

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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Degree for which thesis is submitted: Masters in Business

Administration

Title of Thesis: Perceptions on how working structures have impacted soft-skills and communication styles among office workers in Ireland: A qualitative study

Date: 19/07/2025

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Module: Dissertation.....

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Submission Due Date:19 August 2025

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Word Count:18,011.....

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AI Acknowledgment

This section acknowledges the AI tools that were utilized in the process of completing this assignment.

Tool Name	Brief Description	Link to tool
CHAT GPT	I used Chat GPT to find articles	https://chatgpt.com

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To find articles	
Please provide several academic articles that show how technology has impacted soft skills	<p>Here are several academic articles that explore how technology impacts soft skills:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. "Empowering Soft Skills through Artificial Intelligence and Personalized Mentoring" This study investigates the integration of AI tools like ChatGPT with one-on-one tutoring in higher education. It emphasizes how combining digital tools with human interaction can enhance soft skills like problem-solving, communication, and adaptability. The findings highlight the importance of balancing technological tools with meaningful human connections to optimize soft skill development.2. "The Future of Soft Skills Development: Digital Training Practices" A systematic review of digital training methods for developing soft skills shows that interactive approaches such as simulations, gamified platforms, and virtual environments effectively foster skills like teamwork, empathy, and emotional intelligence. This research suggests that technology can complement traditional training by providing engaging and flexible learning experiences.3. "Soft Skills in Information Technology Education" This review highlights how technology-rich environments in IT education help students develop essential soft skills, such as collaboration, critical thinking, and adaptability. However, it also notes challenges, such as the over-reliance on digital tools potentially reducing face-to-face interactions, which are critical for interpersonal skills.4. "The Effects of Game-Based Learning on Soft Skills" This study examines how gamified learning environments, often used in undergraduate programs, enhance soft skills like teamwork and communication. Game-based scenarios promote engagement and provide real-time feedback, crucial for developing and assessing these skills in a digital context.

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Perceptions on how working structures have impacted soft-skills and communication styles among office workers in Ireland: A qualitative study

Abstract

This project examines how changes in remote and hybrid work models have influenced the perception of soft skills, with a specific focus on communication in the professional workplace in Ireland. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a structural shift in how employees interact, collaborate, and maintain professional relationships. While digital tools have enabled new forms of accessibility and task management, they have also reshaped the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of professional life as interview participants highlighted that digital tools can lead to issues with understanding their colleagues and increase the risk of miscommunication or misinterpretation.

Through qualitative research, including semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this study captured the lived experiences of employees navigating post-pandemic work transitions, using interviews with professionals across sectors who experienced shifts from remote to hybrid or in-person environments. The analysis identified five key themes: the evolution of communication methods, the erosion of informal workplace interactions, the burden of emotional labour, generational and cultural differences in communication norms, and the need for structured support in soft skill development. Findings indicate that while technological platforms have allowed for flexible collaboration, they have also disrupted relational dynamics by removing spontaneity, obscuring tone, and reducing opportunities for learning in social and informal scenarios.

This research highlights the growing distance between the recognised importance of soft skills and the limited organisational investment in their development.

Introduction

The increase in remote and hybrid working has fundamentally transformed the modern workplace. Technology now plays a key role in enabling these new modes of operation. While these arrangements offer flexibility and accessibility to many workers, it is also

important to understand that they present a number of challenges, particularly in the development and use of soft skills. Soft skills, like problem-solving, collaboration, interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence and decision-making, are essential for effective workplace interactions and overall organisational productivity. In traditional office-based settings, these skills have often developed informally through face-to-face collaboration, spontaneous interactions, and shared organisational culture. However, as working models shift towards digital platforms and multiple communication methods, there are concerns that the conditions required for these skills to emerge and develop are being changed or fail to exist in certain hybrid or remote settings. This research seeks to explore how different working structures such as remote, hybrid and on-site impact the development, perception and application of soft skills in professional environments, with a particular focus on communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the adoption of remote work on a global scale. Although many organisations have since shifted to hybrid arrangements, combining both in-person and virtual work, the transition has not been a smooth one. One of the most noticeable changes has been in how employees communicate, both in formal and informal workplace settings. In remote settings, reliance on written communication, video conferencing, and messaging tools can cause a misinterpretation of tone, hinder spontaneous conversation and reduce opportunities for social learning. As organisations continue to navigate this evolving landscape, there is an urgent need to understand the implications of these structural shifts within organisations on interpersonal skills that are key to collaboration, leadership and teamwork. This project focuses on these issues, with particular attention to how employees perceive the changes and how they navigate interpersonal dynamics in the absence of traditional modes of workplace interaction.

