



**What impact has remote work had on performance management, employee engagement levels, and social isolation for office workers during the pandemic from a manager's perspective?**

**by**

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## Abstract

**Background and Aim:** Many organisations that work within an office have had an abrupt shift to remote working life due to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic. The aim of this study is to explore the impact that remote work had on performance management, social isolation, and employee engagement for office workers during the pandemic from a managers perspective using a qualitative approach. **Method:** Semi-structured interviews were carried out with three managers from an architectural company that worked remotely during the pandemic. **Results:** A thematic analysis was carried out and three main themes were identified; (i) Employee well-being (ii) Performance management (iii) Employee engagement. **Conclusion:** Participants were motivated by the array of supports available to them while working remotely within their organisation to help with employee well-being and employee engagement, however, the quality of these supports varied. An ongoing issue for remote workers is employees' not knowing how to switch off from work which is often leading to employees' becoming burnt out. Overall, the pandemic has caused many challenges and changes for remote workers which have in turn had a major impact on their performance, engagement, and well-being.

*Keywords:* Covid-19, Impact, Remote Working, Performance Management, Engagement, Well-being.

## Declaration

### Declaration Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

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**Table of Contents**

**Abstract.....2**

**Declaration and Submission Form.....3**

**Acknowledgements.....4**

**Chapter 1.....6**

**1.1 Introduction.....6**

**1.2 Overview of the Research Topic.....6**

**1.3 Background of the Study.....6**

<b>1.4 Purpose of the Study.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.5 Significance of the Study.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.6 Problem Statement.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.7 Overview of Chapters.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.2 Performance Management Changes.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.3 Performance Management Challenges.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2.4 Monitoring of Performance Management.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.5 Social Isolation and Loneliness.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.6 Multisource Performance Management System.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.7 Employee Engagement.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>2.8 Literature Review Conclusion.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 3 Research Objectives.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Chapter 4 Methodology.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4.2 Theoretical Perspective.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>4.2.1 Understanding Paradigms.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>4.2.2 Exploring Paradigms.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>4.2.3 Interpretative Paradigm.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>4.3 Epistemology, Ontology, Phenomenology.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>4.4 Qualitative Research.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>4.5 Qualitative Data Collection.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>4.5.1 Research Methods.....</b>	<b>24</b>

<b>4.5.2 Constructing Semi Structured Interviews.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>4.5.3 Piloting Case Study Questions.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>4.6 Sampling Method.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>4.6.1 Sampling Participants.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>4.7 Thematic Analysis.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>4.8 Ethical Considerations.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>4.9 Research Instrument.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>4.10 Limitations.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>4.11 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Chapter 5 Findings.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>5.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>5.2 Theme 1: Employee Well-Being.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>5.2.1 Social Isolation and Loneliness.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>5.2.2 Employee Well-Being Programmes.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>5.2.3 Burnt Out.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>5.3 Theme 2: Performance Management.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>5.3.1 Employee Performance.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>5.3.2 Performance Management Challenges.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>5.3.3 Performance Management Changes.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>5.4 Theme 3: Employee Engagement.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>5.4.1 Hybrid Working.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>5.4.2 Staff Shortages.....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>5.4.3 Distractions.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>5.5 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>34</b>

<b>Chapter 6 Discussion and Analysis.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>6.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>6.2 Theme One: Employee Well-Being.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>6.3 Theme Two: Performance Management.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>6.4 Theme Three: Employee Engagement.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>6.5 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Chapter 7 Conclusion and Recommendations.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>7.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>7.2 Recommendations.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>7.3 Future Research.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>7.4 Financial Costs.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>7.5 Limitations of the Study.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>7.6 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter 8 Personal Statement and Reflective Journal.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Appendix A - Email of Participation.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Appendix B – Interview Case Study Questions.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Appendix C – Pilot Study Questions.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Appendix D – Consent Form.....</b>	<b>54</b>

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Overview of The Research Topic**

Firstly, the topic that has been chosen to be worthy of study is performance management. This is an important aspect of human resource management used in many organisations around the world to ensure a high level of performance which is vital for all organisations especially amongst remote workers.

This study looks at the effective operation of the performance management process as it is the key to achieving the objectives of the organisation and its employees. It is also a mechanism for employee engagement if it is handled correctly. The aim was to get an in-depth view into managers' perception of performance management in an architectural firm in a forced remote working world, due to the coronavirus. Additionally, it was hoped to gauge managers' perception of employees' engagement levels and employee well-being while working remotely.

### **1.2 Background of the Study**

According to the goals of the organisation, performance management seeks to track, maintain, and enhance employee performance. It's not just one thing to do, but a variety of things that should be done in a coordinated manner (Gifford, 2020). The objective of performance management is to establish a work environment where employees can give their all and do the finest work possible in the most efficient and productive way.

The ongoing global coronavirus pandemic has caused changes to how performance is monitored and has created many challenges due to them having to work remotely or hybrid working. This change to how work is being monitored has brought many positive elements to work as employees get the chance to work from the comfort of their own home but has also caused many issues such as it being difficult to ensure work life balance and, in many cases, social isolation and decreased employee engagement levels.



### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

There are two theories underlying the concept of performance management. One theory is the goal setting theory, which was created in 1968 by Edwin Locke. According to this view, an employee's personal objectives are very significant in encouraging them to give their best effort. This is a result of the workers continuing to follow their goals. If these goals aren't achieved, they either boost performance or alter the goals to make them more attainable. If performance increases, the performance management system's objectives will be met (Clark, 2005).

The second theory is called expectancy theory which was created by Victor Vroom in 1964. This theory is founded on the notion that people alter their behaviour in an organisation based on the likelihood that their desired goals will be attained. The people alter their actions in a way that is most likely to help them achieve these objectives. The idea of performance management is based on this notion since it holds that performance is influenced by expectations for the future (Clark, 2005).

When done incorrectly, performance management can have a negative effect on workers' productivity, enthusiasm, and engagement as well as potentially disrupt operations that will cause issues for managers. However, proponents of performance management contend that when done correctly, it enhances employees' performance, engagement, and dedication (Festing, Knappert, Dowling and Engle 2012; Gruman and Saks 2011). The level of employee engagement that businesses experience is directly impacted by effective performance management.

The purpose of this study is to find out the impact that employee engagement, social isolation and performance management had on remote working during the pandemic by showing the changes and challenges. Companies have the tools they need to boost employee engagement across the board and increase profitability. These tools include virtual channels for feedback and recognition, career paths and professional development, and a revised process for accurate and meaningful appraisals conducted monthly rather than yearly.

## **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This research will help future researchers to gain a deeper understanding of remote working and hybrid working which is the new normal; it will show them ways in which organisations came up with new ways to use performance management and how employees and management felt about these changes showing both the positives and negatives of this change.

Performance management is a very important function and process in organisations for ensuring employee objectives meet the needs of the organisation. Managing it correctly is important for both management and employees. Finding ways to maintain the integrity of the process is more difficult in a remote working environment. Employee engagement and well-being is also very important in all organisations in order for it to run efficiently so being able to see if it was affected and what affected it during the pandemic is vital.

## **1.5 Problem Statement**

The main problem that is the focus of this study is the disease Covid-19. When exposed to Covid-19, the majority of patients have a mild to severe respiratory infection and recover without any need for special treatment. When Covid-19 is severe, it can cause respiratory failure that requires critical care and may be fatal. Elderly people and people with underlying medical illnesses including cancer, diabetes, heart disease, or chronic respiratory diseases are more likely to experience serious illness (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2022).

They were suddenly pushed into working from home due to the country going into lockdown and the many restrictions that were in place. The lockdown had a major impact on employees' wellbeing such as burnout, stress, and social isolation. There were many challenges for managers to maintain high levels of performance management when there was limited or no opportunities to work face to face with employees. They have been forced to transition quickly without any training.

Many managers struggled to trust that their employees were working as they could no longer see their direct reports or have employees under supervision. When such uncertainties arise, managers may begin to have an irrational expectation that those staff members be accessible at any time, undermining their ability to balance work and home life and adding to their stress levels at work (Parker, Knight and Keller, 2020).

## **1.6 Overview of Chapters**

**Chapter 1 - Introduction:** In this chapter, the research background is described, along with the research challenge that served as the inspiration for the study.

