

***Life in Ireland after COVID-19: How will
remote working impact on attraction and
retention in the Irish public sector?***

Master of Arts in Human Resource Management

National College of Ireland

Submitted to the National College of Ireland

17 August 2022

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Abstract

Remote working (RW) has become a feature of much debate in recent times because it was used around the world to reduce the spread of COVID-19. This study aimed to investigate the impact that working and studying remotely may have on attraction and retention in the Irish public sector post-COVID-19.

Recent surveys indicate that many employees who were working remotely during the pandemic wish to continue to do so to some extent when it ends. There was evidence of negative impacts of RW, the inability to switch off, work intensification and work/non-work life tensions had been described by remote workers. The literature available on this subject relates to periods when RW was to a great extent the employee's choice. This research contributes to the current RW debate by examining if those findings were replicated when RW was not a choice and if the mandatory RW during the COVID-19 pandemic has altered employees' and job-seekers expectations regarding remote work.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who had the experience of RW or studying during the pandemic. They were either employed in or stated that they intended to apply for positions in the Irish public sector.

The transcripts of the interviews were analysed thematically and demonstrated that a one size fits all approach will not be sufficient. While job seekers may not be attracted by remote working policies, for some employees RW would be a consideration for them in choosing to transfer or move to another organisation within the public sector.

Public sector employers in the competitive labour market post-pandemic must be prepared to innovate in the area of RW arrangements to ensure that their overall value proposition meets their employees' and prospective employees' wants, needs, and expectations.

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my family, colleagues and friends who have all contributed to this study in endless conversations about the topic.

I want to thank all the participants for taking part in this study as without them it would not have been possible.

My research supervisor Assistant Professor Caitriona Hughes assisted me throughout and provided advice where needed.

Finally, I want to thank my loved ones for supporting me always.

Thank you all,

Grania Peden

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the text:

Abbreviation	Complete Term
AP	Assistant Principal Officer
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
EO	Executive Officer
EVP	Employee Value Proposition
FWA	Flexible working arrangements
FWP	Flexible work patterns
HEO	Higher Executive Officer
IDA	Industrial Development Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PO	Principal Officer
RW	Remote Working
WLB	Work-life balance

1.0 Chapter: Introduction

1.1 How it began

There are only a small number of occasions during our lifetimes when we can remember exactly where we were when we heard an announcement. Usually, it is the unexpected death of a prominent figure. For those of us living in Ireland, the statement by the then Taoiseach Mr. Leo Varadkar on 27th March 2020 that ‘Everybody must stay at home in all circumstances, except....to travel to and from work, or for purposes of work, only where the workcannot be done from home’ was one of those seminal moments.

Few could have anticipated the changes to the world of work that would result from the extraordinary measures which were taken to curb the spread of COVID-19. A transition from office based to RW was designed and implemented quickly and those organisations that could facilitate it were obliged to do so.

Now, at the mid-point of 2022 the impact of COVID-19 has reduced but the post-pandemic era has not yet fully emerged. This therefore is an appropriate time to engage in a research study to examine the impact that the two-year period of RW may have on attraction and retention in the Irish public sector.

1.2 Remote working pre-pandemic

Before the pandemic, while supportive of RW, the Irish government was not leading the way and uptake was low. Approx. 14% of employees in Ireland worked from home in some capacity (Redmond and McGuinness, 2020). In the public sector RW was infrequent, but there was a demand, and the key motivators were the reduced commute time and the greater flexibility of the arrangement (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2019).

In his review of RW policy, Hynes (2014) argued that it was the key to Irish development. He criticised policymakers for failing to recognise its benefits which was negatively impacting on its expansion. It may be because of this criticism that RW now features in the current programme for government (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020). The Government has

directed public sector employers to move to 20% RW, thus the State as an employer is leading by example (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2021).

1.3 Labour Market

The Irish economy is growing, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2022) in its economic forecast predicted gains in 2022 and 2023 which will lead to increased employment. Current figures show a record number of people are employed; it is likely that the demand for staff will continue to increase as the economy grows (Corrigan, 2022).

The evidence suggests that employees are making decisions based on the remote work practices offered. Of those who changed jobs since the outbreak of COVID-19, “47% indicated that RW was a key factor in their decision” and 88% agreed that “their organisation needs to offer remote/hybrid working to attract staff” (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022, p. 15).

The research amongst Irish employees (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022) and American workers (Barrero, Bloom and Davis, 2021) has found that the majority of those surveyed, who worked remotely during the pandemic want to continue to do so in the future. These findings are supported by an Irish study (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2022) which found that 88% of people in employment who can work remotely want to continue to do so.

During the stay-at-home period, employers were obliged to facilitate RW where possible. The technological and communication barriers which existed were overcome by investing in the appropriate equipment, software and training. This demonstrated what could be achieved, with Williamson (2022) reporting increased productivity.

It has been proposed that as a result there will now be an expectation of remote or blended working as a condition of employment and that strategies for attraction and retention may have to change to accommodate that (Kelly *et al.*, 2022). RW policies may become key for employers to remain competitive (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020).

In this competitive labour market, Irish public sector employers are already facing challenges. Increased levels of retirements are projected, in the period to 2028 (Pender and Chambers, 2018) and a linkage has been shown to exist between voluntary turnover amongst public sector employees and economic growth (Gambi and Brassill, 2020).

The opportunity now exists for employers to introduce the policies that will build on what was achieved during the pandemic, to meet the expectation of employees, and ensure that they can remain competitive.

1.4 The way forward

Public sector employers at the time of writing in June 2022, are being asked by the government to consult with their employees to agree on blended working policies (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2022). This is an opportune time to conduct a study into how RW policies may impact on attraction and retention in the Irish public sector.

This study will review the current literature and discuss and critique the work that has contributed to the understanding of this area. It will identify key themes, theories, and identify gaps in the knowledge. In that way, the research will have its theoretical foundations in the existing literature and the research questions will be designed to build on that knowledge.

Since the focus of this study is the public sector. This study will engage with a sample taken from current employees and jobseekers with an interest in that area. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with them. Through a thematic analysis of the responses received, the study will assess the importance that the RW arrangements available will be to this group.

The strategic priority of the Irish civil service, a significant public sector employer is to be an employer of choice, where people choose to work and stay (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2022). The findings of this study may inform them as they develop the blended working policies required to achieve their goal.

2.0 Chapter: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

It has been proposed that employees will have some expectation of RW as a condition of employment and that strategies for attraction and retention may have to change to accommodate that (Kelly *et al.*, 2022). It is against that backdrop that this literature review is conducted.

This literature review examines the evolution of RW, explores the challenges faced by employers which motivated them to take this approach. The links that have been established in the extant literature between RW and attraction and retention will be assessed and the key theoretical concepts which aid our understanding of them explored.

Public sector employment is the focus of this research study. This review looks at studies of attraction and retention in this sector. Finally, this review will examine emerging trends from surveys which are being conducted to gauge Irish and international workers' attitudes towards RW.

2.2 The evolution of remote working

Telecommuting was defined as working at a remote location away from the central office and using technology to complete this work (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015). The term has been replaced by the term remote work. A recent report (Government of Ireland, 2019, p. 7) defined it as 'where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis'.

The term telecommuting was first used by Nilles (1975). The aim of the practice had been during the oil crisis to reduce energy consumption. Telecommuting arrangements were developed to achieve and maintain air quality standards (Goluboff, 2001) and to facilitate the recruitment of staff who had mobility challenges (Frolick, Wilkes and Urwiler, 1993). It was also used to attract high demand workers (Caldow, 2009). Case studies and employer found that facilitating RW could reduce voluntary turnover (Hom and Griffeth, 1995).

The demand for flexible work-life programmes increased as employees used it to manage their various responsibilities (Caillier, 2013; Baltes *et al.*, 1999). As the demand increased, advances in technology, reduced costs and equipment size meant that more office workers could work remotely (Kizza, 2013).

It was thought that the future expansion of RW was likely to ‘manifest itself as a long series of tremors rather than as a sudden earthquake’ (Messenger *et al.*, 2017, p. 60). Those predicted tremors were eclipsed by a sudden earthquake in the form of COVID-19, almost overnight millions of people around the world moved from office to RW. Lister and Harnish (2011) had been prescient when identifying the potential of RW in preventing the spread of disease.

2.3 Attraction and remote working

The ‘employee value proposition’ (EVP) describes what an organisation stands for, requires and offers as an employer (Sears, 2003). One of the benefits an employer can offer is employment conditions that satisfy the work-life balance (WLB) needs of the individual.

WLB emerged in the literature in the latter part of the twentieth century with Cascio (2000, p. 166) defining WLB programmes as ‘any employer-sponsored benefits or working conditions that help employees balance work and non-work’. Darcy *et al.* (2012) include practices where employees have some control over the location where they complete their work as WLB initiatives.

The research in this area shows that where an employer has successful WLB policies and these were effectively communicated during recruitment, they impact positively on jobseekers’ intention to accept a job offer (Carless and Wintle, 2007). More recent studies of flexible working arrangements (FWA) (Thompson, Payne and Taylor, 2014) and flexible work patterns (FWP) (Onken-Menke, Nüesch, and Kröll, 2018) examined their impact on applicant attraction. Both studies found that organisations that offer discretion over place of work are of greater interest to candidates, thus increasing the number of candidates from which they can select those who are most suitable.

Much of the extant literature has focused on a range of WLB initiatives which employers provide as part of the EVP. Some studies have concentrated on FWA and FWP which included

RW but during this survey of the literature there was no evidence of research where the impact of RW policies in isolation on attraction was studied.

Surveys indicate that organisations may need to offer RW to attract staff. McCarthy *et al.* (2022) report that 88% of their respondents held that view. It is supported by evidence from an Industrial Development Authority (IDA) Ireland (2022) report which stated that 19.2% of Irish job advertisements on LinkedIn in April 2022 offered candidates the option to work from home.

WLB policies which include RW, and attraction had been linked in academic literature and the links between RW alone and attraction is emerging in recent surveys. However, while conclusions cannot be drawn from the results of the surveys because of the response bias inherent in the sampling methods used, they do indicate that the availability of RW may have become a factor for jobseekers considering positions.

2.4 Retention and remote working

Employee retention is an effort by a business to provide a working environment which supports current staff to remain with the organisation (Kaur, 2017). In knowledge-based economies and competitive marketplaces it has become increasingly important (Rotolo *et al.*, 2018; Goswami and Jha, 2012) and organisational commitment, the attachment an employee has to their organisation is seen as a strong predictor of turnover intentions (Ozkan *et al.*, 2020; Meyer *et al.*, 2002).