Communication, in particular, is central to this research. It is a key soft skill that influences almost every aspect of professional life, from task management to conflict resolution and emotional support for colleagues. In hybrid and remote contexts, communication is often mediated through digital channels, which may strip it of non-verbal cues, delay feedback loops and increase the potential for misinterpretation or miscommunication. As a result, employees are required to have an increased level of emotional awareness, adaptability and digital literacy. Communication in these settings is no longer just about conveying

information; it demands the ability to interpret tone, manage ambiguity, and maintain interpersonal relationships without physical presence. This raises important questions about the future of communication as a soft skill and whether organisations are adequately preparing and supporting their workforce to succeed in such environments.

The challenges associated with remote and hybrid communication are compounded by broader issues of perception and relational dynamics. In digital environments, where visibility is reduced and interactions are often scheduled rather than spontaneous, individuals are more likely to rely on subjective interpretation to make sense of others' behaviours. This opens up space for perceptual bias, misjudgement and attribution errors, which can in turn affect collaboration, trust and team morale. Employees may struggle to read intent or emotion in written messages, or may believe that their colleagues' silence or delay in responding to disinterest or incompetence. These difficulties can be particularly evident for employees working with different cultures or generations, where communication styles and expectations may differ. Furthermore, younger professionals who entered the workforce during the pandemic may have had limited exposure to in-person professional norms, which could affect their confidence and ability in face-to-face engagement. As a result, hybrid working has not only changed communication but also the expectations, assumptions and the competencies that define it.

This research hopes to provide a deeper understanding of these changing dynamics by engaging directly with professionals who have experienced a shift from fully remote to hybrid or on-site working. Through qualitative interviews, the study captures their views on how their communication styles, collaborative practices and emotional awareness have changed in response to these new working structures. The emphasis on employee perception is particularly important, as a lot of the existing literature tends to focus on organisational or academic perspectives, leaving a gap in understanding how changes are experienced at the individual level. By focusing on employee narratives, this study hopes to highlight how soft skills are actually used, adapted and valued in everyday professional life, as well as how they are either supported or neglected within organisations.

A key aim of this dissertation is to look at how working structures have impacted soft skills, especially communication, in professional settings. The objectives are to examine the extent to which remote and hybrid models have changed interpersonal interaction; to examine how

employees perceive and respond to these changes; and to evaluate whether sufficient support and training has been provided to help employees adapt. These questions are investigated through a qualitative methodology that uses semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth accounts of individual employee experiences. The analysis is conducted through thematic analysis, which allows for the identification of recurring patterns and meanings within the data.

To support this research, the project is organised in a sequence that builds to provide an understanding on the perception of soft skills. It begins by looking at the existing academic work on soft skills, communication styles, organisational structures, and digital working environments. This review looks at key gaps in the current literature, particularly regarding the lived experiences of employees in hybrid and remote settings, and the ways that perception and communication intersect impact organisations.

Following the review, the project looks at the research problem and questions that it seeks to address, by looking at it from both theoretical practical viewpoints. The methods used for data analysis are also described, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework to identify and interpret key patterns in the data.

The analysis and findings are then discussed, based on recurring themes that came from participant interviews. These themes explore changes in communication methods, shifts in workplace relationships, empathy, , emotional labour and generational and cultural differences, and how they impact soft skills within the evolving work environment.

Literature Review

The contemporary workplace has undergone massive changes in recent decades, with the COVID-19 pandemic serving as a catalyst for major shifts in how, where, and when work is takes place. These changes have highlighted the importance of soft skills, particularly communication, as organisations navigate the complexities of remote, hybrid, and traditional office-based working arrangements. The literature on soft skills development, workplace communication, and organisational behaviour reveals both the growing recognition on the importance of these competencies and significant gaps in understanding

how structural changes to work environments impact the development of soft skills and their application.