**Chapter 2 - Literature Review:** In this chapter, the body of prior research relevant to this study is critically evaluated. It is also discussed how this knowledge affects the research questions, objectives, and formulation for the current study.

**Chapter 3 - Research Objectives:** In this chapter, the primary research goals are explained, along with the research question.

**Chapter 4 - Research Methodology:** This chapter describes the techniques used to gather data. Additionally, it identifies the research ethics that govern the current investigation.

**Chapter 5 – Research Findings:** This chapter analyses the data collected.

**Chapter 6 - Discussion and Analysis:** To address the research objectives, this chapter presents the findings made in the current study by criticising and comparing them with findings in prior literature.

**Chapter 7 - Conclusion and Recommendations:** In this chapter, the research is concluded by going over the research objectives once more and providing a summary of the research process. Additionally, it highlights the most important findings, points out the study's limits and opportunities for further research, and finishes with research implications and recommendations.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter's main goal is to present a thorough analysis of the research that has already been done in the fields of social isolation, related performance management practices, and employee

engagement levels. The purpose of this research is to discover the impact that remote work had on employees performance, engagement and overall well-being to see if there is ways to prevent a negative impact occurring.

The first section looks at what changes had to be made to the performance management activity while working remotely, one of the main changes has been how employee well-being is there biggest priority while working remotely because if their employees are not well performance is essential down. The second section looks at the challenges performance management brought to organisations while working remotely, the main challenge for management was having trust in their employees to do their job without supervision.

The third section covers how performance management was monitored during the pandemic, there were many ways that supervisors monitored their employees and they depended on how much they could trust their employees. The fourth section was about social isolation and loneliness, showing how employees felt while working from home during then pandemic. The fifth section looks at how multisource performance management system is ideal during the pandemic as it will help employees and management connect. Finally, the sixth section looks at employee engagement levels, showing how they have decreased and ways that many organisations have helped engagement levels increase again while working remotely.

## 2.2 Performance Management Changes

The pandemic is far more than a health crisis, it also has a financial and social impact on individuals. The globe has been forced into recession (Bluedorn, Gopinath, and Sandri, 2020), and many countries around the globe have imposed lockdowns and curfews as control measures, forcing citizens to work from home, causing companies and schools to close, making preserving a work–family balance extremely hard (Habersaat *et al.*, 2020).

The impact of the coronavirus on many workplaces has been extensive. The most significant transformation has been the rapid development of remote working, which necessitates a different set of skills than face-to-face management (Hellen, 2021). This has occurred due to public health concerns; remote working is used across many sectors and has caused organisations to become even more adaptive (Hellen, 2021). As the pandemic is still ongoing many organisations are facing major decisions on how to measure the performance of their employees who all work from home.

Every company should prioritise performance management since it is a continual process for discovering, measuring, and improving performance in an organisation by connecting each individual's performance and goals to the organisation's overall aims and goals (Aguinis, 2013). The pandemic has pushed employee health and wellbeing to the top of the priority list within every business across all sectors. All performance management systems now include strategies for monitoring and measuring their organisation's wellbeing (Engage for Success, 2021). The most successful businesses use employee data to create employee wellbeing programmes that will in turn increase performance while also looking after their employees' mental health (Engage for Success, 2021).

Management have had to transition quickly to these changes and mostly without training to help them. While some jobs have adapted easily into remote working, some sectors are not very well suited for the remote working environment and some workers have home lives that have overwhelming challenges (Parker *et al.*, 2020). Due to these issues management may be finding their job roles more challenging than before which may in turn cause their employees lives to be more stressful due to management's struggle to adapt to this new work environment (Parker *et al.*, 2020).

Ultimately, performance management assists businesses in defining goals and strategic objectives, as well as job descriptions and duties. Many organisations had to alter course as a consequence of covid-19, trying to adjust priorities, product, and services, as well as workers' job descriptions (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2021). Businesses can use performance management systems to help employees understand the company's strategic directions and why and how job responsibilities must change.

A few strong performers often contribute significantly more than the majority of employees, which creates a performance gap (Aguinis, Gottfredson and Joo, 2012). To attain and maintain a competitive edge and be able to overcome the crisis, it is essential to keep these top achievers who make contributions that are substantially more significant.

To conclude, the main problem is that all organisations are now facing major decisions on how they should measure the performance of their employees remotely without any training beforehand.

### 2.3 Performance Management Challenges

Many challenges are shown through balancing home life and work life alongside one another which can affect performance. Considering these when making performance related decisions is vital. Remote working has created a change in how managers measure performance, since the pandemic they focus on output not the number of hours an employee puts into their work as all that matters is the results.

Whereas before the pandemic management would see the best performers as the ones that spent the most time at their office desk (Parker *et al.*, 2020). Some managers struggle when they cannot see their direct reports as they find it hard to trust that their employees are doing the work. When this happens, management can start to have an unreasonable expectation that all their employees within the team are always available throughout the day (Parker *et al.*, 2020).

This is disrupting their employees' work home balance and is potentially causing more stress for their employees as they are not having the break they need away from their work, which will overtime cause burnout. By trusting their staff, it will benefit them in the long run as the staff will be loyal to them so it is unlikely, they will need to hire for some time (Risley, 2020).

Based on the research, it is believed that there are many different scenarios that employees may be facing which may affect their performance remotely especially those who have compromised finances or a family to care for. Employees are also finding it hard to perform at the same level as they did prior to the coronavirus pandemic (Parker *et al.*, 2020).

There are a few specific elements that are required to determine a worker's effectiveness in an organisation. Variables related to work, such as stress within their job role and conflicts inside and outside of work, have an impact on performance (Novitasari, Sasono, and Asbari, 2020). According to Novitasari *et al.* (2020), Some of the criteria used to assess performance include quality, quantity, timeliness, cost effectiveness, and social interactions. They examined staff performance in terms of quantity, quality, precision, punctuality, teamwork, and commitment, among other factors.

Through examining past research, this study has discovered that in most cases, remote working does not affect productivity negatively and that it actually leads to enhanced productivity, increased rates of employee satisfaction and talent retention (Hellen, 2021). The key component for effective remote working is trust in one another. If there is no trust it will lead to many challenges such as poor communication and employee disengagement.

At the beginning of remote working teams' management are usually more wary of underperformance amongst employees as it is new, so they often use the employees' past performance to give them an opportunity to create a balanced assessment of differences in their performance in the present year.

Employee performance development may very well have been one of the most ignored aspects of performance management during the pandemic's frantic first year (Rossheim, 2021). With the great resignation now causing havoc for many organisations, it is more important than ever to make visible investments in employees' development.

However, such investment does not have to be in the shape of a costly external program. Work from home has benefited in staff development by demonstrating that it is not so much about spending money and bringing employees abroad for training as it is about utilising internal opportunities (Rossheim, 2021). It is critical to not just concentrate on responsibilities, but also to discuss professional advancement options more freely.

In conclusion, the main issue the change in how performance is now monitored while working remotely it is disrupting their employees' work home balance and is potentially causing more stress for their employees as they aren't getting a break due to managers not having full trust in their employees which will overtime cause burnout.

#### 2.4 Monitoring of Performance Management

Employee performance management had already begun to change before the Covid-19 outbreak. Based on the digital performance data for each employee that was readily available, it began to become more data driven (Göndöcs and Dörfler, 2021). By depending on constant feedback as a new type of positive performance behaviour, it also began to become more forward-looking and development/learning focused.

During the pandemic, many businesses monitored performance management through a short regular one-on-one meeting (Flinchum, Kreamer, Rogelberg and Gooty, 2022). As this is in a remote working scenario many used zoom calls as a form of communication, this app allows them to see and hear one another through a device. This gives management the opportunity to give their employee feedback and to also seek feedback from them. This gives them the opportunity to voice any concerns they have about remote working and for management to

express their expectations (Hellen, 2021). But the concern with this form of evaluation is that often employees' become less disciplined about the one-on-one meetings over a period of time which is a challenge and shows that businesses need to use more than one way to evaluate their employee's performance to see which one works best for their company's culture.