Recent survey evidence (CIPD, 2018) supports the view proposed by Hom and Griffeth (1995) that some employees may resign if their WLB needs are not met. Studies show that adopting family-friendly policies can help organisations to retain employees (Lee and Hong, 2011) and where an employer had successful WLB policies, they impacted positively on retention (Moen, Kelly and Hill, 2011).

Onken-Menke *et al.* (2018) contend that the availability of FWP increases organisational attachment and the retention rate of employees even if they do not avail of the practices. However, when they examined the impact of the availability of RW specifically, while there was evidence that it improved retention rate, the impact on organisational commitment was

not significant. They attributed this to the negative and positive impacts of RW on WLB which neutralised its effect.

Bloom *et al.* (2015), in their study of RW amongst Chinese call centre employees, found the turnover amongst this group was lower and job satisfaction levels higher. Moen *et al.* (2011) also showed a positive relationship with retention, however, that association was not always observed in the research. In her study of government employees, Choi (2018) did not establish links. Neither was a link found by De Sivatte and Guadamillas (2013) in private sector employees.

Looking more closely at Choi's (2018) research, shows a limitation in the study. She carried out quantitative analysis using data obtained from secondary research to test her hypotheses. The data did not include how much time the workers spent RW. Allen *et al.* (2015) warned that not considering this issue could lead to inappropriate conclusions. The study by De Sivatte and Guadamillas (2013) was also limited because they did not consider RW in isolation from other FWP, and this may have obscured the findings.

The primary research study conducted by Bloom *et al.* (2015) was a controlled experiment, participants volunteered, and the sample was selected randomly from those volunteers. There was a control sample who carried out the same work at the office location. The research design and the methodology provide assurance that the results are generalisable.

Some areas of agreement and disagreement exist in the extant literature when seeking a correlation between RW and employee retention. In the next section, the theoretical concepts are explored which will inform the proposed research study.

2.5 The theoretical framework

Having looked at the evolution of RW and how it links to attraction and retention. This review now examines the theories which aid understanding of how and why RW influences organisational attractiveness and employee retention.

2.5.1 Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory has been used to explain the motivations of employees, it proposes that the voluntary action of individuals is motivated by the returns they are expected to bring from others (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). In the work context, in exchange for the opportunity to work remotely, researchers found that employees were prepared to do unpaid work, work harder to get noticed and give of their discretionary effort out of duty to the employer (de Menezes and Kelliher, 2011; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Golden, 2007).

An increased organisational commitment was reported by remote workers as illustrated by their reduced turnover intentions. Felstead and Henseke (2017) found increased commitment amongst remote workers, which Ross and Ali (2017) proposed resulted from an appreciation of the employer because the request for RW was accommodated. Other researchers used a diary method with remote workers in the public sector to reduce the risk of recall bias and did not find increased commitment (De Vries, Tummers and Bekkers, 2019).

Based on this evidence it is unclear whether increased organisational commitment will always result from an employer's facilitation of RW. Nonetheless, social exchange theory may still be of value in explaining the increased productivity of remote employees, they work harder to repay their employers because they facilitated RW.

2.5.2 Border Theory

This theory conceptualises work and non-work lives as two different environments with different rules, emotions, and behaviours. Clark (2000) argues that WLB is achieved where there is minimum conflict between the two. Maintaining these borders, it has been argued is more difficult for remote workers (Felstead and Henseke, 2017).

Qualitative studies have shown that RW can increase work family conflict, when the boundaries are blurred and work pressures spill over into non-work life, it can be more difficult to switch off (Marsh and Musson, 2008). One participant in the Crosbie and Moore (2004 p. 226) study described the issue '.... you come home to relax. Where do you go to relax when you work at home?' Felstead and Henseke (2017) in their quantitative study demonstrated that the working day was longer for remote workers.

The difficulty in separating work and non-work life and leaving work behind drawn from border theory and the willingness to give of discretionary effort described in social exchange theory may help to explain the work intensification that is reported by remote workers.

2.5.3 Path-Goal Leadership Theory

Because of the lack of face-to-face contact with managers and colleagues, remote workers encounter different challenges than those who are conventionally sited (Larson, Vroman and Makarius, 2020). The understanding is that their leaders need to adopt different approaches (Dahlstrom, 2013). The Path-Goal leadership theory was first presented by House and Mitchell (1975), it proposes that a leader's primary goal is to provide the support required by employees to meet their objectives and those of the organisation. They advised that leaders should adopt the approach that best matches the needs of their employees.

Because the processes in the public sector are formalised Cooper and Kurland (2002) contend that leaders of remote workers in this sector do not need to adopt a task-oriented leadership style. They believe that a relationship-oriented approach maximises job satisfaction and organisational commitment amongst these workers. Dahlstrom (2013) contends that this approach combined with effective communication is the most appropriate. Some organisations have considered electronic monitoring as a management tool, it resulted in negative reactions and has been linked to increased turnover (Shaw *et al.*, 1998).

The unique nature of the remote managerial relationship has been highlighted in the literature. It will be important as RW becomes more widespread for managers to recognise that the approach used for conventionally sited workers may not be suitable and for their organisations to support them in developing the new skills that they will need.

2.5.4 Affective Events Theory

This theory proposed by Weiss and Beal (2005) asserts that positive events are associated with positive emotions. In the context of RW increased autonomy and decreased distractions are the positive events and these lead to positive feelings of well-being and increased employee engagement (Anderson, Kaplan and Vega, 2015).

Increased work engagement was found by De Vries *et al.* (2019) amongst the remote workers that they studied. However, they did not examine the extent to which the participants worked remotely. Golden and Veiga (2005) found that the positive impacts on engagement increased as RW began and levelled off as the remote workers became detached from the workplace.

Drawing from this theory increased work engagement may result from the positive benefits felt by remote workers. But as was seen, the increased engagement was not sustained. It may be that those leading remote teams see the initial increased engagement as evidence that remote work is working, and that the management support needed to ensure that continued engagement is not provided.

Several themes have emerged from examining the theoretical basis for the behaviours and attitudes of remote workers. Some of the impacts of RW have been shown and inconsistencies have emerged that has aided the understanding of the subject.

2.6 Voluntary versus involuntary RW

Much of the research in this area was carried out when RW was the active choice of employees (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020). As part of this literature review a search of the databases was conducted to determine to what extent non-voluntary RW had been studied.

One study examined the impacts on employees where RW was involuntary rather than voluntary, (Kaduk *et al.*, 2019) and found that remote workers who had no choice did not report increased stress, psychological distress, or intentions to leave the organisation, compared with those who had volunteered. Other studies were not found that examined this phenomenon. It may be that as involuntary RW was not widespread that this area of research has not been explored.

The study by Kaduk *et al.* (2019) was useful in understanding the extent of RW before the pandemic. The study uses the term substantial remote worker when referring to those who did so for 20% of their working week. That research does not, therefore, provide insights into what outcomes can be anticipated when working from home is compulsory and for a significant portion of the working week as it was for many workers during the pandemic. The widespread introduction of RW in response to COVID-19 has meant that the definition of

substantial used is no longer valid. IDA Ireland (2022) reported that in Ireland 32% of employed people were working from home more often than at their normal workplace.

It is the intention of this study to focus on the impact of RW practices on current and prospective employees in the Irish civil service which is a significant employer within the public sector. The review next examines the available knowledge relating to RW, attraction and retention there.

2.7 The Irish Civil Service and the challenges ahead

The role of the Irish civil service is to support the government of the day to develop and implement its policies. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2021) reports a staff of 41,600 in the Irish civil service.

During this period of global change and uncertainty and with the challenges of Brexit and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis the requirement to have a fully resourced civil service providing objective and evidence-informed advice to the government is critical.

However, it is known that there will be an increase in the number of retirements from the Irish civil service in the coming years and that there is a positive relationship between voluntary turnover and economic expansion amongst public sector employees (Gambi and Brassill, 2020; Pender and Chambers, 2018).

McCarthy *et al.* (2022) shed light on the preferences of workers in civil service administration with 85% of the respondents from that sector stating that they wish to have hybrid working arrangements in the future. It is clear from this that civil service employers need to attract and retain staff and to do so they will need to assess their future RW policies.

2.8 Methodologies

One of the aims of this literature review was to critically evaluate the methodologies which had been used, to determine the one most appropriate to this study. There were many approaches reviewed, from statistical analysis of data in the government spending reports (Brassil and Gambi, 2020) to the quantitative analyses of secondary data (Feeney and Stritch, 2019; Felstead and Henseke, 2017). A daily diary survey method was adopted by De Vries *et al.* (2019), while Kelliher and Anderson (2010) used a mixed methods approach. The research in each case progressed the understanding of how RW can affect attraction and retention in organisations and was useful to the researcher in developing the theoretical framework in which the study can be situated.

However, the studies did not always consider RW separately from other FWP as was the case in the mixed methods approach used by De Sivatte and Guadamillas (2013). An improved research design may have aided the team in showing how the different FWP affected retention. In her quantitative analysis of secondary data, Choi (2018) did not examine how often the participants worked remotely.

The national survey undertaken by McCarty *at al.* (2022) included a mix of quantitative questions, Likert-scale questions, and open-ended free-text qualitative questions. The results give an indication of how workers feel about RW but because of the nature of the study, it did not consider the reasons for the answers given. The authors are also aware of and highlighted the inherent bias associated with the convenience sampling method that they adopted.

This study intends to inform policy makers, it is important to discover the reasons for the responses. Rapley (2004) states that insights can be achieved by using semi-structured interviews, while Kelliher and Anderson (2010) found that qualitative analysis of data from interviews was more revealing than their quantitative analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that thematic analysis is a useful tool to produce qualitative analyses which inform policy development.

The importance of good research design has been recognised as a key factor in ensuring that the objectives of a study are achieved. This area will be re-visited in the research methodology chapter and will inform the methodological approach adopted.

2.9 Conclusion

A theoretical framework drawn from the literature will form the basis for the design of this research study. This review has demonstrated the themes to be considered, has informed the methodological choice, and has given the study direction. The available research relates to periods when RW was voluntary, and when most of the workforce within organisations were working in the normal work location.

