academic journals available, compared with other topics this author could have considered. Many have been repetitive, with a similar angle or perhaps were particularly niche e.g. studies in countries such as India or China where cultural norms can differ, or in manufacturing environments where remote work may not lend itself as well. Academic studies in Ireland were relatively sparse which was disadvantageous factoring in that the research study focussed on Irish based employees.

This study focussed on the 29-39 year old age group. In doing so, it excluded those in their early career who may have found it easier or more challenging to adapt. One participant in the research study commented that it would be more challenging for junior employees as he believed they have not had the benefit of learning from their peers in an office environment. However, these limitations carve out multiple opportunities for future research on this topic.

6.7 Future Research

A handful of future research opportunities thus present themselves. A study could be conducted twelve months after the lockdown restrictions have ended, removing the forced lockdown from the equation. This time would allow the researcher to compare and contrast how employees felt about remote work and their mental health before and after the pandemic. Equally, a study on a specific group of individuals could be conducted i.e. parents, graduates or older working professionals. It would afford the researcher the opportunity to explore whether remote work is better suited to a specific group of individuals compared to another. On the other hand, a broader study using a quantitative methodology would open up the opportunity to gather insights from a larger pool of employees. Alternatively, a study could be done examining remote work from an international perspective. This could utilise Hoftsede's cultural dimensions framework, comparing and contrasting employees' experiences from different regions of the world e.g. Ireland and China.

A study from the lens of an employer would offer interesting insights from another perspective e.g. how remote work has impacted their workforce in terms of productivity, morale, talent attraction & retention. Lastly, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, it would be interesting to examine whether an employee's perceived sense of greater flexibility in remote work is in fact true, if they are working longer hours and/or find it harder to detach from their work.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter draws a number of conclusions to this study. It attempts to firstly answer the sub-questions, and then the overall question. It concludes with four recommendations and a few final thoughts to consider.

7.1 Research Questions & Findings

This study sought to deep dive into the topic of remote work and employee well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, following the consequential shift from a primarily office based working society to becoming fully remote during the lockdown. This shift saw organisations such as Dropbox, Fujitsu and Siemens close some or all of their offices in response (Ardill, 2020). In the literature review, an environmental analysis was conducted using the PESTLE model. This was carried out in order to enable this author to take a step back, and holistically assess the world we've been living in since the pandemic, with the broader topic of remote work in mind. The PESTLE model concluded that political, economic, social, technological and environmental forces favour the swift transition we've made towards remote based work (Boland, 2020; Government of Ireland, 2020; Mangan, 2021; Moalla, 2021; Paul, 2021). However, the legal factor highlighted that at least in some countries such as Ireland, the health and safety of employees lies very much in the hands of their employers, irrespective of where the employee is based (HSA, 2020). That raised the question: are employers taking adequate care of their employees?

Existing literature outlined the reasons as to why remote work has been such a success. This included the option for employers to reduce their overheads via a reduction (or elimination) of office space (Nevogt, 2020), and many employees have welcomed the change due to less time spent commuting, resulting in more time being available for loved ones and leisure (Snouwaert, 2020). The evolution of technology has raised the argument that many roles can be performed successfully regardless of location (Melluso et. al, 2020), and a reduction in traffic and travel has been favoured by those concerned about the planet (Crowley et. al, 2020).

On the other hand, reports and surveys have indicated that employees have felt burnt out from remote work, reporting longer hours and a greater difficulty in switching off. Equally, many have suffered physically without a proper ergonomic set-up and/or risk assessment in place. The lockdown enforced by COVID-19 left some employees feeling exasperated due to isolation. Although it has been reported that a segment of employers have made great strides to support their employees, others have offered little in support or understanding. These concerns have motivated the Irish government to produce a best practice guide on remote work including the right to disconnect. Employers have begun to communicate that they intend to move to a hybrid working model, encompassing both office and remote based work. However, it was reported that such a model could lead to a divide amongst workers who spend more time in the office and vice versa.

