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**Employee Perspectives and Preferences on Hybrid Working Models in
Ireland: Understanding the Role of Physical Workplaces and Workplace Policies**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led organizations globally to adopt hybrid working models, prompting concerns about the impact of physical workplaces and workplace policies on employee engagement and productivity. However, little is known about how employees perceive and prefer this working model, particularly in the Irish context. This research aims to explore employee perspectives and preferences on hybrid working models in Ireland and to understand the role of physical workplaces and workplace policies. The study uses a qualitative research approach with semi-structured interviews of seven employees who have been experiencing hybrid working models in Ireland, working in various industries and sectors. Thematic analysis techniques are used to identify themes such as work-life balance, flexibility, productivity, organizational culture, sense of belonging, and sustainable leadership. The research also examines employee expectations regarding the office environment and the impact of workplace policies, with themes emerging around office space design and the importance of incentives and financial support. The findings offer insights for organizations and suggest that leaders and managers must design the hybrid work model with individual concerns in mind to successfully transition to hybrid work. The research contributes to the understanding of employee perspectives and preferences on hybrid working models in Ireland and provides insight into designing workplace policies that are more conducive to hybrid working models in the country.

Keywords: hybrid working models, individual preferences, workplace policies, employee productivity, work-life balance, flexibility, organizational culture.

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Abbreviations

CIPD - Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

DETE - Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

HR – Human Resources

HRM – Human Resources Management

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1. Chapter ONE: Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced organizations globally to adopt remote work practices to ensure employee safety and comply with government regulations. Lockdowns imposed to avoid the virus's spread resulted in a rapid shift to remote work, despite many workers having little prior experience, as noted by De Vincenzi et al. (2022). With the pandemic moving towards the end, remote work has led to hybrid working models, which have emerged as a popular approach that combines working from home and the physical workplace (Ipsen et al., 2021). Hybrid work models provide benefits to both employees and organizations, such as increased flexibility, reduced commuting time and costs, and better work-life balance.

However, little is known about how employees perceive and prefer this working model, especially in the Irish context. Moreover, studies suggest that companies' adoption of the hybrid model is an attempt to regain control and monitoring over employees, leading to a mismatch between employee and company preferences. According to the Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment DETE (2021) in Ireland, remote working can hinder creativity and group dynamics, leading to less innovation and reduced collaboration. Therefore, some companies are inviting employees to return to the office either full-time or under a hybrid model. However, employees have become accustomed to flexibility and autonomy, and some may resist returning to the office.

Thus, the research aims to explore employee perspectives and preferences on hybrid working models in Ireland and to understand the role of physical workplaces and workplace policies in this regard. The study seeks to identify whether employees' preferences are considered in the transition process and to suggest recommendations for companies to achieve the best-fit hybrid model that meets workers' expectations and organization objectives. To do so, a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews will be adopted, focusing on employees who have been experiencing hybrid working models in Ireland, working in various industries and sectors. Thematic analysis techniques will be used to analyse the data collected.

To successfully transition to hybrid work, leaders and managers must design the hybrid work model with individual concerns in mind, not just institutional ones, as recommended by Gratton (2022). The research will contribute to the understanding of employee perspectives and preferences on hybrid working models in Ireland, providing insight into the design of workplace policies that are more conducive to hybrid working models in the country. Additionally, it may have implications for policy makers, as suggested by Gigauri (2020), who emphasizes the importance of Human Resource Management (HRM) in supporting employees to use digital platforms for accessing their work while prioritizing social interaction among workers.

The research is also relevant to understand the likeliness of losing talent. Companies that fail to provide flexibility and necessary adaptations risk losing their employees to those that have adapted, as noted by Smart (2022). This underscores the importance of flexibility in today's work environment, where workers are seeking higher wages, better conditions, and benefits. However, as Keogh (2022) has pointed out, two-way communication is crucial in ensuring that employees feel valued and heard. Without this, companies are likely to experience a considerable loss of talent. To achieve effective communication, organizations must represent changes and expectations about workers. Organizational change should be viewed through a psychological perspective that focuses on individual preferences for work, as Wiatr (2022) has suggested. This approach can foster confidence and empowerment in employees, which can lead to better contributions and establish a strong bond between employees and the company. Overall, it is imperative for companies to prioritize flexibility and communication to retain top talent in today's competitive job market.

The research is divided into seven chapters, beginning with an introduction describing the aims of the research. The second chapter presents a review of relevant literature on remote and hybrid working models, employer perspectives, employee expectations and preferences, the role of physical workplaces, and workplace policies. Chapter three provides an overview of the research background, context, and rationale, followed by the research questions, objectives, and methodology approach. Chapter four details the research design, including the research philosophy, approach, method, and data collection and analysis techniques. Chapter five and six present the findings, followed by

a discussion of the results and their implications. Finally, chapter seven summarizes the main findings, provides conclusions and recommendations, and suggests areas for future research.

The primary findings of the study indicate that employees prefer remote work due to several factors, including flexibility, work-life balance, and productivity. While some employees may miss the social interaction that occurs in an office setting, the majority do not view going to the office as necessary or important unless it is essential for work execution. In other words, going to the office to perform the same tasks that can be done from home is not seen as sensible by most employees. Consequently, it is crucial for companies to adapt and create new agreements that redefine the use of the office. By doing so, a hybrid working model can be implemented that benefits both the company and the employees.

2. Chapter TWO: Literature Review

2.1. Background: Reimagining the workplace

The conventional office workspace model, which features a hierarchical structure, individual workstations, closed offices, and formal meeting rooms, has been the standard for organizing work for many years (Earle, 2003). While higher salaries and more benefits have traditionally been thought to be the most effective ways for organizations to attract and retain employees, studies have shown that a better work environment can be just as effective in this regard (Earle, 2003). Therefore, organizations must create a physical environment that fosters a flexible and open culture while accommodating the diverse needs of all employees to attract and retain top talent (Czaja et al., 1987).

In addition to physical workspace, the quality of colleagues and co-workers heavily influences job satisfaction. Occupational stress has become a significant problem in office settings, and recent research has challenged assumptions that office work is safe and stress-free (Czaja et al., 1987; Earle, 2003). A negative work environment can demotivate even the most passionate and skilled employees and lead to higher turnover rates (Earle, 2003).

The Covid-19 pandemic in 2019 led to significant changes in people's lives, particularly in the workplace. Lockdowns were implemented to avoid face-to-face interactions, and companies had to adapt to a new work model, with many employees working from home, also known as telework (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). This shift in the understanding of work and workplace involves working outside of a traditional office setting, using telecommunications and computer-based technology to communicate with colleagues (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Kord et al., 2017). With the advance of social isolation restrictions resulting from the pandemic, remote work has become increasingly common. Hybrid work has also emerged as an adaptation between remote and in-person work, currently considered the future work model.

However, a mismatch between employers' and employees' preferences has emerged in the corporate world recently. This text will present relevant research contexts

on the advantages and disadvantages of remote and hybrid work, and the main reasons that have generated this divergence between workers and their employers.

2.2. The Emergence of Remote Working during the pandemic

Although remote working was not entirely unusual, the pandemic has made it much more common. According to De Vincenzi et al. (2022), lockdowns imposed to prevent the spread of the virus led to a rapid migration to remote work, despite many workers having little prior experience. Even though remote working has been beneficial for work-life balance and family time, it has also brought several challenges, such as communication difficulties and overwork (Lopes et al.,2022 & Arunprasad et al.,2021). Companies need to consider multiple factors to make remote working effective, such as the availability of technology, the nature of work, and the difficulty of remote supervision (Arunprasad et al.,2021).

Remote working also brings various risks, such as ergonomic risks and psychological problems, and companies need to ensure a safe home working environment (Bouziri et al.,2020). Companies are now reviewing the role of the traditional office and reducing office spaces to implement a hybrid model that combines office and home, providing more flexibility (Ipsen et al.,2021). However, the adoption of remote working varies among companies, with some already investing in platforms and training before the pandemic (Kicheva, 2021). Although the pandemic has rushed companies to implement remote work, it has become an increasingly stable feature. Therefore, companies must study strategies to ensure both company and employees benefit from remote work while managing its challenges.

2.2.1. Benefits and Challenges of Remote Working: Exploring Flexibility, Health and Safety, Productivity, and Work-Life Balance.

Remote work offers various advantages for both companies and employees, as supported by many studies. The most commonly cited benefit of remote work is flexibility, as highlighted by Kicheva (2021), which allows team members to coordinate tasks more efficiently and stay happier during work. According to Obdržálková and

Moravcová (2022), flexibility also allows workers to schedule their working hours, freeing up more time for personal tasks and reducing commuting time and expenses.

Flexible work is a valuable resource, as emphasized by Shirmohammadi et al. (2022), and it enables workers to have control over their working time, allocate time for non-work activities, and reduce stress, leading to increased productivity. Productivity is another advantage of remote work, as employees become more productive when they have autonomy to perform their work according to their preferences (Kicheva, 2021). However, De Vincenzi et al. (2022) stress that productivity only increases in companies that provide necessary resources for working from home, such as technical assistance and training.

Working from home also offers the advantage of a better work-life balance, as listed by Ipsen et al. (2021) as one of the three most common advantages for employees. Remote work allows employees to balance their work and personal life, providing time for personal tasks and caregiving responsibilities (Ferreira et al., 2021). Shirmohammadi et al. (2022) suggest that control and flexibility over the time for work and personal activities have beneficial effects on workers' lives, enabling them to dedicate time to work and family support as much as needed.

According to De Vincenzi et al. (2022), individual well-being is linked to self-discipline, and workers who consider themselves disciplined can positively deal with work-family balance and mental well-being if they have autonomy at work, which can relieve overload. Obdržálková and Moravcová (2022) conclude that the comfort of home positively affects employee concentration and provides more time spent with the family, which can only be ensured through the flexibility of time and work. In summary, the main advantages offered by remote work include flexibility, productivity, and a better work-life balance.

On the other hand, remote work is also associated with some challenges. One of the most significant challenges for employers is creating a culture of acceptance of remote work, which can negatively impact employee motivation (Kicheva, 2021). The main disadvantages of remote work for employees include social isolation, lack of leadership

and supervision, and poor physical conditions in the home office, as identified by Ipsen et al. (2021). Remote work can result in limited socialization and disrupt teamwork by preventing team members from working together and getting to know each other (Iwashita, 2021). Face-to-face interactions are deemed more effective in sustaining an organizational identity among staff (Arunprasad et al., 2021).

Receiving help and feedback from colleagues and supervisors can be challenging for employees in remote work, resulting in a sense of isolation and stagnation (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). The poverty of communication in remote work can make individuals feel detached from the organization and lead to psychological symptoms (De Vincenzi et al., 2022). Additionally, tracking employee productivity can be difficult for companies, particularly when remote work has been informally adopted (Popovici and Popovici, 2020).

Remote work can also have a negative impact on employee health, with many reporting an increase in stress, anxiety, back problems, burnout, and migraines (Kicheva, 2021). The quality of life of workers has been affected by remote work, resulting in depression, anxiety, poor sleep quality, fatigue, and muscle pain (De Vincenzi et al., 2022). Therefore, employers are responsible for providing adequate equipment and working conditions to reduce this issue (Obdržálková and Moravcová, 2022).

Work-life balance is also a significant challenge associated with remote work. Managing work and family roles can be difficult, weakening the boundary between the workplace and home and making it difficult to manage family interruptions (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Working parents face a greater challenge balancing work and family duties, leading to excessive fatigue and lack of productivity (De Vincenzi et al., 2022). However, proper time and task management can help prevent poor scheduling of working hours (Obdržálková and Moravcová, 2022), and self-discipline can reduce procrastination, improving work efficiency (De Vincenzi et al., 2022).

2.2.2. Strategies for Successful Remote Work: Balancing Productivity, Collaboration, and Employee Well-being

Remote work is a complex attempt that involves careful strategic planning to ensure high productivity levels and employee well-being. Popovici and Popovici (2020) suggest that companies should take concrete steps to address remote work, such as creating new regulations, providing incentives that promote collaboration, and keeping employees engaged and functioning as a team (Arunprasad et al., 2021). However, Iwashita (2021) notes that remote work may lead to a more individualistic work culture post-pandemic due to reduced interaction between colleagues. To combat this, Ferreira et al. (2021) recommend that companies provide employees with necessary technology, consider infrastructure issues, and reinforce tools to balance work and personal life. Shirmohammadi et al. (2022) advise employers to be aware of work's stressful effects, identify situations that increase work intensity, and take proactive measures to improve work-life balance. Ipsen et al. (2021) and Ferreira et al. (2021) suggest that flexible working from home can increase motivation and productivity.