This literature review examines the current research on soft skills in professional environments, with particular attention to communication as a competency. The review is organised around several themes that emerge from the existing literature.

The Evolution and Importance of Soft Skills in Professional Contexts

The way we understand soft skills has changed a lot over the years. Once seen as less important by organisations, they are now seen as essential for success at work. Mohammed and Ozdamli (2024) studied soft skills in higher education, focusing on the IT sector. They found that while students often have strong technical skills, many still lack the social and communication skills that employers want. This is important because even in technical fields like IT, soft skills are now seen to be a requirement, the same way that technical ability is.

The study looks at COVID-19's impact on educational delivery and reveals a concerning trend: online teaching methodologies have weakened students' abilities to connect with others and develop the interpersonal skills that are necessary for professional success. This observation moves beyond educational settings to broader questions about how digital tools affects skill development across professional contexts. Mohammed and Ozdamli's emphasis on the importance of emotional intelligence in management positions within the IT sector highlights a shift in leadership expectations, where technical competence alone is not enough for effective management and decision-making.

Keyton and colleagues' (2013) research on verbal communication behaviours in the workplace provides an understanding on how soft skills develop in professional settings. Through their development of the Workplace Communication Behaviour Inventory (WCBI), the researchers identified 44 distinct communication behaviours that employees regularly observe and engage in during their work. The categorisation of these behaviours into four primary areas; information sharing, relationship maintenance, expressing negative emotion, and organising, this offers a practical framework for understanding the complex nature of workplace communication.

The study's finding that employees rated themselves as highly effective in task-oriented behaviours like information sharing, while demonstrating lower effectiveness in managing

negative emotions and communication with stakeholders, reveals a gap in soft skill development. This gap suggests that while individuals may master the technical aspects of communication, they often struggle with emotional and relational dimensions within workplace communication scenarios that are equally important for workplace effectiveness. The research shows that effective workplace communication requires both technical proficiency and interpersonal sensitivity, showing the need for comprehensive training and development approaches.

Organisational Structures and Soft Skill Development

Moldoveanu's (2024) analysis in Rotman Management provides a detailed examination of soft skills within different organisational structures, highlighting how the growing significance of these competencies is linked with rising automation and artificial intelligence adoption. The article's main argument, that soft skills lack standardised language and reliable metrics for evaluation shows a fundamental challenge facing organisations looking to develop and use these competencies effectively.

The difference between vertical and horizontal organisational structures helps explain how workplace setup affects the need for soft skills. In vertical structures, Moldoveanu explains that managers need strong communication skills to solve complex problems and share solutions through different levels of the hierarchy. This means they must be good at strategic communication and explaining complex ideas clearly.

However, horizontal structures rely more on teamwork and collaboration, so soft skills like cooperation, flexibility, and problem-solving are key. Moldoveanu describes these skills as a kind of "social lubricant" that helps people work well together when there's less emphasis on hierarchy. This shows that different organisations require different soft skills, depending on how they are structured, and that one set of soft skills doesn't fit every situation.

Existing frameworks, such as the Big Five personality traits, often rely on subjective evaluations and imprecise language, leading to inconsistent measurements and applications. The misconception that soft skills are universally transferable further complicates their development and application across diverse organizational contexts. Moldoveanu's example of how traits like extraversion may lead to varied performance depending on specific

scenarios highlights the crucial importance of situational awareness and contextual adaptation in soft skill application.

Career Success and Individual Development Perspectives

The relationship between soft skills and career success has received considerable attention in recent literature, with multiple studies demonstrating the importance of these competencies for individual professional advancement and organizational effectiveness.

Tongia et al,(2024) comprehensive study titled *“The Relevance of Soft Skills in Career Success”* provides evidence for the increasing importance of emotional intelligence, adaptability, and communication in contemporary employment landscapes.

The study's foundation on the understanding that soft skills are typically characterised as *“interpersonal or people skills”* that play key roles in shaping professional identity offers a useful definitional framework. The researchers' emphasis on skills like effective communication, problem-solving, leadership ability, and teamwork as distinct from hard skills that are teachable and task-specific, highlights the unique challenges associated with developing and measuring these competencies. The observation that soft skills enable individuals to engage with co-workers, manage relationships and emotions, and adapt to change represents capabilities that, as the authors note, technology can't replicate.