Another way that businesses monitor performance management is through feedback, but research has discovered that almost half of the staff say that they received feedback from management a couple of times a year or less (Wigert and Barrett, 2020). But when this is done correctly, feedback allows employees to grow and to understand their role within the workplace. Informal feedback can often diminish in a remote work setting and employees can start to feel disconnected from their work or feel a lack of purpose over time especially due to people's mood changes from day to day from hope to fear on top of work and challenges at home (Wigert and Barrett, 2020).

So, it is vital that management give regular feedback in the moment when something happens where possible. Recognizing performance as soon as possible after the incident has proven to be the most efficient technique to leave a positive impression on employees (Hellen, 2021). This helps management to stop recency bias, not miss any achievements and remember all incidents that occurred.

Another type of monitoring that some employees encountered from their supervisors while working remotely included daily reports, clocking in and out using programs like DingTalk, and being obliged to keep a camera on while working (Wang, Liu, Qian, and Parker, 2021). Being monitored was generally seen favourably by many people, as it was easier to manage their procrastination and focus on important tasks that needed to be completed as a result.

When working remotely management will lead to typed communications amongst themselves and employees but they must not rely on only this form of communication to deliver feedback (Larson, Vroman, and Makarius, 2020). The lack of body language and tone of voice, as well as the inability to see each other, is critical and may cause the employee to place a negative interpretation on their feedback (Hellen, 2021). A video call is the best communication channel as they can see one another and can hear their tone of voice which has a significant influence on how a message is interpreted.

Where possible, feedback should always be positive and if there is negative feedback to be given care should be taken. The best feedback is actionable and constructive (Collier, 2019). By identifying the activities that were successful and demonstrating the positive consequences



from it, you can guarantee that the feedback you provide is meaningful to your employee (Hellen, 2021). Management always tends to always give feedback to the best performers often, but all employees should get regular feedback on their achievements regardless.

The level of trust between employees and employers is crucial when monitoring employee performance. Utilising surveillance can damage trust and motivation, which worsens interactions between employees and employers. Employees who are being monitored have less faith in their co-workers', and managers who begin utilising surveillance have less faith in their staff as well (Laker, Godley, Patel, and Cobb, 2020). Based on these conclusions, they advise using surveillance only as a temporary or additional tool to deal with the trust crisis.

## 2.5 Social Isolation and Loneliness

Workplace well-being encompasses all aspects of working life, including the physical environment's quality and safety as well as employees' attitudes toward their workplace, their work conditions, the work culture, and work organisation (International Labour Organization, 2022). The performance of a business over the long run is significantly influenced by the happiness of its management and workforce. Numerous studies have discovered a connection between workers' general health and wellbeing and productivity.

Work-life balance, productivity, work satisfaction, and staff turnover are just a few of the job performance measures that have been connected to employee wellbeing (Keeman et al., 2017; Bakker and Oerlemans, 2011). Due to their lack of social connection and isolation from the outside world during the covid-19 pandemic, office workers experienced mental health issues. While some people loved the independence of working from home, many who do so alone or in a small space felt inadequate, lonely, and mentally worn out (Cho, Beck and Voids, 2022). But the lack of planning for the change to working from home, the decrease in physical exercise brought on by lockdowns, and the mental health problems brought on by stress and social isolation all worked together to make matters worse.

It becomes challenging to leave work stress at work when work is confined to a tiny location where you also live (Cho, Beck and Voids, 2022). Employees with mental health issues, in particular, frequently felt unmotivated and unproductive at work because every day felt like a repeat of the day before, the uncertainty about when the lockdown will end, and

employees missing human interaction played a major part in it because, after a while, phone calls and zoom just weren't enough.

Some peoples' physical health problems were brought on by staying in one place and contributing to a sedentary lifestyle. A lot of office workers spent almost eight hours a day in meetings. Office workers today spend nearly eight hours a day sitting down as opposed to the dashing from room to room and leaving the office at lunchtime in pre-covid times (Cho, Beck and Volda, 2022). Many office workers developed health-related problems like insomnia or poor eating habits because of increased pressure to perform, all while worrying that they wouldn't be able to live up to management expectations (Halford, 2005).

Managers may help their staff cope with increased stress and loneliness by finding new and positive methods to connect them (Moss, 2020). Managers display that workers well-being is very important to them by checking in and putting up areas for employees to create and connect such as chat groups to discuss topics that aren't related to work or the pandemic.

Many companies have used technology to develop social linkages for their employees. The New York Times, for example, held a pet parade featuring employees who work from home and their pets. Virtual reading clubs, team-bonding movie nights, virtual pizza parties, and remote happy hours, where workers dial in and have a cocktail over Zoom or Skype, have all been brought in by many companies (Moss, 2020). Basecamp, a software firm, offers specific social media channels where no work-related talks are permitted; instead, food, sports, pets, and humour are discussed. The channels are similarly devoid of any mention of the pandemic.

It has been observed that working remotely makes people feel as though they lack social support both inside and outside of the workplace (Hager, 2018). By managers helping employees interact while working remotely is absolutely viable. It may be flawed, and many workers will still yearn for occasional moments of human touch, but managers may make the work-from-home experience a little less lonely by introducing a little humour and enjoyment on a routine basis. Now is not the time to be concerned about non-work-related talks reducing productivity. Businesses will appear insensitive if access to these tools is restricted. Managers must act compassionately in times of great stress and support whatever tools are necessary to promote social collaboration and peer support (CIPD, 2022).

In conclusion, social isolation and loneliness has become a big issue especially for employees that work remotely due to them having to stay in one room for hours with some employees having no human interaction other than work. It is crucial that all organisations encourage activities that helps employees interact virtually outside of work.

## 2.6 Multisource Performance Management System

Performance reviews are often solely completed by management and employees. Only approximately 20% of employees receive ratings from their colleagues (Vozza, 2020). But, a multisource performance management system, also referred to as a 360-degree system, has several benefits for businesses during a catastrophe. A multisource feedback system includes performance data from co-workers, direct reports, partners, suppliers, and customers in contrast to supervisors and employees. It is most effective when used for employee development.

A multisource performance feedback system can assist employees who work remotely in interacting with each other, strengthening their emotional ties to the team and the company as well as their sense of togetherness (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2021). Additionally, more performance connections are necessary to provide in-depth insights on employees' strengths and weaknesses when performance is hard to see. Additionally, managers frequently need to have awkward conversations with employees.

Meetings for virtual performances become much more delicate and challenging when face-to-face interaction is prohibited. A multisource strategy promotes communication and feedback because employees are less likely to feel hostile when input comes from a variety of sources. This once in a lifetime chance was presented by the pandemic to put in place a multisource feedback system that would increase staff care and support (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2021). The implementation of such a method is probably going to make workplace conflicts and disagreements due to the pandemic more apparent.

Overall, it is clear that the multisource feedback system, would merely serve as an effective form of messenger and is a good way to provide feedback and dialogue while working remotely.

## 2.7 Employee Engagement

The definition of employee engagement is a topic of much discussion among academics despite being a topic of extensive study. "A positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption" is one of the most often used definitions of employee engagement amongst academics (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002, p. 74).

Since being obliged to work from home due to the covid-19 lockdown and stay-at-home orders, staff workloads had increased. Despite having to manage additional family commitments such as home schooling, childcare, chores and adjust to the abrupt shift to remote working, they were needed to take on more jobs (Adisa, Ogbonnaya and Adekoya, 2021). Workers levels of work engagement decreased because of these modifications since they had to put in more effort.

Greater staff shortages resulting from job losses and layoffs were one of the most prominent causes of the increasing work intensity (Adisa *et al.*, 2021). Many workers were laid off because of the Covid-19 lockdown and stay-at-home orders, and those who were still working had to take on extra responsibility which resulted in low levels of work engagement.

Even though most employees can benefit from working electronically, those who did not do so before the pandemic may suffer as a result. Many workers have encountered situations when they feel under pressure to constantly be online and available to respond to work-related duties. Longer workdays, continuous virtual meetings, and persistent pressure to check and respond to work-related emails or messages after hours are just a few of the drawbacks of this kind of work-related experience (Adisa *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, a lot of people felt compelled to maintain an online presence to show that they were still carrying out their duties while working from home.