Because a significant change in RW came about because of COVID-19, further research is needed to understand the impact of the prolonged and mandatory RW period has had on employees expectations, in the context of the Irish public sector where the need is more acute than ever to be well-positioned to attract and retain employees

It is timely therefore to propose that a research study be conducted with current and prospective public sector employees to understand how the RW policies offered will influence their turnover intentions or their likelihood to take up a position with a public sector employer.

3.0 Chapter: Research Question and Objectives

3.1 Introduction

Messenger *et al.* (2017) predicted that RW would evolve over time as a series of small tremors rather than a sudden earthquake. The COVID-19 pandemic which began in March 2020, was that earthquake, it drove millions of people around the world to move from office to RW almost overnight.

The future of work has now been changed dramatically by how governments responded to the global pandemic. In Ireland prior to March 2020, most public sector employees did not have any flexibility in where they worked. Many began to RW for the first time and on a full-time basis in March 2020 and continue to work remotely to some extent at the time of writing.

During the pandemic, RW moved from being a choice to one where it was enforced. The effects of RW on both employers and employees noted in the literature were based on research conducted when the decision to RW was made by the employee.

It is in this context that this study is taking place. Its objective is to learn from those who worked or studied remotely during that time to understand how attraction and retention in the public sector in Ireland may be impacted by that experience.

3.2 Research Question/Key Objective

To establish if public sector employers will need to consider their RW policies as part of their attraction and retention strategies?

There was evidence in the literature that the availability of RW options in organisations impacted positively on attraction and retention. The research will seek to establish if these links were evident in the sample selected who had not chosen to work or study remotely, unlike the participants in the previous research.

3.2.1 Sub-objective 1

Is there evidence of increased organisational commitment when RW is not a choice?

Increased organisational commitment was noted amongst remote workers in earlier studies. It was theorised that they were grateful to their employer because their request for RW was accommodated and were prepared to work harder. When RW was mandatory, and compulsory did employees give of their discretionary effort.

3.2.2 Sub-objective 2

How did RW when it was enforced impact on employees' well-being and WLB?

RW when it was a choice of the employee was seen to have a positive impact on WLB. There were challenges, but the ability to better balance work and non-work commitments was identified in the pre-pandemic literature as one of the reasons why remote workers had reduced turnover intentions. When RW was mandatory what were the WLB consequences.

3.2.3 Sub-objective 3

To establish what the challenges of remote management were.

It has been said that employees do not leave organisations but rather that they leave their managers. The literature showed the importance of managers in ensuring the success of RW. In March 2020, very few managers had the experience of managing remotely, did this cause difficulty and has this aspect of the RW experience influenced the RW arrangements that will be desired for the future.

3.2.4 Sub-objective 4

To gain an understanding of the RW arrangements employees want in the future.

Many different RW options are now available because of the widespread availability and acceptability of technology. What working arrangements are now being considered by individuals and are they likely to be attracted to organisations that can offer them. Would the lack of availability of their preferred arrangement within their organisation be a factor for them in considering a move to another organisation.

3.3 Conclusion

Through meeting the key objective and sub-objectives of this research study, a greater understanding of the issues will emerge, this will be used to generate a series of recommendations that policymakers and employers can draw on to develop, improve or enhance their RW policies.

4.0 Chapter: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

A research methodology is an outline of the procedures, methods, and techniques used in a research study. This chapter examines the methodologies considered for this study.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) explain how the methodology used is determined by the type of study being conducted and the research question being answered. The research objectives have been established. In this section, the type of study which will ensure that these aims are achieved will be defined.

This chapter describes the philosophical positioning underpinning the study, the design of the research, the selection of the research methodology and the rationale for that decision. The sampling technique, the data, collection instrument, method and analysis chosen will then be described and justified. Finally, the study's ethical considerations and limitations will be examined.

4.2 Research Philosophies

Research is the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting information with the aim of acquiring or developing knowledge. Research philosophy is defined by Saunders *et al.* (2019, p. 130) as “a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge”.

The research philosophy selected forms the basis for the methodological approach chosen and is underpinned by a consistent set of research assumptions. The first step in the selection process must therefore be the examination of those assumptions.

Three branches of research philosophy are considered here. Ontology is concerned with what exists about which knowledge can be acquired (Spirkin, 1983), the ontological assumptions relate to what is observed. Epistemology examines the knowledge itself (Bryman, 2008); epistemological assumptions are made about the knowledge that is acquired. While Axiology (Hart, 1971) is the exploration of the aims of the research and examines what is valued in the

research. Axiological assumptions, therefore, are made about the extent to which the researcher's values influence the research process.

To provide a conceptual framework within which the study will take place, the philosophical position to be taken must be determined. Those taking a positivist position make the ontological assumption that social phenomena exist independently of the individual's view of them. They are universal and lasting. Their epistemological assumption is that they can be studied in the same way that the natural world is studied using a traditional scientific approach to research. The researcher who adopts the positivist outlook is concerned with reliability and objectivity (Quinlan, 2011), social reality and making generalisations from research (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). In positivism, a hypothesis is developed from theory and is then analytically tested, taking the data and using statistics the researcher identifies the cause-and-effect relationship (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Taking this approach, a study hypothesis is either accepted or rejected and generalisation of results is possible.

Interpretivists in contrast, make the ontological assumption that there are differences between people and their worldviews, that reality is open to interpretation (Quinlan, 2011). Their epistemological assumption is that reality needs to be interpreted, to uncover the meaning of activities and behaviour. Interpretivism therefore focuses on detailed understanding of the lived experience of the participants to create new, deeper insights.

There is another issue to examine in selecting the research philosophy. Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (2013) advise that the interests and preferences of the researcher are important in progressing the fieldwork. The researcher established through completing a questionnaire that interpretivism was their preferred position.

Because the objective of this study is to answer research questions by gaining greater understanding. The interpretivist philosophical position is considered the one best suited to this research study. Furthermore, it aligns with the preferred position of the researcher. Therefore, it has been selected as the philosophical framework within which the methodology will be positioned.

4.3 Theory development

There are several choices which can be made in the area of theory development they are dependent on the question which the study seeks to answer.

A deductive research approach is one where the researcher tests a theory; the objective being to prove or disprove the hypothesis using a scientific and statistical approach (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). This approach is associated with the positivist philosophy. While a study of the research into this subject area provided insights, a theory which could either be created and tested or further developed through testing a hypothesis did not emerge. A deductive approach therefore it is not considered appropriate.

Adopting an abductive approach, data is collected to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and explain patterns, to generate a new or modify an existing theory which is subsequently tested through additional data collection (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

An Inductive research approach in comparison is used to explore a phenomenon, in this type of research the researcher begins by collecting data that is relevant to the topic of interest. This approach is associated with the interpretivist philosophy. The conceptual framework begins with a research question, the collection and analysis of the data may help to build a theory.

The aims of this research study could be achieved by taking either an abductive or an inductive approach. Because of the time limitations of this study, the additional data collection required where the former approach is adopted is not available, therefore an inductive approach has been selected. Since this topic is evolving, if a theory is developed here, it may be refined by future researchers.

4.4 Methodological choice

The key research objective and sub-objectives must be met for this study to be successful. The researcher in choosing the appropriate methodology to achieve the goals considered theoretical studies and practical issues.

Quantitative methods are used to investigate the relationships between a set of variables which are first measured numerically and then analysed (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). In a social

science context, questionnaires or surveys are generally used to gather a snapshot of isolated experiences at fixed points in time. The method requires independent researchers, and standardised collection methods. Probability sampling is used to ensure generalisability and large sample sizes are required. This method is associated with reliable and reproducible results (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

It has been argued by Morgan and Smircich (1980) that the social world does not lend itself to this objective form of measurement, that individuals rather than responding to the social world play their part in its development. They believe that quantitative methods are not suited to the nature of the subject, they propose that they should have only a partial role in the analysis and understanding of social change.

Qualitative methods are defined by Corbin and Strauss (1990, p. 11), as “any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification”. They are used to gain in-depth data from participants (Lincoln and Guba cited in Kosnik and Bonoma, 1986). Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, case studies or observations are used. Qualitative researchers do not use a large sample as it might negatively affect the depth of the data collected. The researcher is not independent but builds a rapport and gains intellectual access to the data (the experience of the participants).

These methods are favoured by interpretivist researchers, but critics of the approach believe that because the results are not easily reproduced it is not a reliable research tool. Policymakers may not value the results from these studies (Sallee and Flood, 2012) and because of the small sample sizes they cannot be used to generalise for the entire study population. The observation has been made, however, that qualitative research can contribute to an exploration of perspectives that quantitative methodologies might not discover (Gephart, 2004). In addition, it has been suggested that qualitative research methods in the WLB sphere should be given consideration (Beigi and Shirmohammadi, 2017).

The resource and time limitations have been considered and while acknowledging that the results achieved through a qualitative study may not be generalisable, it is a snapshot in time, at a time when it is important to discover the participants inner thought on their experiences which Corbin and Strauss (2008) believe a qualitative study can achieve. For these reasons, the interpretivist, inductive, qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate.

4.5 Research Strategy

The research strategy is the plan of action which will be taken to achieve the goal of answering in this case the research question, which is to understand the relationship in the public sector between RW policies, attraction and retention.

The qualitative approach gives rise to several different strategic approaches, including phenomenology, case study, ethnography grounded theory and action research. Phenomenology is the study of events from the perspective the individual. Ethnography is used to understand members of a culture. A case study is an in-depth analysis of one group while action research is a category that aims at producing change through research (Tavakol and Sandars, 2014).

Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017) is described as a strategy which is used to discover or generate theory which is grounded in the data produced from the accounts of the participants. While it is an inductive and theory building approach it is used by both positivist and interpretative researchers using qualitative and quantitative methods. This strategy emphasises the study of the phenomenon over the use of pre-existing theory. The theoretical understanding of the subject comes from existing theory which informs the study.

The disadvantage of a grounded theory approach in this study is that as was seen in the literature review, much of the research that has informed this area of study to date has come from research where employees had a choice in the decision to work from home. This study aims to use the new insights from participants who did not have a choice. If a grounded theory strategy is used, there is a risk that those insights would not emerge.

Another inductive strategy is to use case studies. Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) proposed their use for in-depth inquiry. This type of study seeks to find out what is happening and why. The effect of that situation and the implications for action. It has been criticised because it has been believed that this type of study does not produce a general, reliable and theoretical contribution to knowledge. However, this strategy could be used in this descriptive study to gain an accurate and rich understanding of the impact of RW. The data generated can then be analysed to identify patterns and themes, linking this back to the existing literature to refine or extend knowledge or to generate a new theory.