The world appears to be moving full steam ahead towards a future incorporating remote work. A research gap was thus identified: does remote work have a negative impact on employee well-being? This study generated five additional sub-questions to help answer this question, and considers what a successful remote set-up could look like in the future.

The Methodology Chapter outlined the most popular kinds of primary research, exploring the theory behind them before confirming an approach. Qualitative research was selected given society's transition from an office based culture to fully remote (albeit at least temporarily) created a social experiment in itself. Given the existing literature reported both positive and negative reports regarding remote work, it was important to understand how participants felt about this transition on a deeper level, based on their own personal experiences, and whether remote work was a favourable option for them in the future. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to compare participants' experience in a more consistent way, but with the option to unpack an interesting disclosure, where relevant.

The Discussion Chapter brought the existing literature and research study together to compare and contrast. Below, each of the five sub-questions outlined in Chapter Three are listed once again, with answers to each question based on the conclusions drawn from the discussion.

Sub-Question 1: Does the long term future of work include remote work?

The long term future does include remote work. Both existing literature and the research findings correlate strongly that our once office based society is evolving into a remote friendly one. Survey after survey indicates this, and eight in ten participants in the research study felt strongly in favour. It is anticipated that only a small percentage of office based organisations will insist on a return to the office and some have or will evolve into a remote only organisation. The majority of organisations will embrace a hybrid model for a 'best of both worlds' approach, namely flexibility for employees but with frequent in-person collaboration.

Sub-Question 2: How does remote work impact an employee's physical health?

Existing literature and the research study confirm that remote work can negatively impact an employee's physical health, but the level of impact can be heightened or mitigated depending on the equipment and ergonomic set-up available to them. For example, an employee working from their kitchen with just their laptop on a long term basis contrasts considerably to an employee with their own monitor, keyboard, mouse, ergonomic chair and a suitable desk. The employee working from their kitchen may suffer from long term back and/or neck injuries in the future (Participant E), whereas the employee with the right equipment and ergonomic support may not suffer any injuries at all (Participant H).

Sub-Question 3: How does remote work impact an employee's mental health?

Existing literature and the research study confirm that remote work can negatively impact an employee's mental health. This correlates with the previous sub-question but there is greater complexity which would determine the level of impact experienced, if any at all. It appears that an employee's state of mind, personality and preferences play a large role in determining whether remote only work can be successful for them. Possible reasons for this include:

- An employee's living space - an employee working from their bedroom or living room may struggle to separate work from home (Participant D), compared to an employee with a dedicated home office room (Participant J). Unfortunately the research study did

not include how many people lived with each participant, if any. In retrospect this would have been helpful to understand. Thus, it can only be speculated that some employees living alone may be more likely to feel lonely, whereas some employees living with multiple housemates may struggle with cabin fever.

- An employee's family situation - an employee with one child may cherish the additional time spent with them (Participant B) whereas an employee with three children may struggle to do their work in a quiet space (Participant E).
- The level of support provided by their employers i.e. employee assistance programs, 'no meeting' weeks and online social events were well received by participants according to the research study.

The final piece in this puzzle is COVID-19, and the enforced lockdowns as a result of the pandemic. These lockdowns prevented employees from leaving their homes for recreational purposes, limiting movement to less than 5km in Ireland for months at a time. Based on the existing literature and research study, this author believes that these restrictions and the worry or health risks posed by the virus itself have played a negative part in impacting an employee's well-being. This provides opportunity for further research on remote work with regards to mental well-being, beyond the pandemic.

Sub-Question 4: To what extent are employers providing a meaningful level of care to their employees with regards to remote work?

Existing literature and the research study provide mixed results regarding this question. Based on the data available today and the limited nature of the research study it is not possible to ascertain the percentage of employers providing adequate care as opposed to those who are not. However, it is known that some employers have gone above and beyond by offering their employees wellness days, the correct physical equipment, mental health support etc. Others have offered little, and as reported in the existing literature one employer was brought to court for taking advantage of their employee's working hours and right to disconnect in a remote only environment (Burke, 2020). This creates an opportunity for employers to do more.