Another significant factor that caused low levels of work engagement was found to be employment uncertainty (Asfaw, A.G., and Chang, C.C., 2019). Due to the devastating socioeconomic effects of the epidemic, several firms implemented cost-cutting measures that included lowering employee benefits, scaling back operations, reorganizing employee roles, and even laying off certain workers. Many workers thus experienced increased uncertainty over their employment circumstances. Employees were less engaged at work because they were more worried about the possibility of losing their jobs.

The management of employees who work remotely, according to Delany (2021, pp. 261) "Is very much an active process, with managers needing to ensure that they maintain close, and personal contact with their personnel." Line managers are under heightened strain due to this expectation and the pressures associated with coronavirus. Line managers frequently lack the

training and abilities necessary to perform this function (Gallup 2022). Beyond those needed in a face-to-face situation, managing remote workers necessitates a variety of abilities, including coaching, mentoring, expectations management, and the capacity to understand digital body language (Delany, 2021). But far too frequently, people are assigned to line management positions because of their technical expertise rather than the soft qualities necessary for efficient people management.

Remote employee engagement is significant as it enhances a company's culture. When they are aware that the company values their work despite their distant employment, employees develop a strong sense of attachment. When engaged, employees like it when their co-workers check in with them and collaborate to uphold the company's values.

When workers alternate between working from home and the office, remote work boosts employee engagement. According to Gallup (2022), employees who worked from home three to four days out of the five days of the working week saw the greatest increase in engagement. Working from home tends to encourage vigor by generating new job-related resources. According to research already conducted, working from home increases job autonomy by letting employees choose their own work settings and schedules, which results in an increase in job resources that fosters intrinsic job motivation (Felstead, Jewson, Phizacklea, Walters, 2002).

In conclusion, it's clear that employee engagement levels were extremely low during the pandemic due to many factors such as uncertainty, extra workload, distractions, and abrupt change. Hybrid working appears to boost engagement levels as employees can get the best of both.

## **2.8 Literature Review Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident that performance management, social isolation and employee engagement levels are all clearly defined through various academic literature. In fact, throughout the lockdown, people changed, and companies will need to continue reforming to efficiently keep their abilities. Although the quarantine forced people to remain apart, it may also bring them closer once it is done. Milder (2020) stated that although working remotely was required of us, it also allowed hundreds of companies and employees to consistently generate cash throughout these difficult economic times.

Since all companies had to reassess their organizational structures and develop new remote work methods and practices. According to a review of the literature, there are a lot of novel techniques for both organizations and personnel. The definitions and numerous effects of remote work on employees discussed in this part are followed by the research question and the research aims in the following chapter.

### **Chapter 3: Research Objectives**

A research question provides a focus on a specific issue that will be investigated (Collins and Hussey, 2014) the research objective for this study is:

*“To discover what impact has remote work had on performance management, employee engagement levels, and social isolation for office workers during the pandemic”*

For the purpose of this investigation, a local architectural company was chosen as a case study to gather this information. The following sub-objectives are outlined in order to answer the predominant research question:

- To discover the impact social isolation had on office workers’ wellbeing and how it affected their performance and engagement.
- To look at how performance management has changed through how it is monitored and the challenges it has brought for management in a remote working world.
- To gauge managers’ perception on employee engagement levels while working remotely during the pandemic.
- To discover the impact that social isolation and loneliness has had on employees well-being while working remotely during the pandemic.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The term methodology refers to a set of methods and strategies for gathering, processing, and analysing data on a specific issue. Research methods aid in the discovery of answers to the problems posed in this section. Primary data sources which is data generated by the researcher, surveys, interviews, and experiments. It explains the research methods used, as well as why specific methodology and data inputs were chosen.

This chapter will present the method and approach in this study. It will measure the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on employee engagement, social isolation and performance management for office workers working from home will be outlined, along with details of the research instrument, a qualitative case study. Along with its shortcomings, the rationale for choosing semi structured interviews is explored. Discussions on study limits and researcher ethics are also included.

### **4.2 Theoretical Perspective**

#### 4.2.1 Understanding Paradigms

A paradigm is defined as a fundamental framework of assumptions that directs behaviour (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The paradigm of a researcher is the frame of reference they bring to a study. Findings regarding phenomena are developed and conclusions are drawn using this philosophical framework. Researchers can easily identify and explain perspectives and assumptions using the practical tools provided by paradigm.

Researchers must consider the research paradigm in order to create an efficient research design, making sure that it is consistent with their viewpoint on the nature of reality (Mills, Bonner, and Francis, 2006). The positivism, critical theory, and interpretivism philosophical paradigms of research are the three most prevalent and well-known types (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). These paradigms are simplified versions of the diverse worldviews that underpin various study orientations. Research initiatives are guided by a certain paradigm's nature, which is influenced by several philosophical and practical factors.

#### 4.2.2 Exploring Paradigms

Interpretivism, Positivism and Critical Theory are a few various types of paradigm methods (Shah and Al-Bargi, 2013). Taking a closer look at these paradigms, positivism believes that reality exists interdependently of humans, with an ontological position of realism and an epistemological position of objectivism. With a relativist ontological perspective, subjectivity, and the formation of knowledge as its guiding principles, interpretivism is interested in how people see and build reality.

When looking at ontological it holds a position of historical realism, which means its reality is shaped by historical social structures, and an epistemological position is seen as subjectivity, which holds that nothing can be explored without having an impact on the researcher, are the guiding principles of critical theory, which seeks to effect change. As a result, it can be said that the critical paradigm aims to emancipate, the interpretive paradigm seeks to understand phenomena, and the positivist paradigm seeks to generalise observations (Shah and Al-Bargi, 2013).

#### 4.2.3 Interpretative Paradigm

Interpretive research has several distinctive benefits. Firstly, they are frequently useful for building theories in fields with little to no or insufficient a priori theory. Secondly, they are suitable for researching context-specific, singular, or peculiar events or processes (Lumen Learning, 2022). Thirdly, interpretive research can aid in the creation of interesting and important research questions for more investigation.

An interpretive study aims to construct and understand the lived experience of individuals while the researcher's position is reflexive of their own significance and being in the universe. The philosophical foundation for this qualitative research is the study of the lived experience, which is known as phenomenology (Frechette *et al.*, 2020).

### **4.3 Epistemology, Ontology and Phenomenology**

Barron (2006) defines ontology as “a concept concerned with the existence of, and relationship between, different aspects of society such as social actors, cultural norms, and social structure.



Ontological issues are concerned with questions pertaining to the kinds of things that exist within society.”

According to Crotty (1998), epistemology is a way of understanding the world and how to look at it. It incorporates knowledge, and as a result, it inexorably embodies a specific understanding of what knowledge entails. Crotty (1998) continues by stating that the nature of knowledge, as well as its potential, restrictions, and legitimacy, are all topics covered by epistemology. Similar to the previous definition, but with a focus on the divergent perspectives of how the natural and social worlds should be examined, Bryman (2008) describes epistemology as an issue pertaining to the query of what is considered to be acceptable knowledge in a discipline.

Phenomenological research, a qualitative research approach, tries to understand and describe the essential components of a phenomenon. The methodology disregards the researcher's preconceived ideas about the phenomenon and evaluates human experience in daily life (E. Neubauer, T. Witkop and Varpio, 2019).

#### **4.4 Qualitative Research**

Qualitative and quantitative research are the two categories of research methods. Non-numerical data, such as text, video, or audio, are obtained in qualitative research. Understanding people's views, experiences, opinions, behaviour, and interactions involves using the qualitative technique (Pathak, Jena, and Kalra, 2013). It can be used to develop new research ideas or to gain a thorough grasp of a topic.

Because the required data for this study was non-numerical and an in-depth analysis was required to meet the research objective, a qualitative research approach was used. Additionally, this study's research methodology is interpretivist in character since its goal is to develop fresh, deeper insights into the social context of the effects that remote work has had on workers by examining an organization from the perspective of managers. Because participants in qualitative research are free to answer interview questions honestly and completely, the study's participants are better understood (Taylor, DeValut and Bogdan, 2015).

#### **4.5 Qualitative Data Collection**

This type of data is known as primary data, this includes the researcher's own data, questionnaires, interviews, and experiments that are created with the specific goal of illuminating and resolving the current research issue. (Research Guides, 2022).