The study looks at shifting employment demands due to technological improvements and increasing artificial intelligence usage, it also reflects broader trends in workforce development. As routine skills become increasingly automated, the value of skills requiring critical thinking, innovation, and empathy has increased. The reference to World Economic Forum research indicates that the most in-demand skills for future workforces are strongly rooted in soft skill areas demonstrates the strategic importance of these competencies for long-term career resilience and adaptability.

Pandey and Shukla (2020) found that soft skills play a key role in an individual getting hired, moving up in a career, and helping organisations run smoothly. Their research shows that technical skills alone aren't enough to succeed in today's ever-changing organisational landscape. They highlight communication as especially important, noting that even small misunderstandings can lead to big problems.

They also show the value of leadership skills like taking responsibility, solving conflicts, making decisions, and motivating others, skills that are useful at all levels, not just for senior managers. This means soft skills should be developed across the whole organisation.

Their study shows that soft skills are often underrated and that ignoring them can hurt performance. They point out that 58% of HR professionals believe poor soft skills reduce productivity, supporting the idea that investing in soft skills is good for business. Finally, they argue that professionalism comes from both personal effort and company training, and that combining soft skills with technical ability creates a more complete and capable workforce.

Educational Perspectives and Skill Development Challenges

Many studies have shown a clear gap between what students learn in school and the soft skills they need at work. Quintans-Júnior et al. (2023) looked at how soft skills affect both academic and career success, especially for postgraduate students. Their research offers helpful ideas for how schools can better prepare students for the workplace.

They see soft skills not only as useful for getting through school but also as important for long-term career growth and making a positive impact on society. They also highlight the role of soft skills in supporting mental health by helping students build strong relationships, stay motivated under pressure, and manage stress effectively. This shows that soft skills matter for both personal well-being and professional success.

The researchers argue that soft skills help people handle emotional stress and avoid conflicts, especially in research environments. While soft skills can't fix every problem, they are useful for dealing with difficult emotional and social situations. This gives a balanced view of what soft skills can and can't do.

They also point out that soft skills are no longer just "*nice to have*", they are becoming a requirement in the workplace. Employers now look for people who can work well with others, communicate clearly, and adapt to change. This has important implications for how schools and universities design their programmes. The researchers suggest that postgraduate courses should include soft skills training, not just for academic success, but also to support innovation and entrepreneurship. This means soft skills should be part of the main curriculum, not added on as extra training.

Bhati (2022) compared how soft skills are viewed in start-ups and in traditional companies in India, showing how different work environments affect what soft skills are needed and how they are developed. The study uses Purdue University's definition of soft skills, which includes personality traits, social manners, communication style, habits, friendliness, and optimism. This gives a broad understanding of what soft skills involve.

Bhati found that nearly all HR professionals agree soft skills are a requirement for hiring and career growth, strongly supporting their importance. The study also showed that HR professionals in start-ups had a better understanding of soft skills than those in traditional companies, suggesting that company culture and structure shape how these skills are seen.

While marketing departments in both types of companies value teamwork and analytical thinking, technology departments differ, traditional companies focus more on humility and being self-driven, while start-ups emphasise teamwork and leadership. This shows that different companies look for different soft skills depending on their culture.

Majid et al. (2012) studied business students from four universities in Singapore to understand how they see soft skills, their importance, and what gets in the way of learning them. The study looked at students' awareness of soft skills, how important they think these skills are, how they rate their own abilities, the role of universities in teaching them, and the challenges students face in developing these skills.

One finding was that many students didn't fully understand what soft skills include. For example, many didn't see attitude or a willingness to learn as soft skills. This shows a basic problem in how soft skills are taught and how they are understood. The study suggests that schools need to teach these skills more clearly and directly.

Although students saw soft skills as helpful for socialising and getting a job, they didn't think these skills mattered much for academic success. This shows a common mistake, separating academic learning from people skills. The study suggests that schools should better combine soft skill training with regular academic subjects.

The students ranked teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and decision-making as most important for jobs, but saw communication as less important. This is worrying because many employers say communication is one of the most important skills. This gap shows that

students may not fully understand what workplaces expect, and that schools need to do more to connect classroom learning with real job demands.