Having considered the research strategies available, the case study has been selected. The justification for this selection is that it is considered the most appropriate to achieve the research aims, given the time and resources available and the accessibility of participants. A qualitative descriptive case study will be used to answer the research question because a study of that nature recognises that the issue is subjective and that the participants may have had different experiences (Bradshaw, Atkinson, and Doody, 2017).

The data will be collected through interviews with the participants about their experience of RW and studying. Further insights will be gained by funneling the questioning to gain an understanding of how the experience has informed their wishes for their future working arrangements, the actions that they may consider if they are not met by their employer or future employer will also be investigated.

4.6 Sampling

This study aims to examine attraction and retention in the public sector and to assess to what extent this may be influenced by the RW policies introduced. The views of two populations are required to achieve this aim, one is current Irish public sector employees, the other, potential Irish public sector employees. It is unrealistic to expect that the views of all members of these populations could be sought and analysed. Therefore, a sample must be used, data collected from it and from the analysis of the data, inferences may be drawn about the likely views of the two populations.

There are two sampling types which can be used. Probability sampling uses random selection to assemble a representative sample with characteristics resembling the larger population. This sampling method is frequently used in quantitative research where surveys or questionnaires are used.

Because of the nature of this research study where semi-structured interviews are to be conducted only non-random sampling methods can be used. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique where the researcher relies on their judgment when choosing members of the population to take part in the study (Black, 2010). It does not result in a random sample, but rather the aim of this type of sampling is to discover a range of social experiences from

suitable sources (Horn *et al.*, 2009). The results obtained because of this choice will not be suitable for generalisation on statistical grounds (Cooper and Schindler, 2006).

In this study, the participants were chosen by the researcher from current public servants across several divisions who had worked remotely during the pandemic and persons known to the researcher who are interested in working in the sector. This small sample will not be representative of these two groups. The participants were selected because they had the experience of RW or remote learning. It was the researcher's opinion that they would contribute to the study by providing data in the form of their answers to the questions presented in the research instrument.

A sample size of nine was selected. The ages range of the participants was not considered in their selection, but it was recorded because some concepts may emerge in the research in which age is a factor. The participant profile can be seen in Appendix 1.

4.7 Data

4.7.1 Data collection instrument and method

Several techniques of data collection are available to qualitative researchers carrying out a descriptive case study. Focus groups are groupings of participants who are interviewed together and asked the same series of questions in a group setting, the dynamic of the group may result in additional data being gained. This option was considered for the data collection aspect, but since the participants in this study are drawn across several divisions and from public servants and non-public servants it was felt that using this process there might be difficulties in ensuring that all voices were equally heard (Powell and Single, 1996).

This case study is exploratory in nature as it aims to develop a theory from the data which is collected. Semi-structured interviews have been shown to be suited to this type of study (Rapley, 2004), as it allows themes to emerge that may not have been included in the initial objectives of the study. It is for these reasons that this type of interview has been selected to collect the primary data for this study.

The interviews were scheduled and took place at a time and place which was convenient to the participants. They were conducted one-to-one with participants in person or using

Microsoft Teams. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using voice-to-text software. The transcripts were printed and reviewed by the author to amend any errors and to remove any identifying information.

The questions (Appendix 2) were developed with reference the objectives of the research. Guided by Saunders *et al.* (2019), they were designed to be open-ended, and the same questions were asked of all participants. The semi-structured interviews and the open questioning allowed each participant to answer in their own way. Follow-up relevant questions were asked where they were believed necessary and appropriate by the researcher.

4.7.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that involves coding the data sets (such as transcripts from in-depth interviews) and identifying patterns in meaning across the data. It was first proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), they believe that it can generate unexpected insights. It has been reported that by taking a thematic approach to the analysis, the data can be interpreted and made sense of (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017) and that it allows the researcher to gain more descriptive insights into social phenomenon (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019).

Earlier in this chapter the choice of an inductive approach was examined, justified and selected. When this approach is taken at the data analysis stage, meanings and themes are generated from the data which the researcher may use to build theory. Using the inductive approach, the data is coded and then explored to identify potential themes. The themes are then analysed to determine the findings of the study (Clarke and Braun, 2006).

4.8 Pilot Study

The view is held Kezar (2000) that pilot interviews increase the success of the research project by identifying practical issues that may arise. The participants in this research study and the researcher are familiar with the audio-visual technology and the researcher had no concerns in relation to the use of the recording or transcription features. Since colleagues reported that

many hours each day were being spent on video calls, it was felt that there was no necessity to take from the leisure time of additional volunteers.

A pilot study is a valuable tool for assessing the phrasing of the questions (Quinlan, 2011). The researcher tested the questions with several colleagues to be certain that they were easily understood and un-ambiguous. As a result, minor changes were made.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

A researcher has a responsibility to their participants to conduct their research and manage the data collected ethically. Prior to commencing the research study, the researcher submitted an ethics form to the National College of Ireland for consideration (Appendix 3).

The participants were informed of the aims of the study, and they signed a consent form (Appendix 4), ensuring that they agreed to the data they supplied being included in the dissertation. They were advised that the information they provided would be anonymised.

The researcher is aware of the ethical issues surrounding personal data. The participants were advised that the researcher adhered to the General Data Protection Regulations 2018 (GDPR) and the ethical guidelines of the National College of Ireland (Data Protection Commission, 2018). Names were not included in the recordings and transcripts of the interviews. To build rapport the first questions were general. However, collecting data that is not necessary is an unethical research approach, therefore that was not recorded or transcribed.

The recordings are stored in a password-protected file. When the dissertation has been marked, the recordings will be removed. The consent forms and transcribed notes will be retained for two years in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the college.

4.10 Limitations

There are acknowledged limitations to this study. Research published in English only was used to inform the researcher's knowledge. This may have excluded some research in other languages that has contributed to the field.

The public sector includes a wide range of diverse groups and professions, the sample used for this research study was drawn from administrative staff. This group was selected because

their work can be performed remotely. The sample of prospective employees was selected from those seeking positions in the administrative area. The make-up of the sample and its size means that the findings will not be generalisable. Nonetheless, the findings are based on the genuine views of the participants.

It is believed that this study provides a snapshot in time of the extent to which the experience of mandatory RW has affected employees and jobseekers. If it has impacted on their RW expectations and how that will affect attraction and retention in that sector.

The findings, despite these limitations, may be used to inform future scholars in their research and employers in all sectors.

5.0 Chapter: Findings and Results

5.1. Introduction

This exploratory research study used semi-structured interviews to obtain data from a purposive sample of nine participants. The interview questions were designed to be open-ended to allow participants to expand on the topic. This chapter describes the findings obtained from the data, their subsequent thematic analysis, the limitations of the study and the implications.

5.2. Finding the themes

The analysis of the findings began while checking the software-generated transcripts for inaccuracies. During this process, the researcher became familiar with the data. The transcripts were then actively read, to start to determine what they meant. Data were extracted and coded. An inductive approach was selected for this study and therefore the process of coding was data driven rather than looking for specific codes within it.

The codes were elements of the data that were interesting to the researcher because of their relevance to the research question. Having extracted the codes, they were then explored for potential themes. The guidance provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) was invaluable. They recommended that the researcher's judgment is important, a theme they advised captures something significant relating to the overall research question. There should be several examples of the theme in the data set, but that prevalence does not necessarily confer more importance to it. They cautioned that a researcher may misrepresent a small number of examples in the data as a theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Since there was a small sample size in this study, the researcher, was aware of this risk and took care when searching for themes to reduce it.

Several themes were found in the data and were defined and named, they related back to the objectives of the research. In this next section the themes are identified and analysed and are listed here in order of their priority in relation to the overall objective. This analysis shows to what extent the data advances the knowledge and allows an argument to be made in relation to the research question.

5.3 Analysis of themes

5.3.1 RW: Working harder

Work intensification was examined in the literature as a phenomenon experienced by remote workers. It was characterised as doing unpaid work, working harder or working longer hours (de Menezes and Kelliher, 2011; Golden, 2007; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). In the literature it was associated with the remote employee's feelings of gratitude for being allowed the choice in where they worked (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020).

Asked about this aspect of their experience while RW. Some of the participants did report that they were working harder. Participant, #8 *"at the start when we were sent home....it was all new, I was logging on at the time I would normally have left the house for work and logging off when I normally would have returned home"* but reflecting further he felt that perhaps the work *"was expanding to fit the time available"*.

Another Participant, #7 described her experience, *"I worked longer hours and then, I check the laptop to make sure everything was still running smoothly even after I have logged off"*.

While in contrast Participant, #1, who was a student worked harder when he was based on campus *"if I had a 2-hour break between lectures I would go to the library, when I was attending remotely if I had a break, I got distracted, I like maybe worked less hard"*.

Participant #2, with experience of remote learning, was clear *"I definitely did more course work when I was in the college"*.

A pattern of working harder was apparent in the remote workers, there were several reasons given. Participant #5 worked harder, simply because she could, there was *"no commute"*, *"little time taken up with getting ready"* and fewer distractions from work colleagues and friends than there would have been in the office. Participant #8 had more energy to devote to work and thought that was why he worked harder *"normally after the morning commute I would come into work drained"*.

The participants were asked if they worked harder because their employers allowed them to work remotely, they all responded in the negative, Participant, #7 *"no I do not feel obligated"*, Participant, #8 *"oh no I don't see it as a privilege"*.

The participants who were learning remotely felt that the difficulty in avoiding distractions led to the lack of intensity of their effort. For Participant, #3 *“it was just too easy to pick up my phone, even during lectures”*.

While the sample is small the issue of work intensification was considered a valid theme. It was clear from the data that those working remotely experienced it and for those who were studying remotely it was the exact opposite.

For the students, it was a result of more distractions. For the remote workers, it resulted from less distractions, more time, and more energy to devote to work. None of the participants who worked harder reported doing so out of a sense of gratitude to their employer. The work intensification noted amongst remote workers was previously explained using social-exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Based on these findings it is possible that these other factors may have also contributed. Alternatively, it may be that when RW was voluntary and facilitated by the employer then work intensification had its origins in social exchange, but that social exchange cannot be used to explain it when the RW is involuntary.