Human Resources practices play a crucial role in encouraging collaboration and interaction between remote teams. Arunprasad et al. (2021) demonstrate how an effective and communicative approach among employees, fair remuneration policies, diversity management, and efficient recruitment processes can help. E-recruitment can also provide access to a diverse pool of candidates, make filling vacancies faster and less expensive, and reduce discrimination (Lopes et al., 2022). Sustainable leadership is also essential in guiding employees without intrusive monitoring (De Vincenzi et al., 2022).

Organizations can introduce webinars, online meditation classes, and training to develop healthy habits and reduce stress and anxiety (De Vincenzi et al., 2022). Managers and supervisors should invest in improving communication to ensure socialization among teammates and reduce isolation. Adequate training can also help employees adapt to remote work. Weekly alignment sessions, online courses, team meetings, extra-work activities, and strategic management applications can be used to control the team's health, well-being, and productivity (De Vincenzi et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2021). In conclusion, remote work requires a combination of strategic planning, technology, leadership, and employee support to maintain high levels of productivity and well-being.

2.3. The Hybrid Model of Working

Hybrid working, also known as a hybrid remote work or hybrid model, combines remote work with on-site work in a flexible manner. According to Rahaman et al. (2020), in a hybrid work environment, employees have the option to work from the office or their remote location, such as their home, a co-working space, or a coffee shop. This approach is gaining popularity because it offers the advantages of remote work, such as increased productivity and work-life balance, and in-person collaboration and socialization (Ateeq, 2022).

Hybrid working arrangements can vary depending on company policies and the nature of the work. Some companies provide a set number of days in the office, while others allow more flexibility for employees to choose their location based on their needs (Sokolic, 2022). Ateeq (2022) emphasizes that the suitability of hybrid work arrangements may differ depending on the role within an organization, and factors such as the nature of the work and the resources available to employees and employers.

Before implementing a hybrid working model, a careful and thorough evaluation of factors such as the sector of the organization, its size, industry, and union involvement is crucial (Ateeq, 2022). Sokolic (2022) states that many workers prefer hybrid work because it combines the benefits of working from home and in the office. It promotes collaboration, innovation, and interaction between colleagues in the office, and eliminates the need for travel, reduces distractions, and promotes autonomy when working from home. According to a report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development - CIPD (2022), individuals with flexible working arrangements are more satisfied and productive than those without. However, De Vincenzi et al. (2022) warns that the increase in productivity is related to the resources that the company offers to enable efficient remote work. Not all workers have adequate remote working conditions, which may interfere with their ability to perform their duties, communicate, and receive help and feedback from colleagues and supervisors, leading to a feeling of detachment and disinterest (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022).

2.3.1. Exploring the pros and cons of Hybrid Work Models: Strategies for companies to adapt and succeed.

The question of whether to continue working from home or return to the office has arisen after the success of remote working during the pandemic. Naor et al. (2021) highlights the benefits of remote work, such as increased job satisfaction, autonomy, and performance. However, Wang et al. (2021) argues that remote workers may experience disconnection and communication difficulties, while companies express concerns about productivity and control. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment DETE (2021) in Ireland reports that remote work can hinder creativity and collaboration, leading some companies to encourage employees to return to the office.

Hybrid work, which allows for a flexible work schedule split between the office and remote locations, is becoming popular. Naor et al. (2021) suggests that the office provides emotional support and a sense of belonging, but companies must adapt to attract and retain employees' interest in returning to the office. Sokolic (2022) emphasizes that incorporating hybrid work into corporate policies is critical for employee retention. The management of hybrid work should be balanced to prevent burnout and demotivation. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment DETE (2021) highlights three strategic pillars to support remote work: creating a supportive work environment, investing in infrastructure, and aligning public policies with organizational practices. Hilberath et al. (2020) argue that hybrid work is here to stay, and companies that offer flexibility and equal conditions for all employees will secure the future of work. Moreover, The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2022) notes that flexible working is essential for attracting new employees and retaining current ones, but it is also crucial for companies to have employees on-site for at least 40% of the time.

2.3.2. Designing Successful Hybrid Work: Considering Individual Preferences, Technology, and Global Talent Opportunities.

The success of hybrid work relies on considering the preferences of individual employees, according to various researchers. Katsoudas and Patel (2022) emphasize the importance of a people-focused mindset and the critical role technology plays in creating a logical experience between physical and virtual worlds. They argue that hybrid work should aim to create opportunities for anyone to participate in the global economy and

work in ways that play to their strengths. For successful implementation of hybrid work, leaders and managers must design it with individual concerns in mind, rather than just institutional ones, which can be a complex process involving two crucial components: time and place (Gratton, 2022).

Since hybrid work is the future of organizations, it is crucial to understand the perspectives, challenges, and expectations of both employees and employers to find a common ground. To achieve this, this work encourages readers to explore further into these perspectives in the following topics.

2.4. Employer Perspectives on Hybrid Working: Challenges and Opportunities.

In the post-pandemic world, many companies are faced with the decision of whether to return to the traditional office or continue with remote working. While remote work has worked well for many companies and is preferred by many employees, some companies insist on returning to the traditional office. According to Naor et al. (2021), the office provides employees with emotional support, a sense of identity, and a feeling of belonging to the organization that is lost when working from home. Therefore, companies need to focus on a strategic readaptation that can attract and retain employees by reinstating the value of working in the office, even if it is only for a few days a week.

As workers return to the office, it is important to maintain the pre-pandemic organizational culture and make necessary adaptations to create a comfortable, inclusive, and efficient environment for all, whether they work in a hybrid or remote setting (Evans, 2022). Hilberath et al. (2020) suggest that flexibility and strategic adaptations can help companies attract and retain the best talent, achieve better results, and make the return to the office more appealing, especially for those who lack adequate workspaces at home.

Companies that fail to provide flexibility and necessary adaptations risk losing their employees to those that have adapted (Smart, 2022). This need for flexibility reflects two realities: workers are seeking higher wages, better conditions, and benefits, while companies are spending heavily on leasing commercial real estate and want to maintain close control over their employees. Chung (2022) recommends a human-centred

approach that considers when, where, and how work is done, and gives individuals a leading role in deciding the future of their work. Therefore, adaptations to this new work reality should be based on the preferences and choices of individuals, in alignment with business objectives and strategies.

If leaders believe that it is essential for employees to return to the office, partially or fully, Bailey and Rehman (2022) suggest outlining a strategic plan that can convince everyone that this is the best option. Companies must focus on readapting their work practices to accommodate the changing work realities and offer flexibility to their employees to maintain their organizational culture, retain talent, and achieve better results.

2.4.1. Exploring the Financial and Control Considerations of Implementing Hybrid Work by Employers

Financial considerations are a key factor in companies' decisions regarding hybrid work and office return. Naor et al. (2021) observe that organizations are adjusting their office capacities and negotiating with landlords for rent reductions as they move towards hybrid working, with teams alternating between working from home and the office. Some companies are also adopting a completely virtual office environment, while others are exploring the possibility of renting co-working spaces (Vyas, 2022). According to Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi (2020), remote work can result in cost savings for companies, improve employees' planning skills and autonomy, and lead to higher satisfaction and productivity. However, even though remote work can reduce office expenses, companies still need to maintain physical facilities for employees who cannot work from home. Additionally, working from home can transfer some expenses, such as electricity and internet, to employees (Sokolic, 2022).

However, financial considerations are not the only driving force behind employers' decisions to bring employees back to the office. Murphy (2021) contends that while most reasons employers cite for returning employees to the office lack evidence, they rely on three arguments. First, they assume that only personal interactions in the office foster creativity and innovative ideas, but in reality, most employees are isolated

with headphones on. Second, they suggest that distance weakens organizational culture, but there is no evidence that a strong culture contributes to organizational success. Finally, they argue that remote workers are less committed to their work.

However, the most apparent reason for demanding a return to the office is control. Chung (2022) notes that most CEOs want to regain control over their employees, and this may be the primary reason for bringing them back to the office. Managers want to push employees to set personal goals that align with the strategic needs of the organization, as they are easier to manage and control in the office (Murphy, 2022). However, employees are increasingly resistant to this, and a report from CIPD (2022) shows that 63% of hybrid workers feel that their preferences are not being considered by their employers. Furthermore, in some companies, executives are forcing their employees to return to the office while continuing to work remotely. This disconnect between senior management and other employees is demotivating, disrupts the relationship between managers and employees, and makes it difficult to strengthen a relevant organizational culture (Turits, 2022). To address this, Gratton (2022) suggests that companies adapt to their employees' preferences and create choices that meet the needs of their entire workforce. Employers should continue to be flexible in their policies and work with employees to create a viable solution for everyone, starting with communication.

2.4.2. Revitalizing Workplace Communication and Redefining Organizational Change

Communication has been identified as a major issue among remote workers, with many feelings left out and disconnected from their colleagues during the return-to-office process. Keogh (2022) suggests that conversation is the best way to reduce this disconnection and foster a two-way communication process. Employers need to prioritize the voices of their employees and be open to new ways of working and flexible to their needs (Thompson, 2022). Wiatr (2022) recommends viewing organizational change through a psychological perspective to foster confidence and empowerment in employees, leading to better contributions and establishing a strong bond between employees and the company.

To manage the costs and expectations of the organization, it is crucial for employers to discuss their return or hybrid working strategies with their employees. The format of remote work requests should be shaped by legislation that brings clarity of expectations and practices to both parties, as emphasized by The DETE (2021). Experimenting with various possibilities, developing programs that prioritize well-being, and creating collective norms of support can also be effective strategies for the post-pandemic comeback (Hilberath et al., 2020; Thompson, 2022).

Chung (2022) suggests reimagining a possible future by re-evaluating how and why we work, thinking about when, how, and where as primary practices of change, and allowing teams to choose their own work schedules and preferred work location. Katsoudas and Patel (2022) emphasize transforming the office-centric approach to an employee-centric approach, and face-to-face meetings, interaction activities, collective tasks, improved workplace organization, and efficient communication to attract employees back to the office (Wang et al., 2021).

While effective communication is crucial for generating a positive, engaged, and integrated working environment, Sokolic (2022) warns about the phenomenon of "zoom fatigue", due to high screen exposure, and encourages important meetings to happen face-to-face in a more dynamic and participatory approach to create a culture of belonging. Companies should prioritize long-term benefits that have a meaningful impact on their employees' well-being and satisfaction, such as offering flexible work arrangements, opportunities for growth and development, and a supportive company culture (Earle, 2003; Evans, 2022).

2.4.3. Creating a culture of belonging and collaboration in hybrid work arrangements.

According to Evans (2022), engagement and a sense of belonging are critical in retaining employees. Remote workers often feel disconnected from the company, leading to demotivation and a sense of isolation. Gilstrap, Strivastava, and Gilstrap (2022) found that hybrid teams perform best when they perceive their work as teamwork and have effective communication and technology resources. To foster a sense of teamwork,

leaders must promote an inclusive and welcoming work environment, regardless of whether employees work in the office or remotely. Kumari and Yelkar (2022), Evans (2022), and Sokolic (2022) suggest that motivated employees feel like an essential part of something bigger, and offering support and a calendar of events can motivate employees and provide a different work environment.

Organizations should also reconsider their physical facilities to provide a more relaxed and comfortable environment. Gregory (2022) suggests creating creative meeting rooms with sofas, outdoor areas, and "water cooler talks" to recreate the feeling of being at home and disassociate from the rigidity of the office. Hilberath et al. (2020) and Thompson (2022) suggest that involving workers in creating, developing, testing, and deploying solutions to promote collaboration and teamwork can lead to creativity and innovative opportunities. Top-down solutions should be avoided, and workers should participate in defining their work future (Chung, 2022).

Moreover, when designing hybrid working arrangements, it is essential to consider both institutional and individual concerns and to involve employees in the process to gain valuable insights into their preferences and needs (Gratton, 2022). Determining key jobs and tasks and understanding what drives productivity and performance are also important considerations. Ultimately, to achieve its goals, any company must rescue its culture of belonging, collaboration, and teamwork.

2.5. Balancing the Benefits and Challenges: Employees' Perspectives on Hybrid Working

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work was not a common practice. However, lockdowns and the need to avoid crowds made remote work the norm. Many workers have found remote work to be effective and preferable, leading to resistance from employees as companies attempt to return to the office. This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of remote work and the return to the office by employees.

Remote work offers many benefits, including flexibility, productivity, autonomy, and better time management between work and family (Peters et al., 2022). Furthermore, remote work arrangements have the potential to improve workers' physical activity, dietary habits, and work-life balance. However, there are also challenges associated with remote work, such as uncertainties, difficulty in following office culture online, lack of access to the right technical support and tools, cognitive overload, exhaustion from back-to-back online meetings, and difficulty in setting clear boundaries between private life and work life (Chafi, Hultberg, and Yams, 2022). Additionally, remote work can be more monotonous and lacks the social stimulation and input that the office environment provides.