Psychological and Perceptual Views of Workplace Interaction

Recent studies have focused more on the psychology behind how soft skills are developed and used, especially in the workplace. Researchers are exploring how our thoughts, perceptions, and mental processes affect how we interact with colleagues and build relationships. Sharma (2020) offers an important foundation by looking at how perception influences judgment, helping us understand how people interpret and respond to communication and behaviour at work.

Sharma defines perception as the process of making sense of sensory information to understand our surroundings. This highlights how personal factors like emotions, needs, personality, values, and life experiences shape how people interpret situations. In the workplace, this helps explain how different interpretations or misunderstandings can arise from individual perspectives, even if the communication of the message is clear.

The four stages of perception are attention, organisation, interpretation, and retrieval offer a useful way to understand how communication is processed. People often focus on certain information and ignore other parts based on their goals or how they are feeling at that point in time, which affects how messages are received. Grouping information by surface traits can lead to stereotypes, showing the need for awareness and training to reduce bias.

The interpretation stage, where people make sense of organised information by finding causes or meaning, plays a key role in how they judge situations. Since this process is influenced by personal background and context, clear communication also depends on how well messages are understood by different people.

Finally, the retrieval stage, this is how we remember and use past experiences and this shows how memory affects workplace behaviour. Because memories can be incomplete or biased, people may recall only what supports their existing beliefs. This has important consequences for how we evaluate performance, solve conflicts, and build relationships at work.

Roy's (2023) research adds to our understanding of how perception affects workplace behaviour and decision-making through its role in cognitive psychology. He explains that

perception is not passive but an active and ongoing process that strongly shapes our thinking, behaviour, and mental performance, making it important for professional effectiveness.

Roy also discusses Gestalt principles like similarity, proximity, and closure, which show how the brain seeks to make sense of information quickly and efficiently, sometimes by filling in missing details or forming patterns. This has implications for workplace communication, where people may interpret unclear or incomplete messages in unintended ways. Being aware of these perceptual patterns can help reduce miscommunication.

Roy further explores how perception affects memory. He shows that memory is not a perfect record of what happened and that it is shaped by the context in which we perceive events. This challenges the idea that memory is always reliable and highlights that what we remember is often reconstructed rather than recalled exactly. This has important consequences for evaluating performance and managing workplace relationships.

Finally, Roy looks at how perception influences decision-making. He explains that how we see and interpret new information depends on what we already know and how we feel. These factors affect how we judge options and make choices. Perception also shapes how we use past experiences to guide future decisions, showing how it continuously influences professional behaviour over time.

Gaps in Current Research

Although there is a lot of research on soft skills, workplace communication, and organisational behaviour, important gaps remain. These gaps limit our full understanding of how different working structures affect the development and use of soft skills. Identifying these gaps is key to the purpose of this research and shows where more study is needed.

One major gap involves remote and hybrid work environments. Mohammed and Ozdamli (2024) discuss how online learning affects students' ability to connect, but their work doesn't address how remote or hybrid work affects communication and collaboration in professional settings. With flexible working models now common after the COVID-19 pandemic, this is a key area that lacks in-depth research.

Another gap involves how soft skills are measured. Moldoveanu (2024) points out that there are no widely accepted ways to assess soft skills, especially communication. However, there

is little research on how these assessments can be adapted to fit specific organisational needs. Without reliable context specific tools, it's hard for organisations to evaluate or develop soft skills effectively.

There is also limited research on how managers develop soft skills. Mohammed and Ozdamli (2024) note that managers need strong soft skills but don't look at how training programmes can help build them. We lack evidence on what works in management-focused soft skill development and how to best prepare leaders for the interpersonal aspects of their roles.

Much of the current research also focuses on soft skill development in education, with little attention to how workplace structures and cultures develop these skills after graduation. For example, Mohammed and Ozdamli (2024) focus on students in IT and higher education, while Moldoveanu (2024) highlights the value of soft skills but doesn't connect them to different workplace structures like vertical or flat hierarchies.

Another gap is the lack of attention to how soft skills, especially communication, must adapt to different workplace settings. Studies like those by Touloumakos (2020) don't address how communication changes with technology, diversity, or remote work. Keyton et al. (2013) look at individual communication behaviour, but their work doesn't link this behaviour to organisational structures.

Most research also overlooks the experiences of mid-level employees. Existing studies often focus on senior leaders, HR professionals, or students, leaving out the perspectives of those who are most affected by daily changes in communication and structure. Mid-level workers play a key role in applying soft skills in practice, and their insights are essential but often ignored.