5.3.2 RW: WLB

Another theme that emerged in the review of the primary research was the difficulty in switching off experienced by remote workers which resulted in work intensification and led to increased work/non-work life conflict (March and Musson, 2008). The impact on WLB was found by Van der Lippe and Lippenyi (2020) to result from the continuous connection through smart phone and other media.

The participants were asked if they used their personal devices for work and if that affected their ability to switch off. Participant #5 who uses her personal devices for both, has found that her work and non-working lives have merged. She spoke of responding to work e-mails and calls while on holiday. It is her view that mandatory RW has in her organisation led to an *‘always on culture’* and she has found it difficult to separate home and work life. *“I check my work e-mails before going to bed, so I know what is ahead of me the next day, I know it’s stupid, but I keep doing it”*.

Similarly, Participant, #9 used the same laptop and phone for personal and work use, her workstation was in the kitchen area of her family home, she found *“RW was stressful, I felt like I was always at work” after the first few months, I started to pack up my laptop into the bag on a Friday evening so that I was not reminded of work*”. Participant #4 noted that the one thing she misses about her commute is that as well as physically taking her home it helped her to *“mentally leave work behind”*.

A different approach was taken by Participant, #8 who has a separate laptop and mobile phone for personal use *“I’m set up in the spare room, I leave my devices there, I close the door at the end of the day and don’t think about work again until the next morning”*.

Participant, #7 however with a work similar set up away from the rest of the household and a separate work phone and laptop says, *“I still check my e-mails when I have finished working”*.

The three participants who had experienced learning remotely, didn’t experience the difficulty in switching off described by the remote workers, they did however describe how work-life encroached into their non-work lives causing conflicts, the observation of Participant #3 *“we were all at home and trying to get onto the same broadband connection...that caused issues”* was common amongst all the participants.

The difficulty in switching off which had been established amongst remote workers in the extant literature was experienced by the sample of remote workers and not by the remote learners. Work/family conflicts were reported to result from technological issues associated with the demand for broadband rather than from the blurring of the boundaries. While the impact on the mental health of not being able to switch off was noted amongst two of the participants.

Border theory had been used to predict that RW would increase work family conflict and cause difficulty in switching off or unwinding at the end of the day (March and Musson, 2008; Crosbie and Moore, 2004). The workers in this study reported these same experiences, with one participant managing the boundaries very successfully.

The implication of these findings is that the WLB of the remote worker is at risk if they do not control their work/non-work boundary. Employers and their employees must agree processes by which this can be monitored and managed.

5.3.3 RW: Well-being

Previous research in this area had highlighted the improvement in their well-being reported by remote workers. The time gained through not commuting could be used for non-work activities and the greater flexibility and autonomy meant that non-work responsibilities could be fitted in around work (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020). Golden and Veiga (2005) however, reported that the amount of time spent RW is important to the well-being benefits, finding that while the positive impact on well-being increases initially it levels off over time.

The participants agreed that the greatest benefit of RW from a well-being perspective was the absence of the commute. Participant #6 did not enjoy RW but did find that not having to face the commute daily was an attractive aspect. Participant #8 commented that *“I am getting 2-3 hours back a day, I am not exhausted from the commute, I have more energy to give”*.

The positive impact of RW on those with caring commitments was clear, Participant, #6 *“I can call on my elderly mother who lives alone and check on her during the day because, I am working from home”*. Participant #4 *“I love that I don’t have to leave my cat at home when I go to work”*.

The benefits were practical, participants reported taking in deliveries during breaks, allowing people carrying out work in their homes to gain access, and to do laundry. One Participant, #9 said that *“I got my weekend back, I have the chores that I usually spent all day Saturday doing, done during the week, I could fit them in around work”*. Participant, #6 said that she normally took annual leave or flexi-leave to cover those times when she needed work done at home *“now I work remotely those days”*. For Participant #5 the main benefit of working from home from a personal perspective was that she *“spent more time with her family, who were all working or studying from home too”*.

All the remote worker participants found personal benefits to working remotely and these impacted positively on their feelings of well-being. The student participants noted that they

too had more time for other activities, but they did not report a positive effect on their wellbeing.

The increased feelings of wellbeing associated with RW noted in the academic research was also found amongst the remote workers in this group. The participants were enthusiastic about these benefits and didn't report that they had diminished over time. Employers can be assured by these findings that the WLB benefits of RW remain when it is not voluntary.

5.3.4 RW: Social Isolation

In the literature the issue of the social isolation of remote workers was explored and Cooper and Kurland (2002) found that feelings of isolation impacted negatively on job satisfaction for some.

The participants in this study reflected on this aspect of the RW experience. While a question on this issue was not included in the interview questions, an open question which asked them what they missed about the office revealed that they missed the social and work interactions and felt isolated and disconnected and this impacted on their job satisfaction and engagement. Participant, #9 *"I miss having work colleagues around, sometimes I feel lonely at work, but the cameras do help"*.

Those respondents where cameras were used for work interactions, did not report social isolation to the same extent as those working in an organisation which had what was described by Participant, #6 as a *"cameras off" culture, "you don't engage in the same way"*. Participant #4 also described feeling isolated and that she missed the collaboration with and learnings from her colleagues that she experienced while in the office and which added to her enjoyment of work.

Participant #8 described how virtual coffee mornings were organised by his work colleagues and eased the feelings of isolation. His organisation had a *"cameras-on"* approach during work meetings, which he felt also helped in reducing the feelings of disconnection.

The participants who were studying remotely all reported feelings of loneliness, they missed meeting their college friends. One Participant, #2, noted that it was difficult to get to know her fellow students while learning remotely and this caused her to feel socially isolated and disengaged from the class.

The social isolation experienced by remote workers and described in the literature was also reflected in the views of the participants in this study and impacted on their enjoyment of work and for the students their engagement with their classes.

The participants who used video technology for work felt that this helped to reduce the feelings of isolation, in the light of these findings, the cameras-off culture that some organisations have adopted may need to be re-considered.

5.3.5 RW: Managing remote teams

The literature review highlighted the importance of effective communication in managing employees and the difficulties that can emerge when they are working remotely (Larson *et al.*, 2020). Electronic monitoring used in some organisations as a way of observing remote employees' activities, had a negative impact and was linked to increased turnover (Shaw *et al.*, 1998). This study examined how the participants experience being managed while working remotely, how they managed their employees and their views on electronic monitoring.

Communication with their managers was important. Participant, #6 felt much higher job satisfaction levels and less isolation when her new manager took a different approach *"...before I was just left.... but he checks in with me every day and it makes a difference,"* Participant, #8 communicated with his manager as frequently while working remotely as they would have in the office *"it was informal, but we were communicating every day"*. Participant #9 was proactive with her manager; a regular one-to-one was set up *"at least I knew then we would have time every week to go over issues"*. These three felt trusted by their managers to get on with their work.

Participant #5 felt that their manager did not trust that they were working if they were not observing it, *"I send an e-mail at the start and at the end of the day"* as evidence of her starting and finishing time.

Two participants were aware of electronic monitoring of work device internet usage taking place in their organisations. The student participants experienced lecturers insisting on cameras-on to monitor attendance. All participants felt that monitoring showed a lack of trust. When asked if being monitored electronically would influence them in their decision

to leave an organisation there was general agreement that it would. Participant #5 responded by saying *“if that was started, I would walk”*. One Participant, #4 used informal methods to monitor her team’s time off-line, they reacted negatively describing it as *“micro-management”*, she prefers now to concentrate on monitoring work completed.

In this study, the issue of remote management was considered, and the overwhelming view was that communicating with managers was critical to the success of RW. The experience and view of electronic monitoring was negative. These findings supported what had been found in the literature.

Since managing remote and non-remote workers requires different approaches it is important that employers develop these skills in their managers and seek competence in this area when recruiting new managers.

5.3.6 RW: Expectations for the future

Kelly *et al.* (2022) proposed that employees will have some expectation of remote or hybrid working and that strategies for attraction and retention may have to change to accommodate that. In their study, Brassil and Gambi, (2020) concluded that public sector employees who leave their jobs tend to stay within the wider public service.

This study sought to determine the expectations of the participants for RW in the future. The participants who are interested in working in the public sector agreed that RW would not be of interest to them, it therefore would not make an organisation attractive for them. They said that they would look at the overall EVP offered in terms of FWA and the opportunities for career breaks. These were seen as more desirable. Participant, #1 *“it’s nice to know that they are available, but a career break would be of more interest to me”*. They reflected on their periods of learning on-line, and it was on those experiences that their views on RW were founded Participant 2, adding *“how would I get to know my workmates?”*.

For the six participants who were currently working in the public sector, their views on how the period of RW had impacted on their turnover intentions were mixed. For two participants, RW is especially important to them now, they would both seek a transfer to

another organisation if their current department does not facilitate their preferred arrangement. But both stated that they would not leave the public sector.

Participant, #7 said, *“I expect to be allowed to work remotely into the future, my organisation is running a trial, 1 day per week in the office, and they think they have to do that to keep people”*. Another participant, #6 preferred working in the office, she hoped her current blended arrangement would continue, but it would not be a factor for her in deciding to change her job.

The findings here echo the findings of Brassil and Gambi, (2020) that workers do not generally move from the public to the private sector. They indicate that the availability of more suitable RW options in different areas of the public sector may result in the movement of some staff. The participants expect that their RW requirements will be met, but there is no evidence to suggest that if they are not and more attractive working arrangements are available in the private sector this would result in a movement away.

5.3.7 RW: The future

McCarthy *et al.* (2022) revealed the preferences of workers in civil service administration with 85% of the respondents from that sector stating that they wish to have hybrid working arrangements in the future.

This study sought to examine what the participants wanted for the future and the rationale for their choices. These participants who are working in the public sector at present are now working between 1-3 days per week in the office and the other days working from home as their organisations develop their blended working policies.

The types of RW that the participants are interested in were described in their responses to question 8. Participant, #7 *“Working in a hub close by to where I live, that way I can have the social interaction with others that I miss, get out of the house but without the commute”*.

Another would like to see a compressed working week considered, Participant, #9 *“... now that the working day has been reduced, I would like to work my 35-hour week over 4 days, two at home and two in the office”*.

Participant, #8 wants to work remotely as much as possible because, reflecting on the commute: *“ before the pandemic it took an hour minimum to get to the office, I did it, it was a pain but it was part of what you did.....now I am sitting in the car every morning and evening that I go into the office thinking I could have got so much work done in that time”*.