Overall, remote work has both advantages and disadvantages, and a return to the office may not be the best solution for all employees. Therefore, companies should carefully consider the needs and preferences of their employees and offer flexible work arrangements that allow for a healthy work-life balance.

2.5.1. Perspectives on Flexible and In-Person Work Arrangement

The implementation of flexible working has been viewed as a beneficial solution for both employers and employees. However, without proper planning and management, flexible working can lead to inadequate recovery from work and disruption of social connections, ultimately leading to negative impacts on employee mental health (Johnson et.al, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the perspectives of employees when deciding whether or not to return to the office. While some employees prefer the flexibility of remote work, others struggle with family interruptions and lack of productivity. Thus, Chafi, Hultberg and Yams (2022) suggest analysing the advantages and disadvantages of returning to the office from the individual, group, and leadership perspectives.

Returning to the office can provide employees with an ergonomic workspace, increased physical activity, and spontaneous interactions with colleagues, leading to positive impacts on their well-being (Peters et.al, 2022). The physical work environment plays a crucial role in shaping organizational success and employee outcomes. Factors

such as lighting, air temperature and quality, and sound can significantly impact workers' performance (Stich, 2020). Therefore, organizations must pay attention to the physical work environment to maximize their success and retain their valuable resources (Kegel, 2017). However, some employees worry about the potential reduction in autonomy and productivity, as well as the challenges of adapting to a new structure for work (Chafi, Hultberg and Yams, 2022).

Employers must implement policies and practices that support the health and well-being of workers, including providing safer working conditions, supportive leave policies, and health-promoting organizational policies and practices (Peters et.al, 2022). Overall, while returning to the office has potential benefits, it is important to consider the potential negative impacts on employee mental health and well-being, and to manage the transition back to the office effectively.

2.5.2. The Group Perspective: Balancing Social Connection and Coordination Challenges in the Hybrid Model.

The benefits and challenges of returning to the office can be viewed from both an individual and a group perspective. According to Johnson et al. (2020), returning to the office can increase opportunities for socializing, which enhances group cohesion and enables knowledge exchange, collective learning, and creative collaboration with colleagues. However, finding ways to coordinate the office and remote work is a challenge, such as deciding on days for everyone to meet at the office or agreeing on what tasks are better suited for office or remote work despite individual differences and preferences. While flexible working can allow individuals to align work hours and demands with the requirements and schedules of family members, remote working may increase feelings of social isolation and loneliness, limiting opportunities to develop relationships with colleagues and leading to a poor social relationship at work (Chafi, Hultberg, and Yams, 2022).

The social climate is an important factor in predicting mental distress, and the negative impact on work relationships and mental health is evident. Many workers miss social contact, and a significant proportion of home workers believe that their work

relationships have suffered as a result of lockdown. To support team relationships, Gifford (2022) recommends that managers should prioritize face-to-face time for activities such as team building, but also invest in regular videoconference calls to support team relationships. However, tensions may arise between employees and employers who have different expectations for remote work, with some employers desperate for a return to the office for face-to-face interactions. It is important for employers to prioritize the health and well-being of their employees and to offer flexible work arrangements that allow for a healthy work-life balance (Peters et al., 2022). Overall, it is crucial to consider both the benefits and challenges of returning to the office from an individual and group perspective and to manage the transition back to the office effectively.

2.5.3. Challenges and Benefits of Hybrid Workplace, in a Leadership Perspective.

The potential benefits of returning to the office from a leadership perspective include improving communication and social aspects, as well as making it easier to onboard new employees. However, the hybrid model presents challenges such as ambiguity around organizational policies, addressing employee concerns, clarifying work schedules, and implementing guidelines and technologies to support collaboration and creativity (Chafi, Hultberg and Yams, 2022). Technology has significantly impacted the nature of work, with many employees now working as knowledge workers or in a service context. While technology can increase productivity, it can also negatively impact employees' mental health, interpersonal relationships, and social capital within organizations (Johnson et al., 2020).

Organizations must carefully consider the impact of technology on employee experiences and support systems. The use of technology to mediate interactions within organizations can be particularly challenging when employees require support (Johnson et al., 2020). Despite enabling remote work during the pandemic, technology has not necessarily provided a solution to employee exhaustion, with many people experiencing "zoom fatigue" due to prolonged screen exposure (Atkinson, 2022). However, well-designed and implemented technology can reduce work demands.

Leaders can create a social hub for collaboration and creativity by addressing employee concerns and establishing clear policies and guidelines for the hybrid model. Gifford (2022) suggests that managers prioritize face-to-face activities such as team building while also investing in regular videoconference calls to support team relationships. Overall, while technology has benefits and drawbacks for the workplace, organizations must consider the well-being of their employees to maximize their success and retain valuable resources (Kegel, 2017).

2.5.4. Maintaining Work-Life Balance and Reskilling for the Future of Work.

The blurring of boundaries between work and personal life brought by remote work can make it challenging for employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance and distinguish between work and non-work hours. Atkinson (2022) suggests that the imbalance between work and home life negatively affects work-life balance and can lead to underperformance, dissatisfaction, and unhealthy coping mechanisms. Gorjifard and Crawford (2021) further argue that these negative consequences can cause conflict with colleagues and family. Moreover, sudden changes in work practices without proper training can lead to difficulties in managing both work and family responsibilities (Fazal et al., 2022).

Elbaz, Richards and Savard (2022) suggest that flexible working arrangements have stronger positive associations with work-life balance satisfaction. Dilmaghani (2020) found that employees with flexible work arrangements experienced significantly higher job and work-life balance satisfaction than those without any flexible work options. However, Fazal et al. (2022) found that most people tend to work longer hours when working from home, while only a few managed to reduce their workload and attain a positive balance with their work and family life.

The hybrid work model, which requires a new operating model and strategic flexible work policy, inclusive space design, and innovative technology solutions, can help organizations meet new employee expectations, connect a more distributed workforce, and provide tools to create, innovate, and work together to solve business problems (Nadeem, 2022). However, the hybrid model also presents challenges, such as

ambiguities concerning organizational policies, addressing worries, frustrations, and disappointments, clarifying when employees should be at the office or not, and implementing guidelines and technologies that support mixed participation and the creation of a social hub for collaboration and creativity. Additionally, organizations and policy makers must plan and analyse training courses to reskill and upskill employees to adapt to new technology and job roles (Gorjifard and Crawford, 2021).

Overall, work-life balance and proper planning and training are crucial for the wellbeing and productivity of employees in the future of work. While remote work offers a distance from work stress and allows workers to spend time with their families free from work pressures, the blurring of boundaries between work and home due to remote working has influenced this balance, making it difficult for employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance and distinguish between work and non-work hours (Vyas, 2022). Thus, there is a need to rethink which jobs are suitable for remote work.

2.6. Considerations for Employers and Policymakers

Finally, the hybrid work model poses unique challenges for businesses and employees as they navigate a new work culture. While returning to the office may improve communication and facilitate the onboarding of new employees, the hybrid model may complicate policy clarification, technology integration, and collaboration. To support the remote workforce and promote a healthy work culture, HR departments must prioritize social interaction, virtual networking, and other forms of virtual connection (Gigauri, 2020; Singer-Velush, Sherman and Anderson, 2020).

Vyas (2022) asserts that managers and HR departments must remain flexible and adapt their policies to accommodate the changes in work practices. Governments can also play a role in promoting work-life balance by implementing policies such as the "right-to-disconnect" law. Peters et.al, (2022) suggest that employers must promote workers' health and well-being by implementing health-promoting organizational policies and practices, such as safer working conditions and supportive leave policies.

To achieve a successful hybrid solution, businesses should balance the advantages and challenges of going back to the office, offer more flexibility, autonomy, and ergonomic support for the home office, and improve the physical working environment. It is crucial to reinforce the importance of finding a hybrid solution that works well for both employees and businesses. Overall, the success of the hybrid model requires careful planning, effective communication, and a commitment to supporting a healthy work-life balance.

2.7. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced companies and employees to shift towards remote and hybrid work models. While remote work has provided autonomy, flexibility, and improved work-life balance for many employees, it has also presented challenges in terms of productivity, communication, lack of interaction, and health and safety issues. It is crucial to consider these pros and cons when proposing strategies for a successful transition (Kicheva, 2021; Ipsen et al., 2021; Obdržálková and Moravcová, 2022; Shirmohammadi et al., 2022).

The literature suggests a mismatch between employers and employees regarding the transition to hybrid work arrangements and returning to the office. While employers may be eager to return to pre-pandemic ways of working, many employees desire continued flexibility and remote work options. This mismatch can lead to frustration and a lack of engagement from employees, who may feel that their preferences and needs are not being considered. Communication and collaboration between employers and employees are crucial in addressing this mismatch and finding a solution that works for everyone (Chung, 2022; CIPD, 2022).

The preferences of employees should also be taken into account when creating flexible working arrangements. It is essential to understand whether the physical workplace provides interaction, collaboration, and a sense of belonging in employees' perspective. Leaders play a crucial role in this transition. A comprehensive approach that prioritizes employee well-being, productivity, and individual preferences is required to successfully implement remote and hybrid work (Gorjifard and Crawford, 2021;

Atkinson, 2022). This approach should avoid the imbalance between home and work life and working long hours (Fazal et.al., 2022; Vyas, 2022). The literature urges us to understand the expectations that employees have of their leaders in relation to making flexible working work.

3. Chapter THREE: Research Question and Objectives

3.1. Introduction and Rationale

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed the way we work. Many organizations have adopted hybrid working models that combine remote and office-based work. Although this model provides greater flexibility and work-life balance for employees, it also raises concerns regarding the need for physical workplaces and the role of the office in facilitating collaboration and social interaction. Additionally, employees may prefer to work from home, further increasing these concerns. In Ireland, where hybrid working has become increasingly popular, it is crucial to understand employee expectations of this model of work. This understanding can help organizations create workplace policies that meet employee needs.

Therefore, this study aims to explore employee expectations and preferences of hybrid working model and provide insights into how organizations can make it more attractive to employees or assist them in adapting to a predominantly remote work model. This study is essential as it will provide empirical evidence on employee expectations and preferences in the era of hybrid working in Ireland. These findings will be useful for organizations in designing workplace policies that improve engagement and productivity by meeting employee needs and expectations. Additionally, this study will contribute to the existing literature on hybrid working by providing insights into the impact of workplace policies on employees. It will also serve as a foundation for future research on hybrid working in Ireland and other countries.

3.2. Research Objectives

This study aims to identify the worker's perspective regarding their return to work in the office in a hybrid model. The analysis will focus on the challenges, concerns, and fears that employees may have, with the aim of providing recommendations for companies to find the best way forward. The primary objective of this research is to understand what model of work employees prefer and what they expect from their company to encourage their return to the traditional workplace after an extended period

of remote work. Prioritizing the employee perspective is crucial, given the existing literature on the importance of giving voice to key organizational resources. To achieve this purpose, this research has the following objectives:

- To identify the factors that contribute to employees' preferences for working from home or going to the office.
- To identify the factors that would make the hybrid model effective to employees.
- To investigate the role of the physical workplace in fostering collaboration and social interaction among employees in the era of hybrid working.
- To provide recommendations for organizations on how to make the hybrid work arrangements more attractive to employees.

3.3. Research Questions

The research builds up to answer the following questions posed by the author:

1. What are the key factors that influence employee perspectives and preferences on hybrid working models in Ireland?
2. Has the employee's preference been taken into account in the new working arrangements?
3. Is the hybrid working arrangements efficient in Ireland?
4. What are employees' expectations regarding the office environment and workplace policies?

4. Chapter FOUR: Research Methodology

The methodology is a crucial aspect of any academic investigation, outlining the procedures and techniques that will be used to collect, analyse, and interpret data (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). This chapter will provide a detailed account of the methodology applied in this study, including the research philosophy, method, and approach, as well as the data collection and analysis methods. The sampling technique and data sources will also be explained. Ethical considerations will be discussed, with a focus on protecting human data and privacy. The chapter will also touch upon the limitations of the methodology employed and how they were addressed.

4.1. Research Philosophy

Saunders et al. (2019) define research philosophy as a set of assumptions about knowledge development, including ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. This study adopts an epistemological framework that enables the prediction, description, empowerment, and deconstruction of population-specific world views. Within this framework, the two main philosophies are positivism and interpretivism, each with distinct perspectives and limitations that guide researchers' decision-making. Positivism emphasizes objectivity and the use of measurable data, while interpretivism emphasizes the subjective experiences of individuals and the importance of context (Merriam, 2009). By using an epistemological framework, researchers can enhance their understanding of the purpose of qualitative research and expand the knowledge base.