#### 4.5.1 Research Methods

Interviews were the major type of qualitative research used in this study to collect information from individuals about the topic matter. Unstructured, semi-structured, and structured interviews are all available (Quinlan *et al.*, 2019). A one-to-one semi-structured technique to interviewing was used for the purposes of this study. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and email to guarantee compliance with Covid-19 limitations.

The selection of categories that were appropriate for the research study and the creation of interview questions were part of the first step of the interview process. Each participant was asked a total of thirteen questions. In order to guarantee that the interview did not stray from the important subject, the author had prepared a set of thirteen questions that the interviewer used to guide the conversation.

The interview questions were split into different sections; the first segment focussed on the participants history with the architecture group, the second section focussed on the first theme which was employee well-being. The third section focussed on the second theme which was performance management and the fourth section focussed on the third theme which was employee engagement levels while working remotely.

The interviewer was free to ask open-ended questions in semi-structured interviews to get in-depth responses. Thus, it was essential to record the interview in order to thoroughly analyse the results. Based on the answers given by the people interviewed, each interview lasted between 8-15 minutes.

#### 4.5.2 Constructing Semi Structured Interviews

The advantages of both structured and unstructured interviews are combined in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews usually have open-ended questions to allow for flexibility. When you ask the same questions in the same order, it is simpler to compare answers, but it can also be limiting. Minimal structure can nevertheless allow for participant comparisons while assisting in the identification of patterns.

The semi-structured feature of this strategy is defined by this framework and the flexibility of the responses. It appears to be a more popular interview approaches for the degree of relevancy it provides the topic while remaining responsive to the participant (Bartholomew, Henderson, and Marcia, 2000).

Additionally, semi-structured interviews provide researchers the chance to "probe" interviewees for a response (Saunders et al., 2019). The interviewee might reveal more about their unique views and feelings regarding the selected subject thanks to the interviewer's one-sided dialogue with the participants.

Informants have greater authority and control over what and how it is addressed during semi-structured interviews (Saks and Allsop, 2013). Semi-structured interviews also give researchers the chance to examine and separate themselves from their implicit knowledge of the subject under investigation.

#### 4.5.3 Piloting case study questions

A pilot study to test research methods, data collection tools and other research techniques in preparation for a slightly bigger study is what is meant by the term pilot study (Abu Hassan, Schattner and Mazza, 2006). One of the crucial phases of a research project is the pilot study, which is carried out to pinpoint possible problematic areas.

A pilot study was conducted before the interviews to make sure the questions were pertinent and addressed all the topics required to address the research issues. A former manager who was used in the study was the person who was interviewed for the pilot study. To make sure the questions covered all the pertinent subjects to address the study question, the participant was asked three primary questions, each of which contained five supporting questions. The pilot study's participants were given the chance to comment on the questions.

Although the feedback was mostly good, it was evident that the participant was confused about the modifications made to their performance management activity because they were not there

when the changes were made during the pandemic. Following the study, I made more sub-questions into main questions as they required more importance. Without having options available, the participant in the pilot interview found it challenging to decide precisely what had the most impact on employee engagement levels so within the interview I named a few potential factors as examples to help the participant if needed.

## **4.6 Sampling Method**

Probability sampling and non-probability sampling are two different types of sampling methodologies. Probability sampling's main element of random selection allows you to make reliable statistical inferences about the group members. Non-probability sampling, which incorporates non-random selection based on convenience or other factors, makes it simple to collect data (Mc Combes, 2019).

A non-probability purposive or judgmental sampling technique was employed for the purposes of this study. In this instance, the researcher decided who should be included in the sample. This entails making a choice based on the potential traits and capacities that somebody may have. This includes the researcher selecting participants who have expertise or experience in the study's subject. In other words, the selected participants would serve as important research informants. In this instance, managers and supervisors who worked remotely were chosen as participants to achieve the study's goals in discovering the impact that remote work had on employees from a manager's perspective.

### **4.6.1 Sampling Participants**

The primary data was collected by participants who were managers or supervisors who worked remotely during the pandemic for the architecture firm and are currently still working there. Through the communications through email, the researcher looked for candidates. After explaining the study's objectives, participants were asked if they would be open to taking part in an interview. All three participants in the study gave their consent. Each participant received an email with a consent form attached that explained the study's goals, its confidentiality policies, and why the interview was being recorded. The interviews did not require permission from the architecture group because the study did not mention the organisation's name.

## 4.7 Thematic Analysis

The data collected has been handled through a thematic analysis of qualitative case study questions through the app zoom that can be downloaded on to a mobile phone or laptop. Thematic analysis is a method for finding patterns and themes in data and developing them. Using exact quotes from the interview responses, the researcher employed themes to spot trends. There are six steps to this.

- The first stage is to get familiar with the information by having to read and re-read all the interviews and data being used. At this stage it is often useful to write down early impressions.
- The second stage is to generate initial codes which is organising the data in a systematic and meaningful way. Coding reduces lots of data into small chunks of meaning.
- The third stage is to look for themes and to gather data for each one. A theme is a pattern that captures something significant or interesting about the data and or the research question.
- The fourth stage is to evaluate all the themes in order to produce a map of the analysis.
- The fifth stage is to describe and name each theme.
- The sixth stage and final stage is to produce the overall report for the analysis (de Wet and Koekemoer, 2016).

## 4.8 Ethical Considerations

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019, p. 252-253) define ethics as “the standards of behaviour that guide your conduct in relation to the rights of those who become subject to your work or are affected by it.” To enable people to determine whether they wanted to participate or not, the potential participants were given a detailed description of the study's objectives and substance.

Participants have the right to receive an informed consent form, according to Saunders *et al.*, (2019). Individuals can choose whether or not they want to participate in the study after receiving key information about it on this form. Participants will also be made aware of their rights to informed consent and the freedom to leave the research process at any moment without consequences.

Moreover, it is essential that interviewees' dignity must be maintained and always respected. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants must be always protected for this to happen. To make sure that the data could not be openly accessed by anybody other than the researcher or used for other reasons, all information was electronically saved and secured with a password. The participants were also made aware that all data would only be utilised for the purposes of the dissertation and would be erased after the research was finished.

Last but not least, the Harvard reference style was faithfully followed throughout this research study to properly credit earlier work by different authors.

#### **4.9 Research Instrument**

The research instrument used to collect the data required for this research includes a set of case study interview questions about the research topic with a purpose of collecting reliable answers to the questions. Within interviews people tend to be more honest as it is a natural two-way conversation about themselves and their opinion about open ended questions, and the interview is voluntary to the respondents.

The selection of categories that were appropriate for the research study and the formulation of interview questions were the first steps in the interview process. Each of the participants was asked three main questions that each contained three sub-questions in total. The interviewer used a script to guide the conversation, which included a set of questions which was posed to the participants to keep the conversation on track. There were also sub questions to lead the questions further and get all the information needed for the study.

The interview questions were divided into three sections: the first focused on the impact employee well-being had on employees while working remotely during the pandemic from a manager's perspective. Which was broken down into three sub sections called social isolation and loneliness, burnt out and employee wellbeing programmes.

The second section was based on how performance management has changed in the way that it is monitored while working remotely. The sub sections were called performance management challenges, performance management changes and employee performance. Lastly, the third section was based on employee engagement levels while working remotely from a manager's perspective. Each sub section was called distractions, staff shortages and hybrid working.

#### **4.10 Limitations**

With this overall approach there are some potential limitations. While thematic analysis is flexible, the flexibility can be unpredictable and have discontinuity when creating themes taken from the research data (Holloway and Todres, 2003).

Everyone possesses unconscious bias of their own. However, it is up to the data collector to determine what qualifies as a fact and what does not, even though the case study method seeks to lessen the impact of this bias by acquiring factual data. This suggests that the outcomes the researcher is seeking from the entity may be based on the real-time data being collected. By influencing the information acquired, research can manage the results that this approach yields.

Despite the level of careful planning that is done in advance, it is obvious that any research project will have constraints that are beyond its ability to manage. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic was the study's most significant limitation. Face-to-face interviews could not be conducted due to limitations at many workplaces.