Participant #7 noted that *“now that we are blended some days, I go into the office but spend the day on virtual calls so I might as well have worked at home”*.

One Participant, #6, who prefers to be office based would like to work a 4-day compressed working week with all four days in the office location. The consensus of those who wanted to work remotely was that they wanted flexibility about the days in the office. Attending when it was most beneficial and when other members of their teams would be available and not necessarily on the same days every week or even every week.

The findings here agree with the survey findings of McCarthy *et al.* (2022), the difference being that this study being qualitative was able to get behind the figures, and gain insights into the types of arrangement preferred and why.

For policy makers, a one size fits all approach is unlikely to be acceptable going forward. Employees have demonstrated that they are productive while working from home and now want a suite of remote options available to them.

5.4 Study Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of a study of this nature. Because of the methodology chosen, the study was subjective. This means that the insights obtained during the research on the impact of RW are personal to the participants and are not generalisable.

The risk of researcher's bias in the way the questions were asked and how the interview progressed was considered and every effort was made during the interviews to avoid leading the participants, allowing them to give their views independently.

The researcher was aware that there was a possibility that anecdotal examples could be misrepresented as themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researcher took care when searching for themes to ensure that this was avoided.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings and results of the thematic analysis of the data have been reported here. Some findings were more relevant than others in meeting the research objectives of the study.

It was anticipated that the choice of three participants who were interested in seeking work in the public sector might be useful in discovering to what extent the RW policies offered might influence their attraction to the organisations within that sector. The three participants had similar views and their contributions did little to further advance the knowledge in this area.

The experiences of those participants who were RW were similar to what had been reported in the existing literature. There were key areas of difference which have been highlighted here and will be explored in more detail in the next section.

6.0 Chapter: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The interpretation of the findings of this research study as they relate to the research question and the sub-objectives are presented and discussed in this chapter. The discussion compares the findings with those of other researchers and highlights the implications which arise from them for employers, employees, and policy makers.

6.2 RW: Impact on attraction and retention

Previous research which looked at the links between RW and retention noted reduced turnover intentions amongst a group of workers who volunteered to work remotely (Bloom *et al.*, 2015). A positive relationship with retention was also reported by Moen *et al.* (2011), however, neither Choi (2018) nor De Sivatte and Guadamillas (2013) found links in their studies.

In the area of attraction, studies have shown that WLB policies impacted positively on the intention of job seekers to accept a job offer (Carless and Wintle, 2007). Two recent studies indicated that organisations that offer discretion over place of work are of greater interest to candidates (Onken-Menke *et al.*, 2018; Thompson *et al.*, 2014). Against that backdrop, with the results from the study by McCarthy *et al.* (2022) also revealing those links, Kelly *et al.* (2022) predicted that attraction and retention strategies in the future would need to accommodate RW.

This study interviewed prospective public sector employees who had experienced remote learning and shows that they were not attracted by RW policies. These findings contradict the previous research findings and the survey results. The sample used in this study was small and a link may have been found if a larger more representative sample had been selected. But it may be that unlike other studies, these participants based their views on their actual lived experience and for that reason it may have some validity. There was agreement with the literature in that they stated that employers who offer WLB policies would be seen by them as caring and therefore attractive even if the RW policies were not of interest.

The current public sector employees who took part in this study all wanted to continue to work remotely to some extent into the future, this concurs with the survey findings (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022). They were confident that the blended working policies which are currently being developed will meet their needs. However, if RW was not facilitated by their employer into the future, they would consider moving to other organisations within the public sector. There was no appetite amongst them to move away from public sector employment.

It may be that despite the economic growth that has been predicted (OECD, 2022), the uncertainty surrounding Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the rising cost of living has had the effect of reducing turnover rates in this sector. This phenomenon was also observed by Brassil and Gambi, (2020) during periods of economic downturn.

There are implications of these findings for public sector attraction and retention strategies. The overall WLB initiatives including FWA are important to prospective employees, and these should be promoted as part of their recruitment campaigns. Since employees are prepared to move to other public sector organisation to have their RW needs met, another consequence is that employers within the public sector may risk competing against each other. Differing business needs may result in RW practices being more flexible in some organisations, leaving those with less flexible arrangements struggling to retain staff.

6.3 RW: Organisational commitment

Pre-pandemic remote workers were prepared to work harder for longer to reward their employers for allowing them to do so. This was linked to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Employees who had the opportunity to work remotely reciprocated by doing unpaid work out of duty to the employer (de Menezes and Kelliher, 2011; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Golden, 2007). These were seen as indicators of greater organisational commitment which was linked to reduced turnover intentions and increased retention rates Bloom *et al.* (2015).

This study showed that RW participants who were mandated to do so also reported work intensification (working harder and for longer), they were more productive, and gave greater effort. Where these findings differ from those of other studies is in the basis for that

additional effort. Ross and Ali (2017) had found that the increased commitment resulted from an appreciation of the employer because the request for RW was accommodated. The participants in this study attributed their harder work to, fewer distractions, more energy, and more time. None of them indicated that they worked harder because they were grateful to their employer for facilitating the arrangement.

Based on these findings therefore, employers should not expect that when they are obliged to allow employees to RW that this will improve retention, a link between RW and increased commitment was not observed in this study. They can anticipate, however, that remote workers will report that they are working harder.

6.4 RW: Impact on well-being and WLB

Some researchers proposed that the work intensification described above could be explained using social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). Other researchers suggested that the difficulty in switching off experienced by remote workers explained using border theory (Clark, 2000), is the reason why they work harder and for longer. Irrespective of the cause, it has been reported to result in increased work/non-work life conflict (March and Musson, 2008). The continuous connection through smartphones and other media to work was also found by Van der Lippe and Lippenyi (2020) to impact on WLB.

This study found that the participants were working harder, in some cases they spent the time that they usually spent commuting working. They reported that using the same devices for work and personal use can cause conflict, feelings of burnout, lack of work-life balance and blurring of boundaries.

Some participants tried to manage the balance by having separate areas to work in, putting work devices out of sight, but for others the balance has been more difficult to achieve. Their work and non-working lives are not separated. But there were many positive impacts on well-being reported by the participants, the most important for them being the absence of the commute, they also spoke of caring commitments and household duties being completed during work breaks.

The findings of this research reinforce those in the existing literature. While RW is seen as a WLB initiative (Darcy *et al.*, 2012) which can assist employees to balance their work and non-work responsibilities it can impact negatively on that WLB if not managed.

The implication for employers, therefore, is that remote workers must be supported, they must be provided with separate devices for work use and encouraged to disconnect from them. Guidance and financial assistance should be considered to allow them to set up a remote working space away from the normal living areas. Finally, managers must be made aware of the symptoms of burnout and WLB conflict and how to identify them so that professional support can be provided to remote workers who are struggling in that area.

6.5 RW: Management of remote teams.

Research conducted during the pandemic (Parker, Knight and Keller, 2020) demonstrated that managers were struggling with the effective management of remote workers. Employees felt untrusted and micromanaged by their managers which led to feelings of isolation. The literature had established that good management and effective communication skills were essential in managing remote workers (Larson *et al.*, 2020; Dahlstrom, 2013). Electronic monitoring was considered as a way of observing remote employees' activities, but was linked to increased turnover (Shaw *et al.*, 1998).

This study found that some participants experienced similar feelings of distrust and micromanagement resulting in social isolation. Those feelings were less evident in those who communicated well with their managers and were reduced when managers communicated regularly through daily and one-to-one meetings. Where participants and their managers did not engage in that way, they reported that they struggled when working remotely with feelings of being watched, micromanaged, and felt isolated as a result.

The subject of electronic monitoring was examined, the same negative impact and likelihood to result in increased turnover was noted in this study. Participants did not want to see this type of monitoring introduced and saw it as a breach of trust.

The learning for the employer from this aspect of the study is that if RW is to be successful, managers must be supported by their organisations through training to better manage their employees when they are geographically distant. They must be supported and given the

time and resources to allow them to communicate with their teams. If employers plan to introduce electronic monitoring of their employees, they must be clear about what is acceptable and unacceptable and to demonstrate equitable treatment of remote and office-based workers the same electronic monitoring regime must apply to all.

6.6 RW: Arrangements in the future

In the literature many different RW arrangements were studied. With WLB initiatives in general, Darcy *et al.* (2012) had shown in their study that a one size fits all approach was not sufficient.

This view was supported by the findings of this study. Participants were asked about their ideal working arrangement for the future. Their responses ranged from, a desire for a 100% remote option, defined as only going to the office when essential, to, no appetite for remote work. There was no unanimity expressed amongst this group of participants. One size will not fit all.

The range of RW arrangements which were proposed included those that had been in place during the pandemic and which employees would find attractive in the future. There were several arrangements which were suggested that have not been used in the public sector in RW to date. One was a four-day compressed RW week and another was the provision of RW hubs in suburban areas to reduce the commute for city dwellers.

The implication for employers is that they must now identify the roles and tasks in their organisations which are suited to RW. Where technology prevents work from being conducted remotely investment must be considered. This will ensure that in the event of further lockdowns or future emergencies their business continuity can be assured. It will also ensure that those employees who wish to continue to work remotely will be afforded the opportunity to do so. In addition, employers must look outside the box and pilot other RW options that employees find attractive and determine if they can be accommodated while ensuring that the business objectives of the organisation are met.

6.7 Overall implications of this study

There are several suggestions arising from the results of this study, the primary finding was that current employees want RW to continue for them into the future. In addition, they want to be consulted by their employers about the best arrangements for them and if their RW wishes are not met, it would be a factor considered by some in deciding to move to another public sector organisation.

For employers, there will be considerable resources required in firstly designing the RW policies and monitoring the RW arrangements to ensure equity, fairness, and consistency. They must ensure that the business needs of the organisation and that of the employees are met by the arrangements that they put in place. This is complex and may require additional HR and management skills and resources.

The need for training of existing managers in managing remote teams will be essential and it may be that this skill will be sought and assessed as part of the selection process for new managers. Additional investment in technology may be required as the suitability of each role is examined and pilot programmes to test the different RW arrangements must be considered.

6.8 Recommendations for future studies

This study was limited because of the small sample size, and the non-standardised approach. It did not achieve the reproducible and generalisable results that would be expected from a quantitative study. However, this study did gather in-depth data from the interviews with the participants about RW which may not have emerged in a study using the alternative methodologies available.