4.1.1. The Positivist Philosophy

The positivist approach involves observing and measuring reality and recognizing that society influences individuals. The researcher adopting the positivist perspective is concerned with objectivity and reliability (Quinlan, 2011), making generalizations from research about social reality (Saunders et al., 2019). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), in positivism, a hypothesis is developed from theory and then analysed using statistics to identify the cause-and-effect relationship from the data. Positivism

emphasizes the importance of considering data and facts without being influenced by human interpretation or bias (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

Adopting this approach, a study hypothesis can either be accepted or rejected, and generalization of the results is possible. However, as pointed out by Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), positivist research faces some challenges. These include potential misuse or misinterpretation of statistical tests, a failure to explore individuals' true intentions, and difficulties in developing in-depth discussions. Positivist research is sometimes referred to as quantitative research because it assumes that research can be objective, the researcher is independent, and the results are valid, reliable, and replicable (Pather and Remenyi, 2005).

4.1.2. The Interpretivist Philosophy

The interpretivist approach to research is concerned with understanding the multiple realities and experiences of individuals and populations, where actions result from their own meanings rather than external forces of society. Interpretivists assume that there are differences between people and their views of the world, and that reality is open to interpretation (Quinlan, 2011). Interpretivism gathers information on the respondent's world view through subjective data gathering processes such as unstructured interviews or observation, with no right or wrong answers (Tennis, 2008).

Unlike the positivist approach, interpretivism is more concerned with in-depth variables and factors related to context. Human beings cannot be explored in a similar way to physical phenomena, as they create more depth in meanings (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

Interpretive research relies on qualitative methods such as observations and interviews, and is typically used for small sample sizes (Saunders et al., 2019). The interpretive approach is used when a researcher believes that human interactions, rather than just data, will provide more findings (Quinlan et al., 2019). Moreover, interpretive research enables researchers to consider different factors such as behavioural aspects

based on participants' experiences, which helps to describe reality given the assumptions and beliefs of the interpretivist researcher (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

4.1.3. The Philosophy Adoption

As the aim of the study is exploratory and the concepts being studied, such as expectations towards the best work model, flexibility, productivity and work-life balance, are subjective, an interpretivist approach was adopted. This approach is in line with the views of Saunders et al. (2019), who state that interpretivism is a better method for exploratory studies because it allows for the exploration of narratives, viewpoints, and interpretations. Interpretivism is also inductive, uses small samples, and involves in-depth investigations using qualitative methodologies. On the other hand, a positivist approach would not be suitable as it is based on the assumption that reality is objective and can be measured using quantitative methods (Pather and Remenyi, 2005).

4.2. Research Methods

Research method is a crucial aspect of any study, and selecting the appropriate methodology is a critical step in ensuring the validity and reliability of the research findings. Qualitative and quantitative methods are two commonly used research approaches that differ in their objectives, procedures, and data analysis techniques. In this section, we will explore the fundamental differences between these two methodologies and provide examples of when each approach may be more suitable to use in a research study. In the end, the chosen methodology for this research will be presented.

4.2.1. Quantitative Research

Saunders et al. (2019) argue that quantitative methods are used to explore relationships between a set of variables that are first measured numerically and then analysed. This approach is commonly used in social science research, where questionnaires or surveys are often used to capture isolated experiences at specific points in time. Independent researchers and standardized collection methods are typically required, and large sample sizes are also necessary to produce reliable results.

Quinlan et al. (2019) identify questionnaires or polls as common methods for gathering quantitative data. However, Morgan and Smircich (1980) argue that the social world cannot be measured objectively, as individuals play a role in shaping its development. They suggest that quantitative methods are not well-suited for studying the social world and propose that they should play only a partial role in the analysis and understanding of social change. In contrast, qualitative research can provide a more in-depth understanding of the social world, but it can be time-consuming to analyse and may not be as reliable as quantitative research. Quinlan et al. (2019) suggest that quantitative research is deductive, objectivist, and usually placed in the positivist paradigm.

4.2.2. Qualitative Research

According to Tharenou, Donohue, and Cooper (2007), qualitative research is an exploratory research design that focuses on human experience to uncover more in-depth ideas, also known as non-numeric data. Qualitative research measures data with words and aims to answer not only the "what" but also the "why" questions. The difference between qualitative and quantitative data is not in the data gathered but in the methods of analysis applied to the data.

Qualitative research is generally associated with an interpretive philosophy. Creswell (2007) believes that qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups are due to a social or human problem. Qualitative researchers collect data in the field, having face-to-face interaction with participants over time, which allows them to understand richer meanings behind the data and build explanations from respondents' understanding (Jarratt, 1996).

According to Ayre and McCaffery (2022), qualitative research can help to understand the context of a specific population, their needs, and their preferences for intervention goals, content, and delivery formats. This research method's techniques include small-group discussions, semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, and analysis of texts and documents (Hammarberg, Kirkman and Lacey, 2016). One of the major criticisms is that within the positivist paradigm, it is assumed that an objective

reality or truth exists independent of those undertaking the inquiry and their context (Hammarberg, Kirkman and Lacey, 2016).

The quality of qualitative research depends on whether participants' perspectives have been authentically represented in the research process and whether the findings are coherent in the sense that they "fit" the data and social context from which they were derived (Fossey et al., 2002). Examples of qualitative data include interview transcripts, newspaper articles, questionnaire responses, diaries, videos, images, or field observations (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Kitto, Chesters, and Grbich (2008) suggest that a report of qualitative research should address the following criteria: clarification and justification, procedural rigor, representativeness, interpretative rigor, reflexivity and evaluative rigor, and transferability.

The selected research methodology for this study is qualitative, as it enables the collection of detailed and genuine perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs from the sample in relation to the research objectives (Quinlan et al., 2019). Although this method may be time-consuming and demanding, it is deemed more appropriate than quantitative research since the responses may be too complex to represent quantitatively. Qualitative research is often used to understand the contexts and settings in which participants address a problem or issue, and cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it, whether it be at home, with family, or at work (Creswell, 2007).

4.3. Research Approach

According to Howson (2021), the qualitative research method is designed to gather unstructured information such as opinions, attitudes, conceptions, concerns, and lifestyles of individuals through various means such as interviews, observations, feedback forms, reports, and media. The collected data is then interpreted and analysed through theoretical application. The researcher critically assessed both the inductive and deductive approaches to theory and selected the method that was most appropriate for this particular research project.

4.3.1. Inductive

According to Gregory and Muntermann (2011) and Saunders et al. (2019), the inductive approach is a research methodology that starts with specific observations and uses them to develop broader generalizations or theories. It is often referred to as the 'bottom-up' approach because it moves from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories. In the context of qualitative research, the inductive approach involves collecting and analysing data without predetermined hypotheses or theories.

As Woiceshyn and Daellenbach (2018) explain, the researcher may start with an open-ended question or a broad research topic and use techniques such as interviews, focus groups, or observation to gather data. An inductive researcher starts with an observed phenomenon of interest, typically framed as a question that has not been answered. The data is then examined and analysed for patterns, themes, and relationships, and generalizations and theories are generated from the analysis.

While the inductive approach is often used in exploratory research it allows for new insights and perspectives to emerge from the data, and it is well-suited for understanding complex social phenomena (Gregory and Muntermann, 2011). However, no hypotheses are needed, as the authors focus on how their research question and research go beyond what is already known (Woiceshyn and Daellenbach, 2018).

4.3.2. Deductive

Quantitative research typically employs the deductive approach, also known as the 'top-down' approach (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach involves collecting data and then testing theories through analysis of the data, moving from the general to the specific. The researcher adopts a clear theoretical position and the research project is focused on theory. Gregory and Muntermann (2011) state that theorizing in a deductive mode involves identifying a problem in the literature and proposing a solution through the development of hypotheses. Woiceshyn and Daellenbach (2018) suggest that the deductive method can start from any theoretical base, resulting in any number of alternative hypotheses.

Based on that difference, this researcher suggest that an inductive approach is suitable for this project, as it allows for the extraction of meanings from the qualitative interview data collected to develop a theory based on patterns and relationships. This approach was chosen because the research objective is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context, which is achievable through an inductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019). Therefore, this approach was considered the most appropriate for this study.

4.4. Sampling

To ensure a high-quality qualitative study, appropriate participants who can provide the necessary insights need to be identified through a process of qualitative sampling (Fossey et.al, 2002). This process may involve a small number of participants, but it can generate a large amount of data from various sources, such as interviews, observation-based field notes, and written documents. The focus of the study should be on gathering rich descriptions of participants' experiences that incorporate details and reflect on the significance of their experiences. Researchers can increase the likelihood of achieving this goal by using purposeful sampling, which involves determining in advance the desired size and diversity of the sample (Grossoehme, 2014). According to Hammarberg, Kirkman, and Lacey (2016), increasing the sample size in qualitative research does not necessarily lead to greater applicability. In fact, a larger sample size may compromise the depth of the study by prioritizing breadth or generating an excessive amount of data that cannot be adequately analysed. Therefore, sample sizes in qualitative research tend to be relatively small.

For this particular study, the researcher recruited 7 participants who have been experiencing the phenomenon of transitioning from remote to hybrid working or fully returning to the office in companies located in Ireland, either Irish companies or companies with a franchise in Ireland. The industry where these companies are in is not relevant for this research, however it was asked in case of any relativities. They should be working fully remote when the pandemic restrictions were up, and are now transitioning to another model of work. The recruitment process involved personal contact, social and professional networks (such as LinkedIn and Instagram). The reason

for these criteria is to gain relevant information based on their experience in this transitioning process.

The researcher presented the study objectives, invited spontaneous participation (Appendix B), and obtained signed ethical consent forms from the participants (Appendix A). The personal data of the participants were not collected, and the identity of the company in which they work was kept confidential. The only relevant information collected was the sector in which the company operates for comparison and data analysis purposes.

4.5. Data Collection

Qualitative research involves different methods of data collection, each with its own advantages and limitations. Paradis et al. (2016) identifies five primary data collection methods, that will be presented in this topic and the most suitable one will be chosen.

4.5.1. Different Types of Data Collection

The first method is surveys, which can provide useful insights into attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and knowledge of a specific group of individuals, but it requires well-formulated questions to ensure coherence across participants (Paradis et al., 2016; Ayre and McCaffery, 2022). The second method is focus groups, which gather data from a group of people using predetermined questions or a script to stimulate group conversations (Ayre and McCaffery, 2022). Observations, the third method, involves using the senses to investigate and document people's everyday behaviour and actions to understand why they do what they do. However, it may be impractical for short-term research because it may take a long time to gather enough information (Draper and Swift, 2010). The fourth method is textual or content analysis, which involves collecting data from texts, such as medical records, newspaper articles, letters, and reports. Textual analysis is useful for investigating changes in official, institutional, or organizational views on a particular subject, or exploring the experiences and perspectives of a group of individuals who have engaged in written reflection (Draper and Swift, 2010; Paradis et al., 2016).

4.5.2. Interviews: as the most suitable method

Interviews are a valuable tool for collecting data on an individual basis (Paradis et al., 2016). They provide in-depth answers and can bring relevant elements to the research, avoiding the superficiality of direct questions. DiCiccio-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggest that interviews are among the most common strategies for collecting qualitative data, while Howson (2021) highlights that in-depth interviews can encourage participants to speak openly about issues and present points not previously considered by the researcher. Belina (2022) emphasizes the importance of active listening, empathy, spontaneity, appropriate use of clarifying procedures, and the ability to ask questions and interpret the interviewee's reactions for a successful interview.

Interviews can be conducted face-to-face, over the telephone, or online. Draper and Swift (2010) suggest that telephone or online interviews may be useful for accessing participants in remote locations, while face-to-face encounters can establish rapport and capture nonverbal communication. Semi-structured interviews, which provide some standardization in the interview questions while allowing for open-ended responses by the interviewee, are the most applicable type of interview for this study (Belina, 2022). They provide a means for focused exploration of a specific topic, utilizing an interview guide with predetermined questions that encourage participants to speak freely about their perceptions and experiences (Fossey et al., 2002).

Kallio et al. (2016) propose five phases for creating a guide for a semi-structured interview: (1) identifying the prerequisites for using this type of interview; (2) using previous knowledge; (3) formulating the interview guide; (4) pilot testing the interview guide; and (5) presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide. Effective interview questions should use "sensitizing concepts" to encourage participants to share information that increases understanding of experiences, views, beliefs, and behaviours of participants (DiCiccio-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Between five and ten specific questions are normally developed to dig more deeply into different aspects of the research issue.

To avoid potential biases that may influence the results of the study, researchers must be aware of their role as active and neutral participants in the social interaction that occurs during interviews (Belina, 2022; Jowsey, Deng, and Weller, 2021). Researchers should also describe who was interviewed, their reasons for selecting particular interviewees, and any potential relationship between the interviewees and the researcher (Jowsey, Deng, and Weller, 2021). Additionally, informed consent and anonymity rules must be followed, and information sheets should be produced to fully describe the study and provide potential participants with an opportunity to discuss their involvement with the researcher (Draper and Swift, 2010).