The psychological side of communication, like how perception and bias shape interactions hasn't been fully applied to digital work environments. Sharma (2020) and Roy (2023) explain how perception influences judgment, but this hasn't been studied in remote contexts where tone and intent can be easily misunderstood. Common perceptual errors such as stereotyping and confirmation bias may be even stronger in digital settings, yet this area remains underexplored.

Another topic that hasn't been widely researched is intergenerational communication in remote and hybrid workplaces. Giles et al. (2003) explored generational differences in communication, but their study predates the rise of remote work and technological tools like Teams and Slack. Today, differences in digital fluency and technological expectations can create communication challenges between generations, which has not been widely researched.

Informal communication is also under researched. Keyton et al. (2013) focus on observable interactions in traditional settings, but remote work reduces informal chats, body language, and spontaneous conversations. These informal moments are key to building trust, empathy, and soft skills. The long term loss of such interactions may affect how these skills are developed, but this issue has not been studied enough.

Long-term research on soft skill development in digital work environments is also lacking. As many workplaces move away from face-to-face mentoring and support, we don't yet know how this affects soft skill growth over time. More research is needed to understand how soft skills are developed, maintained, or lost in digital-first workplaces.

Finally, current frameworks often treat communication as a one-size-fits-all skill, but today's workplaces require flexible communication across cultures, platforms, and technologies. Studies don't explore how communication must adapt across different formats like messaging apps, video calls, or multicultural teams. This is a major gap in preparing professionals for modern communication demands.

Connecting the Literature

The literature highlights the growing importance of soft skills in today's professional workplaces but also reveals major gaps in understanding how changes in work structures affect communication and skill development. Several key themes emerge from the review: the shift of soft skills from secondary traits to core competencies, the complex link between organisational structures and skill needs, the role of perception and psychology in workplace interactions, and the difficulty of developing and measuring soft skills in constantly evolving environments.

Foundational theories from Goleman (1998) on emotional intelligence, Keyton et al. (2013) on workplace communication, and Sharma (2020) on perception and judgment provide

useful frameworks. However, these theories need to be updated to reflect the realities of today's remote and hybrid work models.

Soft skills, especially communication, are shown to be dynamic, not fixed, they must be continually adapted to fit changing workplace contexts. Moldoveanu (2024) describes soft skills as the “*social lubricant*” that supports collaboration, underlining their central role in organisational success. Yet, there are still challenges around defining, measuring, and developing these skills, particularly in digital work settings.

A major gap in the literature is the lack of employee perspectives. While research often focuses on leadership, education, or HR views, the experiences of employees, the people that are most directly using and affected by soft skills are the ones that are most often overlooked. This research aims to fill that gap.

Integrating theories of perception and psychology with organisational behaviour offers valuable insight into how workplace communication is understood and where misinterpretations may arise. Since perception is shaped by factors like culture, generation, and personal experience, understanding these influences are necessary, especially in diverse or digital environments. However, the application of such insights to remote and hybrid work settings remains limited.

Overall, this literature review looks at research into how work structures influence soft skill development, especially from the employee perspective. The lack of focus on employee experiences, limited attention to perceptual and cultural differences in digital communication, and the absence of frameworks for adaptive communication all point to clear opportunities for further investigation.

This research aims to connect theory with practice by exploring how employees experience the impact of different working structures; remote, hybrid, and on-site, on the development and use of soft skills, particularly communication, through qualitative study of their lived experiences.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach to look at how changing working structures e.g. the shift to hybrid and remote working, has influenced the perception, the development and the use of soft skills in the Irish professional workplace, with a focus on communication.

A qualitative approach is appropriate for this research question as this question seeks to explore the subjective experience and how individuals perceive and respond to their working environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Howson, 2024). Instead of using quantitative methods, as a quantitative approach prioritises the objective measurements and is suited to more general research questions whereas qualitative research approaches are more concerned with understanding the complex social scenarios as they are lived and understood.

This section outlines the design of the study, including its framework, sampling strategy, data collection methods, analytical procedures, and ethical considerations, while also reflecting on the rationale for each decision.