Sub-Question 5: Beyond COVID-19, what are the perceived challenges & opportunities in a hybrid working model?

Existing literature and the research study suggest that a hybrid working model will become the norm for most office based organisations. However both warned it could create an 'us vs. them' culture where employees who spend more working remotely may feel less included than those who choose to spend most or all of their time at the office. This may have an impact on team dynamics, performance reviews etc. If not handled properly, employers may see a downturn in engagement and a spike in attrition. Participants in the research study called out for clear guidelines, inclusivity and trust to promote psychological safety.

Primary Question: Does remote work have a negative impact on employee-well being?

This leads to the research study's original question: does remote work have a negative impact on employee well-being? The answer is, inconclusive. As outlined in the second, third and fourth sub-objectives, this very much depends on an employee's personal preferences, the equipment available to them, their remote environment and the level of support provided by their employer. The pandemic forced office based workers into a remote set-up, removing their choice or ability to work in a hybrid set-up. Beyond the pandemic, those who wish to return to the office will likely be able to do so, although some may no longer have that ability if their employer has decided to shut all of their offices and transition to remote only. As with organisations who intend to exclude remote work as an option, transitioning to remote only presents a real risk with regards to talent attraction and retention.

7.2 Recommendations

This study concludes that where possible, organisations should embrace a flexible hybrid working environment, offering employees a genuine choice. Positive employee well-being is known to reduce employee attrition (Kolakowski et. al, 2020; Nash 2021). The following four recommendations (in order of priority) are geared towards HR teams and leadership alike, the goal being to maintain high employee well-being and help organisations pivot towards the future needs of their employees.

Recommendation 1: Invest in physical well-being support

- Employers must carry out a risk assessment for their remote based employees, in order to be compliant with the Health and Safety authority's legislation.
- Employers should provide the necessary equipment for their employees to do their work from home (as per the office) e.g. a laptop, keyboard, mouse, monitor, ergonomic chair and working desk. If there are genuine financial constraints employees could instead be reimbursed for a certain amount, enabling them to select what they need.

Timeframe & Cost Considerations

This would depend on the size of the organisation, but at an estimate would vary as follows: small organisations (2 weeks or less), medium size organisations (1 month or less) and large organisations (3 months or less). A risk assessment cost would primarily involve time (labour) and could be undertaken by the existing HR team. Alternatively, a contractor could be hired at circa €35,000-€50,000 per annum pro rata (based on this author's work related research). One possible option to save on time would be to set up an automated online process whereby the employee could answer a series of questions and depending on the answer it would then trigger a conversation with HR to further review e.g. health concerns, a potentially hazardous home set-up etc. However, the employer would have to validate this process satisfies the needs of the Health and Safety Authority.

The cost of equipment depending on the quality could range from €1,000-€3,000 per employee. Alternatively, if budget is a concern the amount could be specified in advance, allowing the employee to purchase what they need and expense back the agreed amount via receipts e.g. a desk, ergonomic chair, headphones and/or monitor. This would also save time on behalf of the HR or facilities team to place the orders, especially in larger organisations.

Recommendation 2: Invest in mental well-being support

- During the pandemic, some employers gave additional leave for wellness. This could be continued beyond the pandemic with an emphasis on their mental well-being e.g. additional time to spend with family, meditate, exercise, online yoga etc. This could be as little as half a day per quarter, but would likely be well received.

- Additional well-being programs such as an employee assistance program (EAP) can help employees to feel supported during difficult times. Quarterly in-person and/or monthly online social events for all employees would enable remote only workers to stay connected with their office counterparts.

<u>Timeframe & Cost Considerations</u>

Once approved, additional time off could be communicated very quickly (in a matter of days). It is estimated that the introduction of an EAP program would take 1-2 months to implement, allowing time to review potential partners e.g. Laya Healthcare, VHI etc.