For this study, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and stored in accordance with GDPR regulations to protect the personal and identification data of each participant. The researcher created an interview guide with questions based on previous literature and discussions already presented in this study, aiming to answer the main questions and objectives of this research. The interview guide (Appendix C) contains 6 topics with some questions and follow-up questions based on their answer. The interviews varied from 25 to 35 minutes and were all conducted face-to-face.

4.6. Data Analysis

According to DiCiccio-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), qualitative interviews can be interpreted in various ways, and data analysis should ideally occur concurrently with data collection to inform sampling and research questions. Fossey et al. (2002) describe qualitative data analysis as a process of reviewing, synthesizing, and interpreting data to explain phenomena or social worlds being studied.

Phenomenology, as explained by Jowsey, Deng, and Weller (2021), is an approach in qualitative research that aims to understand and describe the essence of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of individuals who have experienced it. Thematic analysis is a method within this approach that is commonly used with interview data to understand people's experiences and perceptions. This approach attends to create themes of meaning within the data and promote significant discussions comparing data and relevant literature (Fossey et al., 2002; Ayre and McCaffery, 2022).

The researcher used thematic analysis to analyse the data. Thematic analysis involves identifying patterns and themes in the data that are relevant to the research questions. The process of thematic analysis, according to Grossoehme (2014) and Castleberry and Nolen (2018), involves immersing oneself in the data, compiling and coding the texts into categories, and interpreting the meaning behind the participants' words while incorporating relevant literature. However, the interpretation process should occur from the first step of data analysis. The conclusions drawn from the research should be based on the participants' responses and should answer the research questions that are the purpose of the study.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are crucial in any research project involving human participants. DiCiccio-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) identify five ethical considerations that are particularly significant to the interview process, including confidentiality, informed consent, communication of the investigation's intent, responsibility for gathering information, and avoiding exploitation of interviewees for personal gain. Failure to address these concerns can compromise the reliability and validity of the research findings (Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden, 2000). Grossoehme (2014) recommends recording interviews using audio or video, and each interview or focus group should have a single transcript to maintain the written data (Jowsey, Deng, and Weller, 2021). It is important to use devices with suitable audio quality and to remove any information that could identify individuals to protect participants' privacy.

The researcher followed ethical protocols by submitting an ethics form to the National College of Ireland prior to conducting the research study. Information sheets and consent forms were provided to participants, outlining the research's purpose and emphasizing their voluntary participation. The respondents were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study or decline to answer any questions without any consequences. To maintain confidentiality, the researcher assured the participants that all data collected would remain anonymous, and personal data was not collected as it was not relevant to the research. The forms also stated that the data collected would be stored

securely and for a period of two years, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the college. Additionally, under GDPR regulations, respondents have the right to access this information at any time.

4.8. Limitations

There were few limitations to conducting this research. Firstly, the sample size may have been insufficient to represent the larger population, despite qualitative research typically requiring a small sample size. Secondly, the limited timeline may have affected the data collection process and a thorough analysis of the data. Finally, there is a risk of unintentional bias in qualitative research, especially in the framing of research questions. However, the researcher made an effort to mitigate this issue by carefully reviewing and refining the research questions and interview questionnaire to reduce the influence of personal biases.

4.9. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study aimed to understand the role of physical workplaces and workplace policies in hybrid working models from the perspective of employees in Ireland, as well as, their expectation and preferences about this model of work. A comprehensive qualitative research methodology was developed and applied to collect and analyse data from a sample of participants, through a semi-structured interview questionnaire. Through this methodology, key findings were identified, which have contributed to the existing body of knowledge in this area. The study highlights the importance of considering employee perspectives and preferences in shaping workplace policies to support the successful implementation of hybrid working models. However, there were limitations to this study, including a small sample size and potential biases in self-reported data. Overall, this study has provided valuable insights into the role of physical workplaces and workplace policies in the hybrid working models in Ireland, which can inform future research and practice.

5. Chapter FIVE: Research Findings and Analysis

5.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to present and discuss the findings of the research study. After the application of methodology and data collection presented in the previous chapter, this one will focus on the results obtained through the interviews, and will provide detailed elements that respond to the research questions and objectives. The study investigated the perspectives and preferences of employees on hybrid working models in Ireland, with a focus on the role of physical workplaces and workplace policies. The research design allowed for the collection data from employees working under the hybrid model. Through the analysis of the data collected, key themes and patterns emerged, elucidating the experiences and attitudes of employees towards hybrid working models and their impact on work-life balance, productivity, and organizational culture. The findings presented in this chapter are organized according to the research objectives identified in the previous chapter.

5.2. Sampling Profile

In this study, a total of seven face-to-face interviews were conducted with employees working under a hybrid regime. To provide contextual differentiation, the industry and position of each participant were noted, but were not considered relevant factors in the study. The profile of each participant will be presented in the table below, identified only by a number from 1 to 7 to ensure ethical confidentiality as proposed in this research.

Table 1. Participants Profile

Participants	Role/Position	Industry
Participant 1	Financial Analyst	Financial Services
Participant 2	Global Strategy Manager	Pharmaceutical
Participant 3	Outbound Planner	Mining
Participant 4	Frontend Specialist	Risk Assessment and Insurance Broker
Participant 5	Data Analyst	Beauty Tech
Participant 6	Senior QA Engineer	Payment Industry
Participant 7	Drawing Coordinator	Pharmaceutical

5.3. Objective 1: Factors that contribute to employees' preferences for working from home or going to the office.

The hybrid work model has become increasingly prevalent in modern workplaces, offering employees the choice to work from home or go to the office. As a result, there is a growing need to understand the factors that influence employees' preferences for one option over the other. The findings presented in this section indicate that all participants are content working from home and none of them expressed a desire to return to the office full-time. The main driver for this preference is flexibility, which enables employees to balance their work and personal lives effectively. Participant 4 stated, *"it's nice to be at home, managing your own time during the day, being in the comfort of your place,"* while another said, *"I can control my time, do the things in my own time...as long as the tickets are done in time."* (Participant 6). These comments align with Kicheva's (2021) observation that flexibility is a primary benefit of remote work, as it allows workers to coordinate tasks according to their availability and enhances their overall happiness.

The respondents inquired about the differences between working from home and the office, with most highlighting the importance of focus. Participant 1 emphasized, *"The biggest difference is because part of my job is very operational, and requires attention to details and focus all the time"*. Another participant agreed, stating that *"When I'm home, and I need to focus on a project, it's easier because it's a lot quieter than it is in the office, where a lot of people are having calls at the same time, or people are walking by, so it gets a little bit harder to concentrate."* (Participant 2). However, some respondents acknowledged that being in the office has its advantages, in terms of communication and interaction, particularly for those who have had to adjust to working alone. Participant 3 explained, *"For me, the hardest part to adapt was being on my own at my house every day, not having people to talk to."* While Participant 2 noted that, *"when you're in the office, you're allowed to just go grab a coffee with someone, talk about a business topic that you would need to schedule a meeting for."*

Five out of the seven interviewees emphasized the impact of commuting time on their preference for working from home. As Participant 3 points out, *"I don't like going*

into the office, the commute is terrible. I lose two hours of sleep every time because I have to wake up to prepare food, the buses are full of people going to work and schools, and I am always late when I get there." Participant 5 highlights the significant amount of time spent commuting, stating that *"It's almost an hour and a half to go and an hour and a half to come back. I can save three hours in my day if I work from home."* This highlights the importance of reducing commuting time as a key factor in employees' preference for working from home.

5.4. Objective 2: Factors that would make the hybrid model effective to employees.

This model is becoming more popular due to the benefits of remote work, such as increased productivity and work-life balance, combined with the advantages of in-person collaboration and socialization (Ateeq, 2022). In order to gain a better understanding of the factors contributing to the effectiveness of hybrid working, we asked participants about the impact of this model on productivity and work-life balance. Participant 1 observed, *"When it comes to work-life balance, hybrid working can have a positive impact on my life because the days I work at home, I can also take care of household tasks or have more free time."* Similarly, Participant 3 noted, *"Hybrid working has definitely impacted my work-life balance because knowing that I can just wake up and work is brilliant. And when I have downtime at work, I can take care of things around the house. It's a 10 out of 10 for me."*

However, opinions on productivity varied among participants. While some believe they are more productive when working from home, others consider the office a more engaging workspace. According to Participant 4, *"I work better at home, in my own space. There are no interruptions."* On the other hand, Participant 5 believed that being in the office allows for greater collaboration and results in better output: *"I am more productive in the office, especially because everyone is there, and I can ask for help if needed. I also tend to procrastinate when I'm at home if it's not urgent."* It is worth noting that Shirmohammadi et al. (2022) highlights one of the challenges of remote working as the difficulty in receiving help and feedback from colleagues and supervisors.

Another relevant factor discussed in the interview was the importance of in-person interaction among colleagues. Arunprasad et al. (2021) argue that face-to-face interactions are more effective than technological interactions in maintaining organizational identity among staff. When it comes to business, Participant 2 emphasizes an important point, *"The virtual world has allowed us to cross many bridges, for example, to have a meeting with a client/supplier that's far away is a lot easier. But you do have to see people face to face, especially when you're talking business or is about to sign a new contract."* Similarly, other participants believe that interaction between colleagues is also restricted in remote work. According to Participant 7, *"sometimes I need to talk to them and I cannot get them or I need to schedule a meeting."* Another participant agrees, saying, *"I can feel it's a little bit robotic, the interaction between people, just talking about work issues, nothing personal."* (Participant 1). Overall, everyone agrees that it is important to promote interaction activities, as it facilitates collaboration and productivity, *"when we have interaction activities, I can feel my team closer and more productive."* (Participant 4).

A last important factor to consider in understanding the effectiveness of hybrid work is the ability of leaders to manage teams in this model. All participants praised their managers' performance, with Participant 3 highlighting their manager's flexibility, *"He's very flexible. Even though the company pushes us to go to the office, he understands that every member of the team has a different lifestyle and different possibilities to go to the office."* Participant 5 reveals that in their team, some people work completely remotely and that the manager promotes interaction activities at least twice a week, *"In my team, two people are working fully remote. Because of that, twice a week, we have coffee breaks meetings to have random conversations like we were in the office."* Work adjustments related to personal life was also something appreciated by the employees. *"An example of how good he is was when I went to my birth country and had to work full remote, and he changed the time of our team meetings due to different time zones,"* exemplified Participant 4.

Furthermore, another participant considers the team's maturity as a facilitator point for management. *"Because she's not managing a junior team, it could be easier as we are at a very mature level, with individual levels of commitment and responsibility."*

(Participant 2). However, this does not always work well in practice. Participant 1 believes that their manager is not able to handle the dissatisfaction of members who do not want to give up remote work. *"He is losing some control of the team in some aspects. Not being able to deal with some people being resistant to go to the office because of the distance, causing disagreement within the team."* Therefore, in order to make hybrid work, managers and supervisors should invest in improving communication to ensure socialization among teammates and reduce isolation. Weekly alignment sessions, team meetings, extra-work activities, and strategic management applications can also be used to maintain the team's health, well-being, and productivity (De Vincenzi et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2021).

5.5. Objective 3: The role of the physical workplace in fostering collaboration and social interaction among employees in the era of hybrid working.

In the era of hybrid working, where employees alternate between working from home and the physical workplace, it is increasingly important to understand the role of the physical workplace in fostering collaboration and social interaction among employees. While remote work has proven to be beneficial in many ways, it has also highlighted the importance of face-to-face interactions in building relationships and promoting innovation. To explore the impact of physical workplaces on collaboration and social interaction among employees, workplace policies around hybrid working arrangements, and employees' perspectives, participants were asked about the requirement to go to the office, the responses varied, with each participant having different types of agreements.

According to Sokolic (2022), the specifics of hybrid work arrangements can vary based on a company's policies and the type of work involved. Some companies may provide a predetermined number of days for in-office work, while others may offer greater flexibility, allowing employees to choose their work location based on their individual needs. For four participants, going to the office is necessary, but the day is the employee's choice, and there is some freedom regarding this decision. Participant 3 and 7 report needing to go to the office at least once a week, but if any unforeseen event occurs, they are free to stay home without any retaliation. Participant 4 also has the flexibility to

inform the manager if something unexpected occurs on the day they are expected to go to the office. *"It's kind of a choice, if we don't want to go to the office, we just need to inform the manager, without any problem."* On the other hand, Participant 6 has much more flexibility, as they do not need to go to the office at all or only when they need some type of technical assistance. *"I actually go just when I have some issues with my laptop or any physical support that they can fix."*

However, the companies of Participants 1 and 2 seem to be slightly more restrictive regarding this choice. One participant report that the CEO's speech is "highly recommended," but managers must ensure that employees are going to the office. *"It is a highly recommended choice, but our CEO has personally requested people to go back into the office."* (Participant 2). This recommendation was precisely the reason that changed the agreement in the company of Participant 1. Before, the employees had the right to choose and were not going to the office, so the management made it mandatory to be present in the office three times a week, with one day being mandatory for everyone. *"When it started, we could go like any day we want, but some people never went to the office. They change it to two days mandatory and now it increased to three days."* (Participant 1).