To successfully conduct the interviews, the interviewer and participants had to make necessary changes. Participants had to install a software program either through Microsoft Teams or Zoom and become familiar with it before the interview to conduct virtual face-to-face interviews. Office workers were prepared for the interview because they were already accustomed to communicating via online platforms.

#### **4.11 Conclusion**

The following section will conclude the results of the data analysis, after taking into consideration the definitions of methodologies and outlining the methodology used to plan and carry out the research for this project.

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings obtained from the Zoom interviews and presents the impact performance management, social isolation and work life balance had on office workers who worked from home during the pandemic in Ireland. It will show evidence of office workers experience of working from home and the impact it had on managing a team and individual performance and impacts on employee wellbeing.

This section highlights some of the findings. This study's main objective, as previously indicated, was to determine how working from home during the pandemic has affected managers' and employees' performance. Throughout this section, other intriguing findings are given.

## **5.2 Theme 1: Employee Well-Being**

This section of the chapter focuses on the perception of employee well-being looking at how employees have been feeling while working remotely due to the pandemic. Each participant had a similar perception on the topic as they all knew an employee that struggled with loneliness due to social isolation. Participant P1 commented “It did feel isolating at times especially for workers without families”. Similarly, participant P2 noted that “many employees were used to mixing with their colleagues and other teams when in the office but because of covid 19 that interaction was reduced to just the people in their team.” The following factors social isolation and loneliness, and employee well-being programmes and burn out were commonly used to discuss employee well-being while working remotely during the pandemic throughout the interviews and will be discussed below.

### 5.2.1 Social Isolation and Loneliness

All three participants agreed that social isolation and loneliness was a big factor when I came to remote working during the pandemic and they all knew of an employee that particularly struggled due to loneliness.

P2 stated that “One employee who was working for me was flat sharing with one other person and working from his bedroom which meant he was spending up to 22 hours in one room.” Similarly, P1 outlined that “An employee in his late 20’s moved back home with his parents



and was therefore isolated from his friends”. Lastly P3 used the word “anecdotally yes” when discussing if employees felt isolated and lonely during the pandemic.

This portrays that social isolation and loneliness had a major effect on office workers while working remotely due to the pandemic and that they were all very much aware of the impact it was having on employees.

### 5.2.2 Employee Well-Being Programmes

An important theme within this section was employee well-being programmes as it was interesting to see what programmes this company used to help their employee’s well-being while working remotely. One participant P2 stated that “the company provided virtual fitness classes, quizzes and interaction with Laya healthcare to provide online mental health services for all employees”

Similarly, P1 explained that the company also organised “online activities such as cooking classes, crafts and wine tasting”. Likewise, P3 acknowledged that it “we have a wellbeing committee and try to run regular events as well as trying to make the day to day better”.

This emphasises that due to covid 19 this company have come up with many ways to help their employee’s well-being so that they feel less alone and more a part of a team.

### 5.2.3 Burnt Out

All participants came across an employee that was burnt out mainly due to the employee not knowing when to stop working as they struggled to find a balance between work and home life. P1 stated that “Like all architect offices there can be an element of being overworked and burnt out”. P2 similarly mentioned that “it is important to know when to say no that’s enough or I need more help”.

This highlights the impact that remote working had on office workers mentally and physically within this organisation.

## **5.3 Theme 2: Performance Management**

This section focuses on the research objective to ‘investigate impact that the changes made to performance management had on office workers’ it is evident from the data collected that there were many challenges due to the changes in the way performance management was monitored while working remotely. The factors that were chosen were performance management challenges, performance management changes and employee performance.

### 5.3.1 Employee Performance

The abrupt shift to remote working according to P1 was “difficult at the beginning as equipment was being sorted out and lack of childcare at times was challenging.” P2 mentioned that while working remotely it was “harder to switch off, so often ended up doing some extra work in the evening time”. P3 also stated that “I’ve heard a lot of people say they worked longer hours”.

This emphasises that it was difficult for employees to perform as well as they did while working in the office as there is more distractions at home and equipment wasn’t always reliable as many had bad Wi-Fi connect at times depending on where they lived.

### 5.3.2 Performance Management Challenges

Remote working has made performance management challenging for organisations. Moreover, P1 stated that “it was not difficult to trust employees” Similarly, P2 mentioned that “employees work well in the office so there is no reason to believe that they wouldn’t at home”. Furthermore, P3 explained that the biggest challenge was ensuring “one on one meetings were completed often with team leaders” in order to reiterate “goals” “updates” and “feedback” to each group and to also hear from them.

This emphasises that there performance management activity didn’t change much which could be a potential issue in terms of effective performance for all employees while working from home.

### 5.3.3 Performance Management Changes

The performance management activity had to change in ways due to the erupt change to remote working life. According to P1 one of the changes made was that there “was more intentional check ins with employees” and how it is now “more of a flexible approach than before”. Similarly, P2 explained that they had “team leaders for each group” the organisation created smaller groups to ensure effective communication and engagement between teams to ensure goals are met. In addition, P3 mentioned how the organisation “focused more on incorporating strategies for monitoring and measuring employee well-being”. This effectively shows that performance management is now becoming more intertwined with employee engagement.

### **5.4 Theme 3: Employee Engagement**

This section of the chapter focuses on the research objective ‘To discover if employee engagement levels have decreased or increased while working remotely’. Two out of the three participants felt as though employee engagement levels decreased while working remotely. P1 felt that employee engagement levels decreased and at times “I had to give employees space if you felt their mental health was suffering”. In response to this, the participants discussed two major factors in why employee engagement was quite low while working remotely and if that has changed now that they work hybridly. The factors that will be discussed are hybrid working, staff shortages and distractions while working remotely.

#### 5.4.1 Hybrid Working

All three participants stated that employee engagement levels have increased now that the company work hybridly. P1 mentioned that they “enjoy hybrid working”. Similarly, P2 stated that they “Would not like to go back to full time in the office as I have young children so with working from home, I get to bring them to school.” But interestingly P3 mentioned that “it makes a difference interacting with people in person” but engagement levels are “still lower than pre-covid”.

This illustrates that hybrid working appears to being able to interact in person again has helped employee engagement levels and allows employees to have the perfect balance between remote working life and office life.

#### 5.4.2 Staff Shortages

All three participants stated that there were staff shortages within the organisation and this in turn had an affect on employee engagement levels due to employees now having extra work to do. P1 mentioned that since the pandemic “Employees are now being offered a bonus for finding new staff members.” Additionally, P2 stated that there was a shortage of staff, but many were “employees’ getting other job opportunities in the market, resulting in HR changing senior employees’ contracts to require three months’ notice.” Furthermore, P3 explained that “Managers stood in for absent employees” to ensure that employees weren’t overworked.

This highlights that their didn’t appear to be any uncertainty about job losses within this organisation that many appeared to be getting offers from other companies or were absent from work due to them contracting covid-19.

#### 5.4.3 Distractions

A common area of concern in work-life is balancing work schedules around other family members, where, for some parents, work time becomes “porous”. Moreover, P1 mentioned how trying to balance “Trying to look after my children in between work meetings was stressful”. Similarly, P2 stated that they “Would often sacrifice my sleep hours and work at night and early mornings as they were the only quiet hours where I would have no interruptions”. In addition, P3 suggested that “social media and household chores” was a distraction while working remotely.

This emphasises that many office workers struggled to juggle home life and work life which caused a lot of stress and pressure on them due to distractions within their homes.

### **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided the primary data collected from the three interviews carried out with participants who worked remotely during covid 19. Three themes were identified along with various subthemes to discuss the findings of the interviews. It is apparent that remote work possessed many different issues for employees. Following the conduction of these interviews, it is obvious that this organisation implemented many positive activities to get employees while

working remotely. However, it is apparent that hybrid working seems to have a better impact on employees' well-being, engagement, and their overall performance.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion and Analysis**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter's main goal is to explore and present comparisons between the primary data gathered for this research project and the body of academic literature already in existence. The findings should be presented with related academic discoveries because the body of literature already in existence covers a wide range of topics for discussion. As the study's limitations are taken into account, this chapter discusses the three themes that have been found in the data.