Research Objectives and Justification for Method

The research is guided by three main objectives:

1. To explore the extent to which remote and hybrid models have changed interpersonal workplace interaction.
2. To investigate how employees perceive and respond to these changes.
3. To assess whether organisations have provided adequate support for communication skill development in post-pandemic contexts.

In keeping with the research aim, this project prioritises understanding and places particular value on lived experiences and perceptions. A qualitative approach, therefore, enables the researcher to explore the emotional, social, and perceptual contexts of organisational life.

This decision is supported by previous research in the field. Such as studies on communication behaviour (Keyton et al., 2013) and perception (Sharma, 2020) suggest that interpersonal dynamics are strongly linked in subjective experience and organisational context.

Framework

This study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, which believes that knowledge is constructed through the social world and that reality experienced differently by everyone

(Howson, 2024). It rejects the idea of objective measurement of human behaviour and instead looks at how meaning is formed through communication, relationships, and context.

Sample Selection and Recruitment

The sampling strategy that was used was a purposive one as the aim was to identify participants who had direct experience with both in office and remote or hybrid working structures within a professional context. The target population consisted of working professionals that were based in Ireland and were drawn from a range of industries including education, finance, the public sector, and technology.

Eight participants were selected to ensure diversity across different career stages, sectors, and demographic profiles. All participants had experience to some form of on-site or hybrid working after extended periods of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. This diversity was intentional, in order to best understand different views from generational, cultural, and organisational perspectives in soft skill perception and application.

Each participant received a participant information sheet (see Appendix 3), provided informed consent (Appendix 2), and was given the opportunity to withdraw at any stage. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms or participant codes (e.g., I1–I8) were assigned.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to be the primary data collection tool, due to their flexibility and capacity to gather and reflective responses. Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams as this also reflects the hybrid and remote contexts under investigation. Interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent and then transcribed.

The interview questions (Appendix 1) were designed to explore communication practices, emotional labour, workplace relationships, generational differences, and perceived organisational support.

The semi-structured format allowed for open-ended responses, enabling participants to reflect on both their professional experiences and the emotional and relationship dimensions of those experiences.

Analytical Approach: Thematic Analysis

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis, this model gives a systematic but flexible approach for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The six phases are:

1. **Familiarisation with the data:** Interview transcripts were read and reviewed to ensure an in-depth understanding of the viewpoints described by the interviewees.
2. **Generating initial codes:** Codes were applied to meaningful data samples.
3. **Searching for themes:** Data is then grouped into potential themes based on patterns and relationships.
4. **Reviewing themes:** Themes were refined and cross-checked for clarity with the raw data.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** Each theme was clearly defined in relation to the research questions.
6. **Producing the report:** The final narrative uses illustrative quotes and analytical interpretation.

This method was chosen because of its ability to work with both explicit and implicit meanings. The inductive approach allowed for the new insights grounded in participant experience, while the deductive approach ensured relevance to the research objectives and literature.

The flexibility of thematic analysis is a strength, but also a potential limitation if not applied correctly. To help ensure that it is applied correctly, Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist for high-quality thematic analysis was followed.

Transcription was supported using AI-based tool Read.ai, which enabled efficient and accurate initial transcripts. However, these transcripts were manually reviewed and edited by the researcher to maintain analytical integrity (Arora, 2024).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research guidelines as outlined by NCI's ethical principles which included:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants were informed about the purpose, risks, and benefits of the study and signed consent forms prior to participation.
- **Confidentiality:** All data were anonymised and securely stored. Identifiable information was removed from transcripts and reports.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Participants were free to withdraw at any time without consequence.
- **Respect for Autonomy:** Participants were treated with respect and dignity throughout, with special consideration given to the potential emotional or psychological impact of discussing work-related stress or miscommunication.

Limitations

As with most qualitative studies, this research does not aim for generalised results. Rather, it seeks to have findings that resonate across similar contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The relatively small sample size (n=8) limits a wider study but allows for rich, detailed data.

Self-reporting bias is another potential limitation, as participants may unconsciously present themselves or their organisations in a more favourable light or unfavourable light. To help to mitigate this, a number of data points were collected, and reflective prompts were used to encourage deeper and more reflective answers.

The interpretive nature of thematic analysis also presents subjectivity risks. These risks were addressed through processes like coding, theme development, and continuous comparison with raw data.