Despite the existing agreements in each of the interviewees' companies, this study aimed to identify each individual's personal preferences and whether these were taken into consideration by the company in structuring the hybrid working arrangements. The majority of participants stated that they had not been involved in the development of the work model, nor were they even asked about their preferences or opinions. *"This arrangement was not a matter of asking or the team. They just set a meeting and said they were not happy with the results of the choice and now they were requiring physical presence in the office"* (Participant 1). Only one participant reported being consulted about their preferences: *"My boss spoke to the whole team and heard all of our opinions. That's how we came together on choosing two days of the week, because it's the best for most people"* (Participant 3).

Even though there are different agreements made in each company, opinions on why companies are requiring a return to the office and the importance of consulting

employees' preferences are similar. Even those who already had a defined agreement in their contract expressed a preference for being consulted on their opinions if changes were to be made. *“I think that the people that do the work, it's the one that should decide how it's better for them to actually do the work.”* *“Some of us prefer work fully in the office, other fully remote or hybrid. So, if the company could make everyone happy the whole team would be more productive.”* (Participant 3; Participant 1). Additionally, Participant 2 believes that the intention to return employees to the office, in addition to control, is also related to organizational culture. *“These arrangements are basically because of culture. The company replaced around 40% of the employees. That means those people have never stepped foot into the office and lived the reality of our company face to face because they were hired during that time when it was remote.”* This is an important point that will be further discussed in the chapter on discussions.

5.6. Objective 4: Recommendations for organizations on how to make the hybrid work arrangements more attractive to employees.

As organizations transition to hybrid work arrangements, it is important for them to ensure that these arrangements are attractive to employees. This section presents findings on how well hybrid working arrangements are working in the workplace and recommendations for improvements. While six out of seven participants stated that their companies were doing a good job with hybrid work, one participant expressed dissatisfaction with the mandatory office requirement and how it had affected team performance. *“It is not working, especially because of the mandatory thing, people are not happy with it.”* (Participant 1).

The participants agreed that there is still room for improvement in optimizing team results. For example, Participant 5 suggested that going to the office, when necessary, would be better for everyone. While Participant 1 emphasized that allowing employees to choose the days they want to work in the office would improve work outcomes. However, another participant highlighted that their company's approach, where employees do not have assigned desks or workstations, resulted in a lack of interaction between team members, making going to the office unnecessary. *“They created that “activity-based work” thing, where you can navigate through the office. That is, you don't*

have your table or a place for your team. Everybody is loose in the office, and even the people that you're supposed to meet is hard to find. I hate that." (Participant 3)

The majority of participants reported feeling more productive when working from home because they can organize their own time and stay focused on tasks. As such, another important point considered in the interview was whether the company provides resources that facilitate remote work, such as chairs, desks, computers, and screens, and if there is any type of financial support for monthly bills. Obdržálková and Moravcová (2022) assert that it is the employer's responsibility to provide adequate conditions and equipment for work to be performed.

All participants reported having received the necessary equipment for work, such as computers and screens. To some the equipment were given, such as ergonomic chairs and desks, while others had to buy their own and were reimbursed. A positive aspect worth noting is that some companies consider contributing financially each month to support electricity and internet bills as part of the incentives for remote work. Participant 7 said that in addition to the two screens and laptop, the company pays for their home internet. Participant 6 said they received €500 to invest in equipment and still receives an extra €100 per month to help with electricity and internet bills. Participant 3 added that they received a budget of €150 to invest in equipment and also receives money to help with household bills, and stated, *"It's just a small amount, but at least they do"* (Participant 3). However, the other participants complained of not receiving any monthly incentives for household bills.

Regarding incentives they would like to receive when working in the office, 5 out of 7 participants mentioned free food. Some companies have restaurants in the building, but employees need to pay for the food. These factors are crucial in resistance to going to the office because they affect the worker's finances, who needs to cover transportation and food on office days. *"They can offer more options for free food, having some good options would be a good attractive"* (Participant 4). *"I would say food because my company is not providing food every single day, if they did certainly more people would go to the office"* (Participant 1). Participant 3 goes even further and states that they wish

the company offered transportation because the biggest difficulty is commuting to the office. *"I'll happily go if they bring me from my house to there in a car."*

While some are satisfied with the incentives, other participants reported preferring to remain remote and not go to the office at all. According to Participant 2, even though they consider free food a good incentive, if could choose, it would not be enough to make them go to the office. *"In my reality, even if they offered free food, it would not make much of a difference for me. I would not go if I have the choice."* Participant 3 also mentioned that not promoting interaction among the team makes no sense to go to the office, saying, *"If I'm going to be alone there from nine to five sitting beside a person that I have never seen before, it makes no sense for me to go."* The following topic will examine that deeper and present the emerging themes in the data collected from the interviews, as well as their relationship with the literature presented.

6. Chapter SIX: Discussions

6.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to answer the research questions and analyse employee preferences and expectations in relation to hybrid working arrangements, using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns of meaning across the data collected as presented in the methodology and findings' chapters. One of the research questions explored employee work model preferences, focusing on themes such as work-life balance, flexibility, and productivity. Furthermore, the extent to which these preferences were considered in the new working arrangements was evaluated, with themes emerging around employee preferences, working arrangements, and insights for organizations. Another research question investigated the effectiveness of hybrid working arrangements in Ireland, with the analysis revealing themes related to organizational culture, sense of belonging, and sustainable leadership. Additionally, the study examined employee expectations regarding the office environment and the impact of workplace policies, with themes emerging around office space design and the importance of incentives and support.

6.2. Question 1: What are the key factors that influence employee perspectives and preferences on hybrid working models in Ireland?

Based on the interviews conducted with employees who have experienced long-term remote work, it has become difficult for them to readjust to the traditional office model that was used prior to the pandemic. All participants expressed a preference for a hybrid work model over a complete return to the office, citing factors such as flexibility, autonomy, and work-life balance. Ateeq (2022) believes that the popularity of this work model is a result of the possibility it provides to combine the benefits of working from home with the advantages of face-to-face interaction and collaboration. As stated by Participant 2, *"hybrid would be the best option, because it allows time to go to the office socialize or have meetings face to face, but it also gives flexibility to do something in my personal life, or prevents me from wasting time commuting to the office, is the perfect balance between the two options."*

This is in line with the findings of Obdržálková and Moravcová (2022), which reveal that flexibility enables workers to schedule their work hours, freeing up more time for personal tasks and saving time and money on commuting. Ferreira et al. (2021) reiterates that this work model allows employees to balance their work and personal life, providing time for personal tasks and caregiving responsibilities. Participant 5 confirms this, saying *"I work better in the evenings, so I like to go to the gym in the morning. It is better, especially when I am not spending 4 hours in public transport."* According to Ipsen et al. (2021), flexibility, productivity, and work-life balance are the three most common advantages for employees working remotely. Therefore, these three themes will be discussed in more depth below and compared to the collected data.

6.2.1. The Power of Flexibility in Hybrid Work

Flexibility is a familiar term when it comes to remote work. It is rare to come across any study on this work model that does not cite flexibility as its main benefit, and this study is no exception, as many participants mentioned flexibility as the main benefit. Ipsen et al. (2021) believe that companies are revising the role of the traditional office and creating more opportunities for hybrid work, attempting to provide greater flexibility, which, according to Kicheva (2021), is the benefit most commonly cited by employees, as it provides autonomy in carrying out tasks according to availability and results in happier employees.

Furthermore, Shirmohammadi et al. (2022) assert that offering flexible work can be a valuable resource, enabling workers to have control over their working time and allocate time for non-work activities, leading to reduced stress and increased productivity. Participant 6 claims to be more productive when they can define the work schedule that feels most productive for them to perform their duties, *"I work better when I can control my time. After the daily team meeting, I can decide what time I want to work, as long as I do my job on time."* Therefore, Smart (2022) states that the company that refuses to offer flexibility to its employees runs the risk of losing them to those that do. Moreover, individuals with flexibility at work are more satisfied and productive than those who do not have it (CIPD, 2022).

6.2.2. Productivity in Hybrid Work

The preference for hybrid work is also driven by productivity. According to the interviews, 80% of the respondents reported being more productive when working from home, as they are free from interruptions and commuting time and can focus better. This aligns with Popovici and Popovici's (2020) findings that remote work enhances productivity by eliminating commuting time and enabling employees to work in a convenient, quiet place that enhances their concentration. However, De Vincenzi et al. (2022) cautioned that this increase in productivity is dependent on the resources provided by the company to enable efficient work performance. The company must create mechanisms that allow the employee to recognize the time when they are most productive.

On the other hand, poor time management can negatively affect productivity. Employees who lack monitoring may procrastinate on tasks that are not urgent. Participant 6 stated that they feel more productive in the office because they get distracted by other things while working from home. *“In the office I’m there to work, someone is looking at me, I feel pressured. At home, I don’t have that, so I easily get distracted with my phone or other things.”* De Vincenzi et al. (2022) also reported that efficient work can be significantly impacted by the lack of self-discipline among remote employees, and this could be avoided with proper task and time management (Obdržálková and Moravcová, 2022).

6.2.3. The Pros and Cons of Hybrid Work for Work-Life Balance

The concept of work-life balance is commonly associated with the ability to balance personal life with work. It is widely agreed that remote work provides this balance, particularly in a hybrid model, where employees can work from home, the office, or anywhere they prefer. This flexibility improves employee performance and productivity. The hybrid work model is an excellent way to keep employees engaged and happy, and contribute effectively to the organization's bottom line (Nadeem, 2022).

However, the existence of this balance between life and work cannot be generalized because hybrid work also poses some challenges, particularly for people responsible for caring for others. It is worth noting that none of the participants in this study revealed being caregivers, but this fact cannot be overlooked in the discussion about work-life balance. According to Shirmohammadi et al. (2022), managing work and family roles can be challenging, as it weakens the boundary between the workplace and home and makes it difficult to manage family interruptions. Atkinson (2022) believes that the imbalance between work and home life has negatively impacted work-life balance due to responsibilities with family care. The negative consequences can lead to conflict with colleagues and family, underperformance, dissatisfaction, and unhealthy coping mechanisms (Gorjifard and Crawford, 2021). Participant 3 agrees with the importance of flexibility for colleagues who have children, stating that *"for my co-workers who have kids, having the flexibility to not go to the office is just perfect."* Working parents face a greater challenge in balancing work and family duties, resulting in excessive fatigue and lack of productivity (De Vincenzi et al., 2022). Elbaz, Richards and Savard (2022) suggest that flexible working arrangements have stronger positive associations with work-life balance satisfaction among men and women without children, which is confirmed by the profiles of Participants 4 and 5, who state *"I see advantages in being close to my colleagues, meetings face to face, having some activity after work"* and *"My social life is much better, I can manage to go to the gym or cinema."*

Moreover, this balance can also be affected when working remotely, as many employees complain about not being able to disconnect from work. Fazal et al. (2022) found that most people work longer hours when working from home, while very few managed to reduce their workload and attain a positive balance with their work and family life. However, in this study, it was observed that workers who reported working outside business hours did so by choice, as Participant 6 stated, *"sometimes I do my work at 9 pm, other times I finish at 3 pm, so it's a good balance. If it were in the office, I couldn't do it."*

6.3. Question 2: Has the employee's preference been taken into account in the new working arrangements?

The impact of employee preferences on motivation, engagement, and well-being cannot be overstated, as these factors directly affect organizational performance. This section aims to examine how organizations have taken employee preferences into account in the new working arrangements, with the goal of providing insights on how to create working arrangements that align with these preferences and lead to higher engagement and performance. Katsoudas and Patel (2022) stress that such arrangements must prioritize people and include them in the process, requiring a psychological perspective that considers individual work preferences. This approach can build confidence and empowerment among employees, leading to better contributions and a stronger bond between employees and the organization (Wiatr, 2022).