### **6.2 Theme One: Employee Well-Being**

The key findings of the study illustrate the view of the participants in terms of if they felt their organisation prioritises employee well-being and the impact social isolation and loneliness had on remote workers.

As per the findings within theme one sub theme 5.2.1 a reoccurring issue identified by participants was social isolation and loneliness amongst employees. A participant mentioned knowing an “employee who flat shared with other people so was working in his bedroom which meant he was spending up to 22 hours a day in one room”; another mentioned “a younger employee having to move back to their parent’s house and was then isolated from their friends”.

Other researchers have also reached similar conclusions, as it is stated within my literature review that Cho, Beck and Volda, (2022) explains that it becomes challenging to leave work stress at work when work is confined to a tiny location where you also live.

It was clear that employee well-being programmes became more popular throughout the pandemic to help employees mentally and physically. P2 stated that “the company provided virtual fitness classes, quizzes and interaction with Laya healthcare to provide online mental health services for all employees” Similarly, within my literature review, Moss (2020)

explained how basecamp, a software firm, offers specific social media channels where no work-related talks are permitted; instead, food, sports, pets, and humour are discussed. This is an effective way to increase employee engagement, performance, and overall well-being.

According to Stahl (2020) burnout has been linked to a long list of physiological and psychological problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, reduced immune systems, anxiety, depression, and even mortality. Moreover, P1 stated that “Like all architect offices there can be an element of being overworked and burnt out”. Similarly in the findings section P2 mentioned that “it is important to know when to say no that’s enough or I need more help”. Eurofound (2021) explains that the ‘right to disconnect’ practice was introduced in at the end of 2021 for all organisations that work remotely, it alludes to a worker's right to be free from being forced to work and to abstain from using work-related digital communications, including emails or other messages, outside of work hours.

After reflecting on these ideas, it is easy to see that the "Right to disconnect" is effective in companies as it would make employees feel more cared for, which can boost their trust and work performance. Therefore, if the company wanted to successfully apply the practice, it must establish certain policies to protect the safety and wellbeing of its personnel.

### **6.3 Theme Two: Performance Management**

The key findings illustrated from theme two is that all participants agreed that performance management had to changed slightly due office workers having to work remotely due to the pandemic.

When looking at employee performance, P2 mentioned within the findings section that while working remotely it was “harder to switch off, so often ended up doing some extra work in the evening time”. Similarly, Risley (2020) stated by not trusting employees it is disrupting their employees’ work home balance and is potentially causing more stress for their employees as they are not having the break they need away from their work, which will overtime cause burnout.

Furthermore, within the finding section P3 explained that the biggest challenge was ensuring “one on one meetings were completed often with team leaders” in order to reiterate “goals”

“updates” and “feedback” to each group and to also hear from them. Similarly, Hellen (2021) mentions that the best feedback is completed by identifying the activities that were successful and demonstrating the positive consequences from it, you can guarantee that the feedback you provide is meaningful to your employee.

But Hellen (2021) also stated that there is concern due to employees’ becoming less disciplined about the one-on-one meetings over a period of time which is a challenge and shows that businesses need to use more than one way to evaluate their employee’s performance to see which one works best for their company’s culture.

Lastly, according to all participants performance management has had to change slightly due to remote working. According to P1 one of the changes made was that there “was more intentional check ins with employees” and how it is now “more of a flexible approach than before”.

According to Hearn (2017) flexibility in performance management is crucial since it increases a company's appeal and helps retain employees who have demanding personal obligations. Offering flexible scheduling is significant because it demonstrates your confidence in your workforce's ability to do their jobs without the need for strict, outdated regulations.

#### **6.4 Theme Three: Employee Engagement**

The second objective of this research involves: ‘review obstacles imposed by remote working and investigate how they impacted employee engagement levels.’ The third theme and its sub-themes from the findings, which looks at the difficulties the participants experienced, can be the main emphasis of this purpose.

The major issue verified from the data collected was that employee engagement levels decreased significantly while working remotely but all participants agreed that engagement levels increased now that they work hybridly but that they were still not as high as pre covid. Gallup (2021) also came to the same result, finding that allowing employees to work both in the office and from home enhanced employee engagement.

In addition, when asked how to overcome these challenges, the majority of study participants stated that a hybrid approach has solved both a lack of interaction and communication issues

because it allows them to meet colleagues for meetings and take advantage of the chance to strengthen their connections and networks.

Another issue pointed out by participants was regarding distractions while working remotely, P1 mentioned that “trying to look after my children in between work meetings was stressful” due to a lack of childcare because of covid-19. According to Keller, Meier, Elfering, and Semmer (2020), the perception of control that employees have over their job decreases as a result of the number of interruptions they encounter at work.

Lastly, another issue pointed out by participants was regarding staff shortages during the pandemic. P2 stated that there was a shortage of staff, but many were “employees’ getting other job opportunities in the market, resulting in HR changing senior employees’ contracts to require three months’ notice.” Which was different from my research within my literature review as from my research Adisa *et al.*, (2021), mentioned that many workers were laid off because of the Covid-19 lockdown and stay-at-home orders, and those who were still working had to take on extra responsibility which resulted in low levels of work engagement.

But similarly, P3 did mention that “Managers stood in for absent employees” to ensure that employees weren’t overworked. There are many ways to encourage employees to stay within an organisation but one in particular is having high employee engagement levels this can be done by giving individual attention, providing training and coaching, get social, listening to employees and giving recognition for it (Lytle, 2016).

The goal of reviewing hurdles and ways to analyse them was accomplished after considering the conclusions stated and the literature provided. It is essential to note that, depending on the organisational situation, other problems could emerge that call for alternative solutions from those suggested.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This part addressed the study findings in accordance with the suggested objectives to respond to the research question. Given how severely distant working has affected most of the participants in numerous ways, it is undeniable that many participants were more drawn to hybrid working. Most participants believed that a hybrid approach and assuring disconnection after work hours may resolve the bulk of issues associated with working remotely.



Though it might be more crucial for them to have the choice to work remotely or not rather than having it forced upon them, as each person is the greatest judge of their own needs. Having that choice and the freedom to make it could help employers draw in and keep staff while also boosting employee engagement, performance, and overall well-being.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The primary aim of this research study was to explore how remote working has impacted office workers by looking at the following factors employee engagement, social isolation/loneliness and performance management focusing on a manager's perspective within an architecture firm.

Following the review of academic literature, it became clear that there was in fact a gap in the current literature surrounding this topic. The researcher put forth three main research questions within the one question to fill this gap in the literature. The analysis of the findings section regarding the main research provided the responses to the research questions. The findings chapter portrayed current views of remote working life and how it has made an impact on employees through their engagement levels, performance, and overall wellbeing.

The outcome of the primary research and academic literature have offered the architecture group clear and concise strategies that they should put into practice in order to enhance performance management and identify more ways to increase employee engagement and well-being as this research effectively shows the positives and negatives of different methods that have been used by other organisations. It is clear that the company may not be able to instantly follow all the suggestions, but it is crucial for the architecture business to take into account and comprehend the demands of its staff in order to improve performance.

Additionally, the participants discussed the effects that working remotely had on their co-worker's as well as the resources that the organisation offered to promote employee engagement and well-being, which looked to be somewhat successful. This shows that the organisation's performance management approach has not changed much, highlighting the need for the company to modernise its performance management tools in order to provide all

employees a voice and more frequent one-on-one feedback. This prompts the question of whether the architectural group is using an antiquated performance management system once more. It is reasonable to conclude that they are not motivating their staff as effectively as they could be in this situation.

In conclusion, there is a gap in research regarding the negative impact remote working has had on remote workers. But by assessing the participants' views and expectations from their experience with remote working, this study outlined that remote work has had more of a negative impact on employee's wellbeing, engagement, and performance.

## **7.2 Recommendations**

The researcher has provided two key recommendations for the architectural group to implement to further improve employee performance, engagement, and overall well-being.

1. According to the research findings, which were summarised in the preceding section, the hybrid approach was favoured by all participants when given the option between remote and hybrid working. This strategy can guarantee greater employee flexibility, and a way to improve work-life balance. Aligning duties and supervising workers may require greater control from organisations and managers, but it can improve worker performance, engagement, and well-being. Giving the teams the freedom to decide what is best for the members while ensuring strong communication across all teams is one idea for how organisations might manage this strategy.