To further advance the knowledge in this area it is recommended that a longitudinal study is commenced now with a large sample of public servants so that their views can be ascertained as the new blended working policies are introduced, developed and as they evolve. In this way employers will be better informed about how they are impacting on turnover intentions within this group.

Because so many employees have experienced RW, they now have a wealth of knowledge which can be drawn on by researchers to further the understanding in this area, to improve the world of work. The commitment and bond that remote workers have to their organisations is one such area, how it is developed in new employees and achieved and maintained in established employees who are RW is key to retention. The Line Manager relationship is critical to it, and this is an area of study which could be explored further.

This study did not contribute to the knowledge as well as it was hoped for in employee attraction. The study was limited by the availability to it of a broad range of participants from this group that would provide diverse and data-rich insights. A study of incoming staff and those who turned down offers to ascertain to what extent their decisions were made based on the RW policies available would provide a useful source of data for employers as they attempt to meet the needs of this group.

7.0 Chapter: Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

Not long ago, employees with sedentary desk-bound jobs, enduring long commutes on wet winter mornings, could only dream of a time when they could do all their work from the comfort of their own homes.

When COVID-19 emerged, that dream became a reality overnight, but as so often with dreams, they can be unpredictable, when this dream came true, it had some unanticipated consequences. Those newly remote workers, not familiar with the research in this area may not have expected to be working harder, finding it hard to leave work behind them, feeling isolated and missing the interactions with their colleagues. They may have expected that they would have more time but perhaps did not expect to spend the time at their workstations, checking their work devices or negotiating with housemates over broadband usage.

The work from home measures which were expected to last for a few weeks lasted from March 2020-January 2022 and for that period, public sector workers who could work from home were obliged to do so and their employers were asked to lead by example and facilitate it. For those employees, managers and employers who had no experience of remote working, remote management or of being a remote employer it was a steep learning curve. But like much change it was managed and now what was a dream come true is to some extent taken for granted.

This research carried out with these newly remote workers found that they did and continue to work harder and for longer, however, they do so not to repay their employer, they don't see RW as a privilege granted which they must reward. They work harder simply because working remotely facilitates it. They have found that in practice they have more time and energy and less distractions, they can fit in some non-work tasks around work ones, allowing them to focus better on the work, as a result they work harder and are more productive.

The organisational commitment of employees has not changed, but their expectations have. In the past RW was available to a small number of public sector administrative staff, this period of RW resulting from COVID-19 demonstrated that RW can work in these areas of the public sector. Now employees expect employers to build on what has been achieved, and if they do not, some will consider leaving their organisations.

The impacts on WLB were positive and negative, there were social isolation issues and blurring of work and non-work life boundaries causing conflicts. Mental health challenges were experienced because work was hard to leave behind, but this did not impact to such an extent that RW is not attractive into the future.

Earlier research showed that jobseekers were attracted to employers with a strong WLB culture as this was indicative of the value they placed on their employees. The impact of the imposed RW on attraction was not clear-cut. While the negative effects of studying remotely that was experienced has resulted in a lack of interest in working remotely, it still stands that employers who offer RW policies are seen as caring and that in itself is attractive to jobseekers.

Management of remote teams was challenging, lack of interaction with managers resulted in feelings of isolation and disengagement for some. Video conferencing technology where used, mitigated those feelings of social isolation when used for collaboration and social interactions within the work setting. The use of electronic monitoring by managers demonstrated a lack of trust and was considered unacceptable. While these issues alone may not increase turn-over intentions, the findings indicate that the skillset required to manage remote teams may need further development.

Employees are interested in several flexible RW arrangements with time in the office taken up with collaboration and team interaction and the RW days spent on tasks that require more focus. But they may move to other public sector organisations to have their RW needs met, to avoid competition between them for staff, public sector employers will need to be innovative and flexible while mindful of the needs of their businesses.

7.2 Recommendations

Several recommendations to businesses can now be made based in the findings, discussion and conclusion of this study. There are cost implications associated with these recommendations. However, in the long term, these investments will be offset by the reduction in costs associated with the lower real estate demands, savings in recruitment, selection and training costs if staff retention is improved and finally the cost benefits associated with the increased productivity which was demonstrated by public servants when they RW. They are listed here in order of priority.

7.2.1 Management training

When managers failed to engage with employees who were RW this had a negative impact on them. It is proposed that learning and development teams conduct anonymised surveys to the assess the issue. Engage a specialist training organisation to consider the survey findings and create and deliver a management training programme tailored to the needs of the organisation. Allowing for government procurement regulations the survey and training can be completed within three-months.

Survey, in-house L&D specialist 5 days €310.00 x 5=€1,550.00. Training delivery cost per participant: €600.00 ex VAT, initially 10 managers = €6,000. Estimated total cost of training: € 7,150.00 ex VAT.

7.2.2 Interview programme

The findings of this study indicate that current employees may consider moving to other public sector organisations if their RW arrangements are more attractive to them. It is recommended that a specific question relating to this issue is added to exit interviews and the information is analysed to identify emerging trends and to allow corrective action to be taken to reduce those risks where possible.

There is no engagement currently with applicants who are successful at interview but who do not then accept the position offered. Formal contact should be made, subject to the constraints of GDPR to determine the rationale for their decisions. Initial set up would take

one month: 1 HR Specialist for 2 days 2 x €310.00=€620.00 and ongoing: 1 HR specialist for 1 day per month to engage with individuals and prepare report: €310.00 per month.

7.2.3 4 Day week

From 1st July 2022 the working week was reduced for civil servants from 37.5 hours to 35 hours net per week (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2022). It is therefore an opportune time to consider a four-day compressed working week where all the contracted working hours per week are completed over four days rather than five. This has not up until now been available to civil servants. It is recommended that the Civil Service HR unit conducts a pilot study to investigate the feasibility of this proposal.

To manage and report on the project to reduce the risk of bias, it is recommended that a business consultancy with a specialist knowledge is engaged. The tendering, planning and initiation phase of the project would take approx. three months. Six months will be needed for the actual pilot to take place and 3 months for the report to be available, one year in total.

The estimated cost of the consultancy to set up the project, monitor the participants and report on the findings is €60,000.00 ex VAT. There would be no additional costs from the perspective of the employees volunteering to take part in the study.

7.2.4 Remote hubs

It was a feature of this study that while participants felt isolated while RW, they had no appetite for a return to the long commute. Hubs could provide the human interaction required without the commute if they are correctly located.

The feasibility of allowing staff from other departments to use existing government department offices in suburban areas is worthy of consideration. A feasibility project could be run with available resources by Office of Public Works (OPW) at no extra cost.

Introduction of a desk booking system, Simply Book software can be purchased for €250.00 ex VAT per annum for this proof-of-concept phase. Timeline: Six-month feasibility with OPW reporting back on findings at that time.

8.0 Chapter Personal Learning Statement

I enrolled in the MA in Human Resource Management course in the National College of Ireland in September 2020. My aim was to gain a level 9 qualification accredited by CIPD. With a background in the natural sciences, this was a new area of study for me. I was more familiar with white coats, experiments and quantitative analysis. It was a steep learning curve.

I put my head down and got to work. I attended virtual lectures. I learnt to navigate video conferencing software, even the mute button eventually! I took the advice of lecturers and I got to know the library staff and the resources available there. I sought feedback from the patient lecturers after every assignment and I used their constructive criticism to learn the lessons that helped me to improve. Slowly my academic confidence grew, I began to hear my own voice coming through in my assignments. What I was learning was also helping me to contribute more to my workplace. The added confidence and knowledge I had gained combined with the commitment I was demonstrating by undertaking the course, was the edge I needed in a promotion competition. The long hours studying and writing assignments were proving worthwhile.

With more confidence I moved on to the second year, the challenges of research methods and dissertation writing awaited. These more independent-learning modules presented even more challenges. I put my head down again. In my second year, I learnt the discipline of writing. Drafting, reviewing and re-drafting, and to let go of some work that had taken time in research and writing because it did not, in the end, contribute to the research objectives. I honed my editing skills; I learnt that that process takes more time than you expect. The French philosopher, Blaise Pascal put it so succinctly in his correspondence to a friend “if I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter”.

To quote Marilyn Monroe whom I recently discovered was a poet, I learnt that I “think in ink”, for me to get the fullest understanding of a subject. I need to investigate it and to write about it. In the process of writing, re-reading and editing any lack of understanding emerges and then I cycle back until I understand the subject better and when I do that my writing becomes clearer, more concise and logical.

If I were undertaking a similar project again, I would not underestimate the time needed. I would warn family and friends that during periods when deadlines loom, I am no fun. I would add during the research I won't care what they want to talk about, I will bring the subject back to RW at every opportunity.

My only regret is that because of the pandemic and the resulting remote learning, I did not have the opportunity to learn from the NCI teaching staff and my fellow students as much as I would have if I had attended college in person. Despite great engagement on Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp, it could not replace the collegiality that develops and the learnings that emerge during those conversation with lecturers at the end of a class or during coffee breaks with students between lectures on cold winter nights.

Deinde tempore

Grania Peden August 2022

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10.0 Appendices

Appendix 1

Participants Profile

Participant Number	Age Range	Grade	Years of service
1	20-25	Jobseeker	0
2	20-25	Jobseeker	0
3	20-25	Jobseeker	0
4	40-45	Executive Officer (EO)	8
5	60-65	Principal Officer(PO)	30
6	40-45	Higher Executive Officer(HEO)	10
7	40-45	Assistant Principal Officer (AP)	8
8	30-35	Executive Officer	10
9	55-60	Assistant Principal Officer	6

Research Questions

Question Number	Question
1.0	What do you miss most about the office when you are working remotely?
2.0	What do you miss about working from home when you are working in the office?
3.0	What benefits did you experience while working from home?
4.0	Do you find that when you are working from home you work longer hours?
4.1	Do you find it difficult to switch off?
4.2	Did your employer do anything to assist you to manage your workload?
4.3	Do you use your personal devices such as laptop/mobile phones for work or work devices for personal use and does this impact on your ability to switch off from work?
5.0	If RW continues to be facilitated by your employer, do you think that you will be more likely to stay?
5.1	If yes what is your ideal number of days per week working remotely?
6.0	If RW was not facilitated, would you look for another job?
6.2	If yes what number of days/week would be the deciding factor.
6.2	Would you move out of the public sector to get better RW options?
7.0	Do you think you will work harder if you are facilitated by your employer to work remotely in the future?
8.0	What would be your ideal RW arrangement and why?
9.0	Is your commute a factor?
10.0	Is job security more important to you than RW?
11.0	Are there other work-life balance initiatives that you would like to see introduced?
12.0	What was your experience of managing people and/or being managed/supervised while working remotely?
12.1	Would this aspect influence your decision with regard to RW into the future?
12.2	How does the electronic monitoring of you/your team impact your/their performance?
12.3	If you have no experience with electronic monitoring, how would you feel if it was introduced?
13.0	What was your experience of the use of videoconferencing/Zoom/Microsoft Teams technology while working remotely?
13.1	Were you concerned about your privacy?
13.2	Did it have an impact on the border between work and home life
13.3	Were there benefits?
13.4	If not used in your organisation, do you feel this impacted you in any way?
14.0	If you have recently returned to the office following a prolonged period of RW what frustrations are associated with the return.
15.0	What is your current arrangement?
16.0	What do you enjoy most about the blended working experience?