6.3.1. Importance of Employee Preferences

The role of employee preferences in influencing motivation, engagement, and well-being, and its impact on organizational performance is highlighted in this theme. Wiatr (2022) emphasizes the need for organizations to prioritize employee preferences in decision-making processes to ensure higher levels of engagement and performance, which can foster confidence and empowerment in employees and establish a strong bond between employees and the company. However, in this study, 6 out of 7 participants stated that they were not asked about their preferences, whereas Participant 3 had a meeting with the team to decide the number and days of being present in the office. Gorjifard and Crawford (2021) and Atkinson (2022) suggest that successful implementation of remote and hybrid work requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes employee well-being, productivity, and individual preferences. According to Chung (2022), individuals should have a leading role in deciding the future of their work by considering when, where, and how the work is done, aligned with business objectives and strategies. Some participants agree that finding a solution that works both ways for on-site and remote roles would be a good negotiation. However, this agreement requires attention and care as it can generate discontent and a sense of injustice.

On the other hand, Participant 1 states that not being asked about the changes and making it mandatory to go to the office on specific days was the worst part for the team, especially for those living in the countryside, as they need to dedicate more time to

commuting. Bailey and Rehman (2022) suggest that if leaders believe it is essential for employees to return to the office, they should suggest a strategic plan that convinces everyone that it is the best option. However, companies should still focus on readapting their work practices to accommodate changing work realities and offer flexibility to their employees to maintain their organizational culture.

6.3.2. Creating Working Arrangements that Align with Employee Preferences

This theme emphasizes the importance of considering employee preferences when creating working arrangements within organizations. It highlights the need for employee involvement in decision-making and the leadership's role in managing these arrangements. According to Wang et al. (2021), mechanisms that promote team interaction and effective communication between leaders and their teams can improve engagement and productivity. One participant shared, *"My boss always tries to keep us together, remote or in the office, she schedules meetings to have random conversations about personal topics to make us feel closer to each other"* (Participant 5).

Encouraging face-to-face meetings in a more dynamic and participatory approach can create a culture of belonging. In addition, there are non-financial benefits such as pool tables or games that can enhance the employee experience in the office (Earle, 2003). One participant stated, *"I like to go on Thursdays because it's when we have cultural events, free beers, and pizza after the meetings"* (Participant 4). However, these incentives alone may not be sufficient. It is also important that the day in the office is productive in relation to work, such as having a meeting or making an important decision. Another participant shared, *"I like to be in the office when I will benefit from being there, a meeting for a decision that needs to be made face-to-face. Otherwise, if it's something that I will just do from home, I prefer to do it at home"* (Participant 2).

6.3.3. Insights for Organizations

This theme understands the reasons why companies want employees back in the office and the importance of prioritizing individuals' work preferences by involving them

in decision-making processes. This approach can benefit both employees and organizations by building confidence and empowerment, establishing stronger bonds, and promoting efficient leadership. However, despite the fact that all participants in the study work in a hybrid model, they all prefer to work from home, if there was a choice. This preference is in line with the report by CIPD (2002), which shows that 63% of workers in a hybrid model did not have a choice and would prefer to remain remote. Nevertheless, companies do not share this preference and are increasingly insisting on returning to the office.

One of the main reasons for companies to want their employees in the office is control, as pointed out by Chung (2022). This is confirmed by Participant 1, who states that *"My manager doesn't have fully control, for example, if he wants to call one of us to talk about anything of the job, it is not sure that the person is going to be online to answer if working from home."* Managers prefer employees to set personal goals that align with the organization's strategic needs, as it is easier to manage and control them in the office (Murphy, 2022). On the other hand, some executives are forcing their employees to return to the office while still working remotely, creating a disconnect between senior management and other employees. This behaviour is demotivating, disrupts the relationship between managers and employees, and makes it difficult to strengthen a relevant organizational culture (Turits, 2022). Participant 1 shares a similar situation in their company, where four colleagues would like to work completely remotely, but only two with senior positions are authorized to remain remote, while the other two with junior positions are being forced to come to the office three times a week.

To address this issue, Gratton (2022) recommends that companies adapt to their employees' preferences and create choices that meet the needs of their entire workforce. Employers should continue to be flexible in their policies and work with employees to create a workable solution for everyone, starting with communication. According to Thompson (2022), employers must prioritize the voices of their employees over their personal interests because the two are interconnected. Companies need to be aware of their employees' needs, open to new ways of working, and flexible. Without two-way communication, where everyone has a voice, there is likely to be a significant loss of talent (Keogh, 2022).

6.4. Is the hybrid working arrangement efficient in Ireland?

To address this question, this study will take into account two crucial factors: the company's organizational culture and the leaders' performance in managing teams in this working model.

6.4.1. The Importance of Organizational Culture and Sense of Belonging

According to Evans (2022), a consistent organizational culture is a crucial factor for the efficiency of a hybrid work model, especially when the company decides to bring employees back to the office. Engaging and creating a sense of belonging are also essential factors in winning back employees. None of the participants reported feeling excluded from the company or not belonging, even when working from home. They attributed this to regular meetings, online platforms that facilitate faster communication, and training that helps them feel connected to the company. For example, Participant 2 shared his experience working on a global team where each member is located in a different country and the only way to connect is through online meetings. Hybrid teams perform best when they perceive their work as teamwork, rather than individual work, and have access to effective communication and technology resources to facilitate this perception (Gilstrap, Strivastava, and Gilstrap, 2022).

The emotional support and sense of belonging to the organization that is partially lost when working remotely can be provided by the office (Naor et al., 2021). Therefore, companies must strategically readapt to attract and retain employees' interest in returning to the office, even if only a few days a week. This involves reviving the pre-pandemic organizational culture and making necessary adaptations to create a comfortable, inclusive, and efficient environment for all, both hybrid and remote. As Participant 4 mentioned, *"When I first started, I was very lost. Not feeling part of anything. But when I went physically to the place, I instantly understood that I'm part of something, but it took time."* Evans (2022) emphasizes the importance of maintaining the pre-pandemic

organizational culture and making necessary adaptations as workers return to the office, especially for those hired during the fully remote time.

As Participant 2 mentioned, their company is inviting employees back to provide new hires with the experience of living the day-to-day office environment, which helps them incorporate the prevailing organizational culture. *"There are researchers that mention that it's easier to build culture when you're physically in the same place. That's why you have banners, mentioning values of that company when you first walk into the office, you can get the mission and the values, everything's just standing out in front of you all the time. It's something that you don't get when you're working at home."* Hilberath et al. (2020) suggest that flexibility and strategic adaptations can help companies attract and retain the best talent, achieve better results, and make the return to the office more appealing, particularly for those who lack adequate workspaces at home.

6.4.2. Sustainable Leadership Practices

In their work, Kumari and Yelkar (2022), Evans (2022), and Sokolic (2022) have emphasized the importance of inclusive and collaborative work environments in promoting employee motivation, regardless of whether they work remotely or in the office. According to De Vincenzi et al. (2022), sustainable leadership practices are critical in guiding employees towards enhanced productivity without resorting to intrusive monitoring. As such, it falls on management to define and supervise the professional and personal performance and capacity of each worker.

In this study, six out of seven participants praised their leaders' ability to manage hybrid teams, a topic previously discussed in the last chapter. However, it is worth noting the importance of leaders considering their employees' preferred work models to ensure the best performance and outcomes. Effective and direct communication and flexibility are crucial and necessary for efficient leadership. To successfully transition to hybrid work, leaders and managers must design it with individual concerns in mind, not just institutional ones. This process is not straightforward because designing hybrid work requires considering both time and place as crucial components (Gratton, 2022).

6.5. What are employees' expectations regarding the office environment and workplace policies?

6.5.1. The Role of Physical Office Space

According to Gregory (2022), the physical office space plays a crucial role in the lives of employees, as it provides a comfortable and relaxed environment. He suggests that creative meeting rooms can help recreate the feeling of being at home and break away from the rigidity of the office, allowing for informal communication and the exchange of ideas, resulting in creativity and innovative opportunities. Participant 7 affirms that having a variety of spaces to work in, such as outdoor rooms, relaxation areas, and creative rooms, makes work enjoyable and prevents boredom.

While some companies are moving towards a completely virtual office environment or renting co-working spaces, others are redesigning their physical office space to fit a hybrid model. However, one interviewee stated that this model is not well received by employees, as there are not enough tables for everyone and working from home is preferred (Participant 4). Although maintaining physical facilities for employees who cannot work remotely is still necessary (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020; Sokolic, 2022), the majority of employees argue that a good office setup is not enough to attract them. Participant 2 confirms that while the office may have a comfortable chair and a big screen, they already have that setup at home, making it unnecessary to go to the office. Therefore, while some companies may need to maintain physical facilities, it is more viable to offer incentives to support employees' home expenses than invest in office modernization.

6.5.2. The Impact of Incentives

All participants stated that they received at least the minimum necessary to carry out their work, such as laptops, screens, desks, and ergonomic chairs. However, a discrepancy between companies could be observed, as some offer financial support for monthly electricity and internet bills. While Kegel (2017) and Stich (2020) discuss how factors such as physical environment, lighting, room temperature, and air quality affect

workers' performance, 60% of participants named free food as one of the biggest incentives. They stated that one of the biggest challenges of going to the office, in addition to commuting time, is having to prepare all their meals beforehand, meaning going to the office requires dedication well before leaving home. If the company offered this incentive, it would save them money and time.

However, even though these incentives were cited as fundamental, when asked if the company began to offer them, many responded that they still preferred to remain remote. This confirms the CIPD's report, which reveals that many employees have expressed a desire for continued flexibility and remote work options, even in hybrid arrangements (CIPD, 2022).

6.6. Conclusion

As previously discussed, the key factor impacting employee productivity and earnings is directly related to flexibility. Employees have had the opportunity to experience remote work and have realized its effectiveness, leading to their reluctance to return to traditional models. To address this resistance, companies must consider their employees' preferences and develop strategies that align with organizational objectives. Employers must engage in discussions with employees regarding return or hybrid working strategies and implement policies that outline the format of remote work requests to provide clarity and expectations for both parties (DETE, 2021). However, as Thompson (2022) suggests, each company must develop its unique strategies as there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

6.7. Limitations of the Study

A qualitative study suggests a smaller sampling size, and the number presented in this study is reasonable. However, it is challenging to generalize the interview data collected as it is limited to a small group of individuals working in the same location. The unique culture and workforce of Ireland mean that the findings may not be applicable to other countries or regions with different cultural, social, and economic contexts. Additionally, the limited time available for data collection was a constraint, and the

concept of hybrid working is relatively new, with many organizations still developing and implementing policies. This could restrict the study's ability to capture the full range of perspectives and experiences and overlook changes in attitudes and preferences over time. Moreover, bias is also a limitation of qualitative research, as the study relies on self-reported data from participants, which may present both positive and negative bias. Therefore, caution should be exercised when interpreting the results of this study.

7. Chapter SEVEN: Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1. Conclusions

7.1.1. Summary of the Study

In conclusion, this study aimed to investigate employee perspectives and preferences on hybrid working models in Ireland, with a specific focus on the role of physical workplaces and workplace policies. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a significant shift towards remote work, and now many companies are adopting the hybrid model, which combines traditional office work with remote work. Although this model is becoming more common in many companies, agreements and adaptation strategies have not yet been fully defined. The literature suggests that there is a lack of alignment between companies and employees regarding the return to the office, which is causing disorganization in some companies, as shown by research data and reports. Effective communication and collaboration between employers and employees are crucial in addressing this mismatch and finding a solution that works for everyone. This study aimed to address this issue by offering insights and recommendations to companies in Ireland based on employee perspectives. The conclusions made by the researcher will be presented below, organized according to the main idea of the research questions.

7.1.2. Employees' Preferences

The study emphasizes the significance of employee preferences in creating policies that support the effective implementation of hybrid working models. To successfully implement remote and hybrid work, a comprehensive approach that prioritizes employee well-being, productivity, and individual preferences is required. According to the study, remote work flexibility has gained popularity among employees, despite some disadvantages. Workers reported feeling more focused, motivated, and productive when working from home, primarily because it eliminates the stress of commuting and saves money. As suggested by Thompson (2022), each company must develop its post-pandemic comeback strategies, as no organization can match it. To create, develop, test, and deploy these strategies, Hilberath et al. (2020) propose involving

workers in the decision-making process to motivate them, enhance their company's value, encourage them to work harder, and deliver better outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial for companies to consider worker preferences, give them a voice, and involve them in decision-making processes to remain attractive, competitive, and retain top talent.

7.1.3. Workplace Policies and Arrangements

This study presented the role of the traditional office space and its significance from the workers' perspective. In addition, workplace policies were identified as crucial, with employees emphasizing the need for clear and consistent guidelines around hybrid working. This includes expectations around availability, flexibility, and work-life balance. Companies are investing in a hybrid model in an attempt to bring employees back to the office. However, the literature and interviews suggest that the primary factor driving this return is control, as companies have lost the ability to monitor their employees when working remotely. Murphy (2021) argues that although most of the reasons employers want employees back in the office lack relevant evidence, there are three arguments on which they rely on. These are based on assumptions that personal interactions foster creativity and innovative ideas, a strong culture contributes to organizational success, and remote workers are less committed to their work. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and each company must develop its unique strategies.