2. Moreover, one of the primary obstacles to the practice is that some people find it difficult to separate work from home life. The "Right to Disconnect" seeks to stop remote workers from having their family and downtime interfered with. Adopting this policy and additional procedures to ensure that employees can tell the difference between working and resting hours is strongly advised. Companies can advise staff to delete any work-related files from their personal devices and to turn off their working devices when not in use, enabling them to unplug.

3. Eventually, regarding performance management while working remotely this organisation need another performance management activity for it to be effective. As overtime employees become less disciplined about the one-on-one meetings which becomes an issue causing employee performance, engagement, and productivity to decrease over a period. The best way

to implement another approach is by choosing other ways is to try evaluating their employee's performance to see which one works best for their company's culture.

### **7.3 Future Research**

To examine the elements that affect remote employees, it would be prudent to choose participants from a variety of workforces, such as technology, banking, recruitment, or the healthcare industry, if this issue were to be researched in the future. By expanding the study's focus, the researcher will have more options for choosing participants and may acquire a better understanding of how performance management, employee engagement, and employee well-being have affected remote employees throughout the pandemic and what organisations did to help.

### **7.4 Financial Costs**

Since most recommendations call for introducing new internal policies and procedures, it is predicted that management and staff would need time to adapt, especially when it comes to culture change and allowing people the opportunity to make their own judgments. The company will need to adjust over the course of three months to a year, depending on the amount of change that will take place. Because they may already have similar processes in place, businesses with experience working remotely might need less time.

### **7.5 Limitations of the Study**

Further limitations of the study have been identified following the completion of the research. There were two key limitations of this study:

1. The Covid-19 outbreak hindered the researcher's ability to physically access materials and participants. The only options available to the researcher were email and Microsoft Teams for conducting the interviews. This is a drawback in and of itself because it is simple for someone to ignore an email and challenging to interpret body language in Microsoft Teams meetings.

2. By using only one business in an industry restricts the scope of this investigation. A multi-industry study with a large sample size might produce different and stronger results. Consequently, these should be viewed as research gaps for upcoming studies in this field. Such future research endeavours could produce ground-breaking results by utilising new research methodologies, enlarging the study area, or examining another industry or industries, and boosting the sample size.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

Ultimately, the research was successfully completed, the goals were met, and a thorough investigation was conducted. It is clear, however, that advancements might be made to the research on this subject in the future to advance the study. It is evident that there are multiple factors that can impact employee's performance, engagement and wellbeing while working remotely.

## **Chapter 8: Personal Statement and Reflective Journal**

I became interested in how remote work could impact office workers after observing how the pandemic affected people's lives. Although it was significant, the study's thematic provided several hurdles to the research because it was relatively new to the academic world and because, only over the last year, more studies have examined the effects of Covid-19.

Despite this, I was able to apply the research skills I had learned while completing the master's modules and connect earlier research with more recent writing to provide a solution to the research question and objectives I had set forth at the beginning of the study.

I made a wise choice to conduct qualitative interviews since it improved my comprehension of the effects that remote work has had on office workers. Additionally, having conducted interviews will be a huge benefit to me in the future as I progress through my career in human resources. Since this was my first dissertation at this level, it was difficult for me to get used to the format, requirements, and depth of the literature review.

However, I am really happy with the knowledge I have gained and the network I was able to create while conducting the research. These abilities will undoubtedly help me in both my current and next professional jobs.

Finally, even though I had no prior experience with remote work, I saw researching it as a method to get ready for any future need that companies may have. Additionally, I think that my research might be useful to Irish businesses and employees who work remotely.

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## **Appendix A – Email of Participation**

Hi X,

I'd like to ask you to participate in my dissertation research study. Before you decide, I want you to understand the purpose of the research and what it entails for you. Please kindly read the following material, and if anything is unclear, don't hesitate to ask me any questions.

My name is Ellen, I'm a master's student at National College of Ireland studying human resource management. I have a primary research-based dissertation I need to complete in order to complete this course. This study's primary objective is to examine employee engagement, performance management, and well-being in order to determine the effects of remote work on workers from the manager's perspective.

I believe you are a manager who has worked remotely throughout the pandemic at the architecture business. As a result, I was hoping you might take part in a semi-structured interview as part of my research study. Employee performance and burnout will be discussed, along with remote working, employee engagement, covid-19, employee well-being and performance management.

Using Microsoft Teams, I intend to conduct this interview. Depending on the respondent's responses, the interview will last 10 to 20 minutes on average. Taking part in this interview is entirely up to you. You may therefore decline to participate at any time without any repercussions, decline to answer any question, and withdraw. I can guarantee that all personal information you share and the data you supply will be kept completely anonymous throughout the research process.

I will be more than pleased to give you any more information you may need regarding the study. The data will be saved and kept for the sole purpose of conducting this study, after which it will be destroyed. Would you be willing to participate in this study based on the information provided?

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Many thanks,

Ellen

## **Appendix B - Interview Case Study Questions**

1. How long have you been employed by the organisation?
2. Did you work remotely due to the pandemic?
3. Do you feel social isolation and loneliness had an affect on office workers while working remotely during the pandemic? If so, in what way?
4. Were there any employee well-being programmes or activities set up online for employees to interact outside of working hours?
5. How has performance management changed in how it is monitored while working remotely?
6. What challenges did performance management bring management while working remotely? Did you find it difficult to fully trust employees?
7. Do you feel employee engagement levels decreased or increased while working remotely? If so, in what way?
8. Did employee's performance change while working remotely? If so, in what way?
9. Are you happy working in this organisation? Do you feel they prioritise employee wellbeing? If so, how?

10. Employee well-being is very important within all organisations; how often would you check in with employees?

11. Did your company have staff shortages due to covid? Do you think this affected engagement levels due to employees having extra work to do?

12. Did employees find it difficult to adjust to the abrupt shift to remote working?

13. Do you feel engagement levels are higher now that you work hybridly?

## **Appendix C – Pilot Study Questions**

### **Social Isolation**

#### Main Question:

What impact has social isolation and loneliness had on employee's while working remotely during the pandemic?

#### Sub-Questions:

-If so, how did you as their manager help your staff cope with increased stress and loneliness?

-Worker's wellbeing is extremely important to management, how often would you check in with employees?

-Was there an area for employees to connect with one to discuss topics that didn't involve work? Such as a games night or a pet day etc.

-Does your workplace have any employee wellbeing programmes?

### **Performance Management**

#### Main Question:

How has performance management changed in the way that it is monitored while working remotely?

### Sub-Questions:

- Did you have regular one on one meeting with employees? How often?
- How have you given feedback to employees? Through zoom, email, phone call? Video call is the best form of communication channel as they can see one another and can hear their tone of voice which has a significant influence on how a message is interpreted.
- Do you evaluate employee performance in more than one way? Over time employees become less disciplined about one-on-one meetings over time.
- Do you use a multisource feedback system?
- Was it difficult to not see direct reports and have no supervision for employees?

### **Employee Engagement**

#### Main Question:

What is your perception on employee engagement levels while working remotely during the pandemic?

#### Sub-Questions:

- Did employees struggle to stay engaged due to having to manage additional family commitments? such as home schooling, childcare, chores.
- Did many find it difficult to adjust to the abrupt shift to remote working?
- Did your company have staff shortages due to covid? Did this effect engagement levels due to employees having extra work to do?
- Do you think many employees felt compelled to maintain an online presence outside of business hours to show that they were still carrying out their duties while working from home?
- If so, did this lead to burnout?
- Do you think low engagement levels was due to increased uncertainty over their employment circumstances? Due to some employees laying off and changing of roles.
- Do you feel engagement levels are higher now that you work hybridly?

### **Appendix D – Consent Form**

**Project Title:** “What impact has remote work had on performance management, employee engagement levels, and social isolation for office workers during the pandemic from a manager’s perspective?”

### **Consent to take part in research**

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves answering a set of questions on Microsoft Teams or Zoom.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the findings section of the dissertation.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained on a password protected drive until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.



- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

**Signature of research participant**

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**Signature of participant**

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**Date**

**Signature of researcher**

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

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**Signature of researcher**

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**Date**