Healthcare packages for employees (based on this author's work related research) range from €800-€1,600 per year but would include an EAP program for free.

Recommendation 3: Prioritise employer care

- Employer care extends beyond physical and mental well-being support. Employee engagement surveys would help organisations to get a sense of the 'mood on the floor' and learn what is and isn't working for them e.g. parents have different needs and priorities to those without e.g. flexi-time. Follow-up focus groups by HR could help leadership to better understand results from a qualitative perspective. An action plan could then be created and communicated to all employees.

- Employers should seek regular feedback from remote workers to assess their happiness, hours spent working, ability to switch off after work, perceived level of inclusion and take action accordingly.

<u>Timeframe & Cost Considerations</u>

The only cost involved in this would be time, and this should be handled by the HR team i.e. sending out the surveys, analysing the results, sharing themes with leadership and setting up focus groups thereafter to better understand the data. It is recommended that these surveys are ongoing and could be done twice per year e.g. via pulse checks.

Recommendation 4: Create a successful hybrid working environment

● A truly flexible environment includes genuine choice between how much time is spent at the office vs. at home. Organisations are advised not to get too prescriptive, and instead ask their employees what they want, consider if their role can be done from home and afford them this freedom. This may result in a mix of employees working primarily from the office, primarily from home or a mix between the two. Certain in-person events could still be required e.g. onboarding or a quarterly offsite. This may create an opportunity to repurpose existing office space for team collaboration events. A 'Head of Remote' (or culture) position could be created if one does not already exist.

● Organisations are encouraged to create a flexible remote working policy. Performance should be measured on results and impact, rather than physical visibility or response time on email or a chat application tool.

● Where organisations wish to remain office led, they are encouraged to take a remote first approach with regards to communication to ensure inclusivity e.g. using video conferencing if one or more team members may be working from home.

<u>Timeframe & Cost Considerations</u>

A 'Head of Remote' position may warrant a salary ranging from €70,000-€120,000 per annum depending on the size of the organisation (based on this author's work related research). It is estimated that this role may take two to three months to hire for. Given this role is relatively new it would be advisable to consider internal candidates, such as the HR team or program managers who may have a passion for this topic.

A remote work policy would take a matter of weeks to create, including time for reviews and sign off by leadership and HR alike. It is recommended that feedback is ascertained by a select group of employees before the policy is finalised. This would allow time for final changes before going live in order to validate it would be well received e.g. via an employee committee.

7.3 Conclusion

Ultimately, the topic of remote work is a complex one. The success or failure of remote work is influenced by a myriad of factors, including environmental, a person's emotional well-being, their preferences and importantly, the actions of an employer. Therefore, employers must go above and beyond to ensure such a working arrangement can be successful for all. From an employers' perspective, remote work is a double edge sword. It can enable, or hinder their talent attraction and retention strategies.

This author hopes this research study has provided satisfactory answers to its questions, and will contribute towards a greater understanding of this topic, acting as an aid for future research.

Personal Learning Statement

As part of my Masters in Human Resource Management, a research study was required in order to obtain my qualification. When the COVID-19 lockdown occurred, and continued on for several months, it felt natural to explore how such a significant global event would affect employees from a HR perspective. Equally, the subject of remote work has been of interest to me in recent years. I was aware that there were limited studies on remote work and how it impacted employee well-being. Therefore, I felt I could take a deep dive into this topic.

As an employee who transitioned from office based work to remote during the lockdown, I had my own experiences and feelings on remote work. Personally, I'm a firm believer that remote work has a place in the future of business, although I was unsure if it would suit everyone. Through studying existing literature and carrying out primary research I was able to gain a much deeper understanding from others. I learnt that the experience of remote work can vary disproportionately from one person to another, influenced by many factors such as their own preferences, their home set-up, who they live with, and importantly, the level of support from their employer.

At the time of writing, I believe the majority of employers have yet to truly figure out a successful hybrid working model. This is only natural given we have yet to emerge from the pandemic. Therefore, it was fascinating to study what we currently know about hybrid, via primary and secondary research.