The findings suggest that a comprehensive approach that prioritizes employee well-being, productivity, and individual preferences is necessary for the successful implementation of remote and hybrid work models. The literature urges us to understand the expectations that employees have of their leaders in relation to making flexible working work. Hilberath et al. (2020) and Thompson (2022) suggest that solutions to this issue should be created, developed, tested, and deployed with the participation and collaboration of workers. Workers should participate in defining their work future, and solutions imposed from the top-down should be avoided. Leaders play a crucial role in this transition, and a comprehensive approach is required to successfully implement remote and hybrid work. Communication and collaboration between employers and employees are also crucial in addressing the mismatch between employers and employees regarding the transition to hybrid work arrangements and returning to the office. The

preferences of employees should be taken into account when creating flexible working arrangements, and spaces that allow informal communication and the exchange of ideas resulting in creativity and innovative opportunities.

The implementation of strategies aimed at harmonizing the relationship between companies and their employees is a crucial role of the Human Resources department. According to Vyas (2022), both managers and HR departments must be flexible and adapt their policies to accommodate changes in work practices. Governments can also contribute by implementing specific policies, such as the "right-to-disconnect" law, which grants employees the right to decline work-related communications during non-working hours. Peters et.al, (2022) argue that regulations mandating safer working conditions and supportive leave policies are necessary to safeguard workers and eliminate health inequalities. Employers can also play an essential role in promoting employees' health and well-being by implementing health-promoting policies and practices. There is a trend suggesting that workers seek employment that supports their health and well-being.

7.1.4. Suggestions for Future Research

For clarity and mutual expectations, it is essential for employers to engage in discussions with employees and establish policies that specify the format of remote work requests while prioritizing employee well-being and productivity through strategies aligned with organizational goals. This approach can assist companies in navigating challenges and enhancing the benefits of hybrid work models in the post-pandemic world. Nonetheless, future research should also aim to explore the experiences and perspectives of employees across different sectors and industries, as well as the long-term implications of hybrid working on individuals and society.

Another suggestion would be to conduct a large-scale study utilizing other forms of data collection that provide more comprehensive analyses, such as surveys. Furthermore, expanding the territorial context to encompass a continent or cities that are significant industrial hubs and analysing the differences in context between them and the agreements established by each company could help discover employees' true preferences regarding the current work model more accurately.

7.2.Recommendations

7.2.1. Prioritizing Employee Preferences and Needs in Organizational Strategies.

According to Chung (2022), organizations should adopt hybrid working models that take into account the preferences and requirements of their employees by providing flexible work arrangements and fostering a supportive work environment. This approach should prioritize the voices of employees over the interests of employers, and allow individuals to have a significant say in shaping their work future. Employers should engage with their workforce to develop strategies that align organizational goals with employee preferences, primarily related to flexibility, allowing employees to choose the place and time that they feel most productive and comfortable.

Thompson (2022) highlights the importance of re-evaluating the traditional organizational structure and adopting an employee-centric approach to make the transition smoother. Katsoudas and Patel (2022) note that the one-size-fits-all model has prevented employees from flourishing. To implement these changes, Chung (2022) suggests reimagining a possible future, re-evaluating when, how, and where work is performed. Employers should consider allowing teams to choose their own work schedules, offering workers the option to choose their preferred work location, and removing the need to work all at the same time by default.

7.2.2. Strategies for Effective Management and Communication

Organisations must adapt to their employees' preferences and create options that meet the needs of the entire workforce (Gratton, 2022). To effectively manage hybrid teams, employers should provide training and support to employees and managers, maintain flexibility in their policies, and communicate openly with everyone involved. Without two-way communication where everyone has a voice, there is a considerable risk of losing talent, as advised by Keogh (2022). Wiatr (2022) recommends that organizational change should prioritize individual preferences for work, foster employee confidence and empowerment, and strengthen the bond between employees and the

company. When designing hybrid working arrangements, it is crucial to consider institutional and individual concerns and base these arrangements on where and when people work. Gratton (2022) highlights the importance of identifying key jobs and tasks, understanding what drives productivity and performance, and involving employees in the process to gain valuable insights into their preferences and needs. If leaders believe that it is essential for employees to return to the office, partially or fully, Bailey and Rehman (2022) suggest outlining a strategic plan that can convince everyone that this is the best option.

Therefore, organizations need to readapt their work practices to accommodate the changing work realities and offer flexibility to their employees to maintain their organizational culture, retain talent, and achieve better results. To reduce the disconnection between managers and employees, companies need to communicate effectively and be open to new ways of working. This means there needs to be representation of changes and expectations about workers. Overall, organizational change should prioritize individual preferences for work, foster employee confidence and empowerment, and strengthen the bond between employees and the company.

7.2.3. Implications of Recommendations

The financial costs and implications of the recommendation for an organization to prioritize employee preferences and needs in organizational strategies can vary depending on the specific actions taken and the size of the organization. Implementing flexible work arrangements and providing support for employees and managers may require additional resources, such as technology and training, which can come at a cost. Learning and Development trainings can cost up to €2000 per person, for a 50-70 hours course, for managers, or up to €150 for short duration courses for more employees (CIPD). However, prioritizing employee preferences can also lead to increased employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention, which can ultimately result in cost savings for the organization. If the company decides to invest in a professional to develop its own training and implementation, the cost for hiring a Learning and Development Specialist could vary between €37000 to €49300 annually (Glassdoor, 2023).

Allowing teams to choose their own work schedules and preferred work location can also lead to cost savings for the organization, such as reduced office space and overhead expenses. Effective communication and management strategies may require additional time and resources to implement, but can lead to improved productivity, reduced turnover rates, and better relationships between managers and employees. Overall, prioritizing employee preferences and needs in organizational strategies can involve initial costs, but can lead to long-term benefits such as increased productivity, employee satisfaction, and cost savings.

8. Personal Learning Statement – CIPD Requirement

To begin, I must admit that pursuing a master's degree in a non-native language posed a significant challenge. Nevertheless, I am proud to have overcome this obstacle and am on track to achieve my goal. My study of Human Resource Management in diverse contexts was an enlightening and rewarding experience that revealed many potential opportunities in my future career.

Conducting this particular research project was both my greatest challenge and my greatest achievement. Identifying the current organizational climate and establishing relationships to understand it was a creditable accomplishment. My interest in examining the relationship between hybrid work models and company objectives came from the observations, complaints, grievances, and experiences shared by friends and acquaintances who were dissatisfied with mandatory returns to the office. By researching and reading extensively on this topic, I was able to better define and structure my research question and make sense of the organizational landscape.

One key lesson I learned from this study was that any agreements or decisions that impact employees' lives should prioritize their opinions and preferences. Achieving a mutually beneficial relationship between the company and its employees is crucial. The importance of giving voice to workers was emphasized in most of the modules covered during the course, whether discussing talent development or the employee-employer relationship's efficiency.

While I encountered some obstacles during the research process, such as limited time and the unforeseen cancellation of interviews, I did not face many difficulties. This project and the course in general provided me with invaluable theoretical and practical resources that will aid me in my professional pursuits. However, I recognize that the learning process is ongoing, and there is always more to discover.

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10. Appendix

10.1. Appendix A: CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH

Employee Perspectives and Preferences on Hybrid Working Models in Ireland: Understanding the Role of Physical Workplaces and Workplace Policies

- I _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves answering questions about my preferences and expectations regarding hybrid work arrangements.
- 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.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in the Dissertation's folder in the researcher laptop, password protected with access to the researcher only, until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the exam board.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher: Gustavo Rosa Santana – MA in Human Resources Management

x21176027@student.ncirl.ie

Signature of participant

Date: _____

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

Signature of researcher

Date: _____

10.2. Appendix B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Employee Perspectives and Preferences on Hybrid Working Models in Ireland: Understanding the Role of Physical Workplaces and Workplace Policies

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study on *Employee Perspectives and Preferences on Hybrid Working Models in Ireland: Understanding the Role of Physical Workplaces and Workplace Policies*. Before you decide to take part in it, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT

I am currently a Master's in Human Resource Management student in National College of Ireland. As per the requirements of my course, I am currently undergoing a dissertation on *Employee Perspectives and Preferences on Hybrid Working Models in Ireland: Understanding the Role of Physical Workplaces and Workplace Policies*, aiming to understand employee preferences and perspective about hybrid work arrangements, as well as the role of the traditional office in this process.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Taking part in this study involve dedicating 30-45 minutes to an interview with semi-structured questions covering a range of topics related to the research, such as: your preferences about the model of work; your opinion about the benefits and challenges in hybrid work and your thoughts about how important is the workplace in your work life. The interviews will be scheduled in person, at a place and time that best suits you. They will be voice-recorded without video to facilitate the transcription and analysis of the data with more accuracy.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You have been invited because you are over 18 years of age and you are working in a company in Ireland that has shifted the model of work to a hybrid model and is requesting your presence in the office some days a week.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participation is completely voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation, refuse to answer any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

This research does not provide any personal benefit other than the production of knowledge about the subject studied. As well as, the possible risks identified would be related to the use of part of your time that could be used for another purpose.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

Participation in this research is completely confidential. No personal data collected will be used in the research, apart from a brief profile description of the participants containing length of employment and the industry their company is in. Non-anonymised data, such as a consent form that will be presented by the researcher and signed by you for ethical reasons and the audio recording of the interview, are part of the research process.

HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

The signed consent forms and audio recordings will be kept under the care of the researcher in a safe place with restricted access. The electronic devices used for data collection have password access under the domain of the researcher only. These documents will be preserved until the degree has been conferred. The transcription of the interviews, which do not have identification data, will be restricted for another two years beyond the date of the diploma conference. Any participant is legally entitled to access the information provided by him/her at any time.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The plans for this research consist only of submitting the dissertation.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

In case you need any further information, do not hesitate to contact me:

Researcher: Gustavo Rosa Santana - gustavo_rsantana@hotmail.com

THANK YOU

10.3. Appendix C: Interview Questionnaire

In-depth interview questionnaire for a master's dissertation with the theme **“Employee Perspectives and Preferences on Hybrid Working Models in Ireland: Understanding the Role of Physical Workplaces and Workplace Policies”**:

1. Introduction and Context

- 1.1. What is your current role in the company?
- 1.2. How long have you been working for this company?
- 1.3. What industry is your company in?

2. Model of work

- 2.1. What is your actual model of work?
 - 2.1.1. If remote, how has been your experience with remote work?
 - 2.1.2. If hybrid, how has been your experience with hybrid work?
- 2.2. What model of work do you prefer the most? Why?
- 2.3. Do you see any difference between working from home and working in the office? Which one?

3. Hybrid working arrangements

- 3.1. Do you think hybrid work has impacted your productivity, engagement or work life balance? If so, how?
- 3.2. In your opinion what are the advantages and disadvantages of this model?
- 3.3. Do you think remote work prevents social interaction among colleagues? Is it important to have face-to-face interaction with them?
- 3.4. In terms of communication, do you think hybrid work affect efficient communication between team workers? If so, in which way?
- 3.5. How good do you consider your boss at managing hybrid working teams?

4. Traditional workplace

- 4.1. Currently, do you have to go to the physical office at any day of the week? If so, how many days?
- 4.2. Is going to the office a choice or a requirement? Are you obliged to go?
 - 4.2.1. If it is a choice, how did this arrangement happen?
 - 4.2.2. If it is mandatory, how did this arrangement happen?

- 4.3. When you have to go to the office, do you like going? What are the benefits and challenges of it?
- 4.4. If going to the office is a choice, do you usually choose to go or not? What are the benefits and challenges of that choice?

5. Employee Preferences

- 5.1. Did you participate on the decision of your work model arrangement? Were your preferences asked?
 - 5.1.1. If so, how did this happen?
 - 5.1.2. If not, do you think you should have been asked?
- 5.2. Do you think that work model arrangements should be based in employee's preferences? Why?
- 5.3. Has the hybrid work affected your life positively or negatively? How?
- 5.4. When working from home, do you feel in any way left out or not belonging to your company/team? Tell me more.

6. Workplace Policies

- 6.1. Do hybrid work arrangements work well in your company?
- 6.2. Is there anything that could be improved? What? How?
- 6.3. In which workplace environment do you feel more productive? Home or office? Why?
- 6.4. What is your opinion about the office in your company? What does it differ from your home?
- 6.5. When working from home, does your company provide facilities for your work to happen?
 - 6.5.1. If so, which ones?
 - 6.5.2. If not, what should they provide?
- 6.6. Do you think your company should offer incentives to encourage employees to go to the office? If so, what kind of incentives would you find most appealing?