Appendix 3

Human Participants Ethical Review Application Form

National College of Ireland

Human Participants Ethical Review Application Form

All parts of the below form must be completed. However, in certain cases where sections are not relevant to the proposed study, clearly mark NA in the box provided.

Part A: Title of Project and Contact Information

Name

Grania Peden

Student Number (if applicable)

20127740

Email

granspeden@gmail.com

Status:

Undergraduate

Postgraduate

Staff

Supervisor (if applicable)

Assistant Professor Caitriona Hughes

Title of Research Project

Life in Ireland after COVID-19: what impact will RW policies have on the recruitment and retention of staff in the public sector

Category into which the proposed research falls (see guidelines)

Research Category A

Research Category B

Research Category C

Have you read the NCI Ethical Guidelines for Research with Human Participants?

Yes
No

Please indicate any other ethical guidelines or codes of conduct you have consulted

N/A

Has this research been submitted to any other research ethics committee?

Yes
No

If yes please provide details, and the outcomes of this process, if applicable:

N/A

Is this research supported by any form of research funding?

Yes
No

If yes please provide details, and indicate whether any restrictions exist on the freedom of the researcher to publish the results:

N/A

Part B: Research Proposal

Briefly outline the following information (not more than 200 words in any section).

Proposed starting date and duration of project

February 2022-April 2022

The rationale for the project

Requirement for completion of MAHRM08

The research aims and objectives

The key objective of the research is to establish if offering attractive RW options will give public sector employers a competitive advantage in recruiting and retaining talent?

The research design

The research will use non-probability purposeful sampling.

Participants will be selected by the researcher based on their characteristics, in this case, current public sector employees who have had the experience of RW during COVID-19 and persons with an interest in careers in the Irish public sector.

One 45–60-minute semi-structured interview will be conducted with each of the participants to gain insights into the participant's experience of working remotely and how important working from home will be for them in deciding to join or remain in the public sector.

I will ask those who have had the experience of working remotely about their experience of communication, video-conferencing and electronic monitoring while working remotely.

I will analyse the data thematically and will, based on the research be able to make recommendations concerning the design of RW policies for the post-COVID-19 era.

The research sample and sample size

Please indicate the sample size and your justification of this sample size. Describe the age range of participants, and whether they belong to medical groups (those currently receiving medical treatment, those not in remission from previous medical treatment, those recruited because of a previous medical condition, healthy controls recruited for a medical study) or clinical groups (those undergoing non-medical treatment such as counselling, psychoanalysis, in treatment centres, rehabilitation centres, or similar, or those with a DSM disorder diagnosis).

The sample size is intended to be 9. 6 current public sector employees, 3 potential public sector employees. Some participants will have caring responsibilities and their commutes to the normal workplace will vary in their duration and the methods that they normally use.

If the study involves a MEDICAL or CLINICAL group, the following details are required:

- a) **Do you have approval from a hospital/medical/specialist ethics committee?**
If YES, please append the letter of approval. Also required is a letter from a clinically responsible authority at the host institution, supporting the study, detailing the support mechanisms in place for individuals who may become distressed as a result of participating in the study, and the potential risk to participants.
If NO, please detail why this approval cannot or has not been sought.
- b) **Does the study impact on participant's medical condition, wellbeing, or health?**
If YES, please append a letter of approval from a specialist ethics committee.
If NO, please give a detailed explanation about why you do not expect there to be an impact on medical condition, wellbeing, or health.

The nature of any proposed pilot study. Pilot studies are usually required if a) a new intervention is being used, b) a new questionnaire, scale or item is being used, or c) established interventions or questionnaires, scales or items are being used on a new population. If no such study is planned, explain why it is not necessary.

This is a qualitative study, semi-structured interviews will be undertaken with the participants. No pilot study will be conducted

The methods of data analysis. Give details here of the analytic process (e.g. the statistical procedures planned if quantitative, and the approach taken if qualitative. It is not sufficient to name the software to be used).

A thematic analysis of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews will be conducted.

Study Procedure

Please give as detailed an account as possible of a participant's likely experience in engaging with the study, from point of first learning about the study, to study completion. State how long project

participation is likely to take, and whether participants will be offered breaks. Please attach all questionnaires, interview schedules, scales, surveys, and demographic questions, etc. in the Appendix.

The participants will be recruited 6 weeks in advance. Their involvement will be voluntary, and they will be advised of the subject matter at recruitment. They will be asked to be available for one 45–60-minute semi-structured interview. At a time, suitable to them using video conferencing software or face to face if Public Health Guidelines in place at the time allow it the interview will take place. The participants will not be expected to prepare in advance for the interview. The researcher will advise them of the subject matter in advance.

Part C: Ethical Risk

Please identify any ethical issues or risks of harm or distress which may arise during the proposed research, and how you will address this risk. Here you need to consider the potential for physical risk, social risk (i.e. loss of social status, privacy, or reputation), outside of that expected in everyday life, and whether the participant is likely to feel distress as a result of taking part in the study. Debriefing sheets must be included in the appendix if required. These should detail the participant's right to withdraw from the study, the statutory limits upon confidentiality, and the obligations of the researcher in relation to Freedom of Information legislation. Debriefing sheets should also include details of helplines and avenues for receiving support in the event that participants become distressed as a result of their involvement in this study.

There are no risks of harm or distress associated with this research

Do the participants belong to any of the following vulnerable groups?

(Please tick all those involved).

- Children:
- The very elderly:
- People with an intellectual or learning disability
- Individuals or groups receiving help through the voluntary sector
- Those in a subordinate position to the researchers such as employees
- Other groups who might not understand the research and consent process
- Other vulnerable groups

How will the research participants in this study be selected, approached and recruited? From where will participants be recruited? If recruiting via an institution or organisation other than NCI please attach a letter of agreement from the host institution agreeing to host the study and circulate recruitment advertisements/email etc.

The participants will be recruited from persons in my network

What inclusion or exclusion criteria will be used?

I will interview participants who are public sector employees and who have worked remotely during COVID-19 and participants who have an interest in public sector careers.

How will participants be informed of the nature of the study and participation?

I will request participation in person or in telephone/video call.

Does the study involve deception or the withholding of information? If so, provide justification for this decision.

No

What procedures will be used to document the participants' consent to participate?

A consent form will be signed by all participants in advance of taking part in the study.

Can study participants withdraw at any time without penalty? If so, how will this be communicated to participants?

The participants will be advised of this in the consent [form](#) and it will be re-iterated verbally by the researcher before the interview begins.

If vulnerable groups are participating, what special arrangements will be made to deal with issues of informed consent/assent?

N/A

Please include copies of any information letters, debriefing sheets, and consent forms with the application.

Part D: Confidentiality and Data Protection

Please indicate the form in which the data will be collected.

Identified

Potentially Identifiable

De-Identified

What arrangements are in place to ensure that the identity of participants is protected?

The names of the participants will be coded by the Researcher, the code identifier which will link the name of the participant to the code will be retained in a password-protected file on a password protected PC in the researcher's home. The file will be deleted as soon as the study has been completed. The participants will not be named in the dissertation.

Will any information about illegal behaviours be collected as part of the research process? If so, detail your consideration of how this information will be treated.

Please indicate any recording devices being used to collect data (e.g. audio/video).

I intend to conduct the interviews on MS Teams and will set the app to transcribe the interview.

Please describe the procedures for securing specific permission for the use of these recording devices in advance.

The researcher will request consent in the consent form and seek verbal consent in advance of the interview and will only use computer-aided transcription if the participant agrees to it.

Please indicate the form in which the data will be stored.

Identified Potentially Identifiable De-Identified

Who will have responsibility for the data generated by the research?

The Researcher: Grania Peden

Is there a possibility that the data will be archived for secondary data analysis? If so, has this been included in the informed consent process? Also include information on how and where the data will be stored for secondary analytic purposes.

The data will not be used for any other purposes other than the completion of this thesis.

If not to be stored for secondary data analysis, will the data be stored for 5 years and then destroyed, in accordance with NCI policy? N/A

Yes No

Dissemination and Reporting

Please describe how the participants will be informed of dissemination and reporting (e.g., submission for examination, reporting, publications, presentations)?

Before the thesis is submitted the researcher will advise the participants by e-mail that it has been submitted.

If any dissemination entails the use of audio, video and/or photographic records (including direct quotes), please describe how participants will be informed of this in advance.

N/A

Part E: Signed Declaration

I confirm that I have read the NCI Ethical Guidelines for Research with Human Participants and agree to abide by them in conducting this research. I also confirm that the information provided on this form is correct.

Signature of Applicant: *Grania Peden*

Date 10th December 2021

Signature of Supervisor (where appropriate):

Date _____

Any other information the committee should be aware of?

N/A

Appendix 4

Consent Form

Life in Ireland after COVID-19: How will RW impact on attraction and retention in the Irish public sector?

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 being interviewed about my perceptions of retirement as an individual who is nearing retirement and offering my personal opinion on what organisations could do to support people in their decision to retire or to continue working.

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 dissertation itself and may be used in further published papers with my prior consent.

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 the original audio recordings will be transcribed and retained in a secure, password protected location until the exam board confirms the results of the dissertation at which point it will be destroyed securely. I understand that the researcher, as well as her supervisor will only have access to my interview notes/audio recording. These practices will be in line with the NCI ethical guidelines and GDPR.

I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed along with my consent form will be retained for 2 years after the researcher finishes the masters programme in accordance with NCI policy.

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 participant Date

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

Signature of researcher Date