If I were to undertake this study again, I would be keen to explore the topic from a quantitative perspective. This would afford me the opportunity to learn first hand from a much larger group of individuals, and may provide additional insights.

Overall, I immensely enjoyed this opportunity to study remote work and how it impacts employee well-being. Not only was it highly interesting to me, I hope my work can benefit researchers and future studies on this topic.

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Appendices

Research Study Consent Form

Thesis Subject Title:

A qualitative investigation into the mental and physical effects caused by remote work during the COVID-19 lockdown, and the future of remote working beyond the pandemic.

The Purpose Of This Study:

The researcher's paper examines the negative effects associated with remote work from a well-being perspective and explores whether employees and employers are adequately prepared to counter such implications. Following the primary research a practical guide will be provided as part of this research for employees and employers. This is intended to set both parties up for success in a world which has shifted significantly in favour of remote work.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Does the future of work include remote working?
2. How does remote work impact an employee's mental health?
3. How does remote work impact an employee's physical health?
4. What additional support could employers consider providing for their employees with regards to their mental and physical health?
5. Beyond COVID-19, how can employers create an inclusive environment where remote works feel the same sense of belonging and inclusion as their office counterparts?

Participant Requirements:

You will be asked a series of questions related to remote work and how it may have impacted your well-being. It will include questions such as how working remotely over the past year has impacted your physical and mental health, what support your employer has offered you (if any) and your feelings on how a hybrid office/remote set-up may work post COVID-19.

Please find attached with this consent form a copy of these questions in advance.

Researcher:

Matt Langan, Masters Student in HRM (National College of Ireland) -

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College Supervisor:

Supervisor: Eileen Tan

email: eileen.tan@ncirl.ie, phone: 0876806669

Consent

I _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. I understand I am free to ask the researcher any questions related to this study, consent form or interview in advance of the interview.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I understand that participation involves taking part in a 30-45 minute interview with the researcher who will ask me questions on the topic of remote work and how it has impacted my mental and physical well-being.

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

I understand and agree that my interview will be conducted over and audio-recorded on Microsoft Teams.

I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the researcher's thesis as part of his course work for his Masters in HRM at the National College of Ireland. I understand the data will be used for this thesis but will not be traceable back to the participant.

I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on the researcher's password protected computer until the NCI exam board confirms the results of the thesis. It will be disposed of thereafter. It will be accessible only to the researcher and supervisor.

I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for five years from the date of the thesis results.

I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant:

_____

Date:

_____

Signature of researcher:

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

_____

Date:

_____

Research Study Interview Questions

Participant Background

1. Participant A/B/C
2. Gender
3. Age
4. Children/Dependants
5. Role
6. Employer Industry

Introduction

1. What are the first three words you would use to describe remote working and why?

Physical Well-Being

1. In what way has remote work impacted your physical health, for example physical discomfort... or in a positive way?
2. What options have been made available to you, to support your physical well-being? (Examples: an ergonomic chair, second monitor etc.)
3. What additional support from your employer would benefit your physical well-being?

Mental Well-Being

1. In what way has remote work impacted your mental health, for example anxiety, depression etc. or in a positive way?
2. What steps has your employer taken to support you working remotely? (Examples: employee assistance program, virtual events etc.)
3. What additional steps could your employer take that would benefit your mental well-being?
4. Have you worked more or less hours since moving to a remote set-up? Why?
5. Have you found it easier or harder to switch off after closing the laptop? Why?

Post COVID-19

1. What flexibility has your employer offered once it is safe to work from the office again e.g. to be 100% home or office based, or work in a hybrid model (2-3 days from home)?

2. What would be your ideal preference and why?

3. Imagine a hybrid model where some workers are 100% remote and others are 100% office based. What challenges would that present?

4. (If applicable) What steps could an employer take to mitigate any such challenges?

In Conclusion

1. Overall, how do you feel about the switch to remote work?

2. What advice would you give to employers to ensure remote work can be successful for them and their employees?