This methodology approach directly addresses identified gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of employee-focused qualitative research into communication and emotional labour in evolving work structures. The findings derived from this methodological approach offer significant contributions to organisational behaviour, communication studies, and future workforce development strategies.

Analysis & Findings

The following section presents a comprehensive thematic analysis of data collected from eight interview participants, all of whom reflected on their own individual experiences transitioning back to the office working environment following an extended period of remote working. This analysis is grounded in Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, including, familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, looking for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing final results.

The aim of this study was to explore how individuals perceived and experienced changes in soft skills like communication, empathy, collaboration, adaptability and interpersonal awareness, particularly around the landscape of hybrid working. This qualitative study highlights the psychosocial dimensions of workplace reintegration and the importance of emotional intelligence in organisational life.

This analysis focus on themes that emerged from these interviews. This approach allows for nuanced patterns that span the different aspects of the participants' professional lives, this offers an holistic view of both the communicative and the relational shifts that has been shaped by the post-pandemic workplace.

Direct quotations from interview participants are included throughout to provide additional context and authenticity to these thematic findings and also provide evidence to the complex and diverse experiences encountered due to the return to in-person and hybrid working contexts. Each quote is attributed by interviewee number (e.g., I1-I8) in order to ensure anonymity whilst also maintaining analytical clarity.

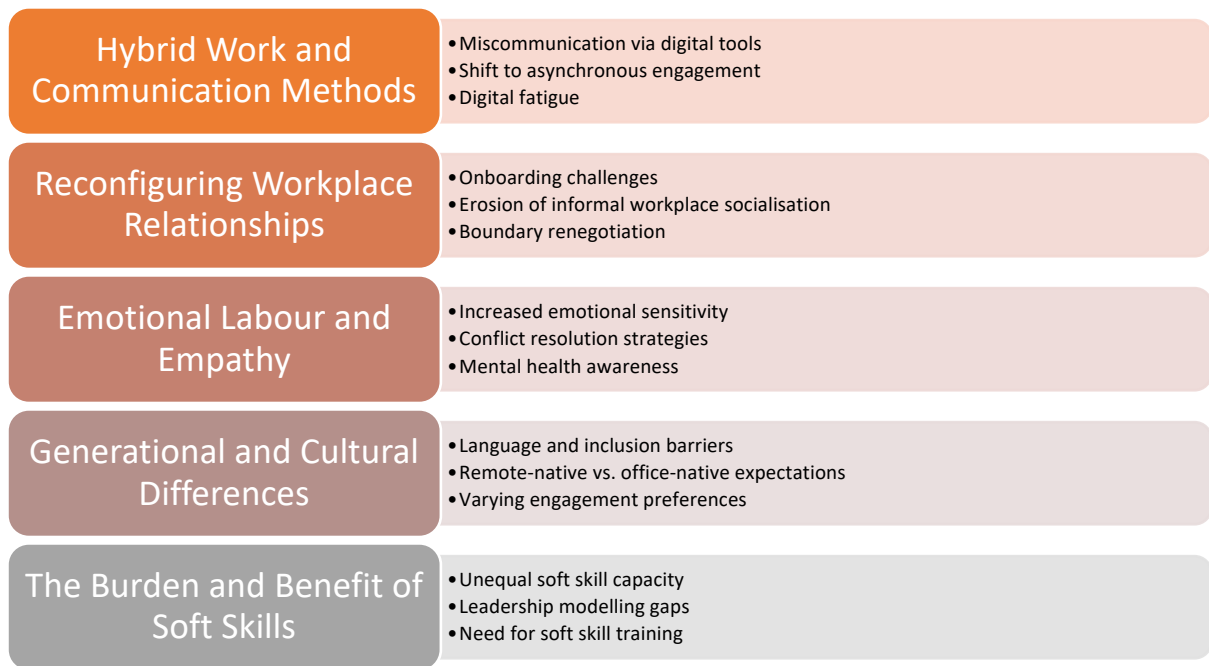


Figure 1: Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Hybrid Work and Communication Methods

The transition to hybrid work has changed traditional communication methods. Across interviews participants consistently highlighted participants a strong reliance on digital platforms (e.g., Teams, Slack, and e-mail) in order to carry out their daily tasks while also facilitating logistical coordination, and felt that this often impacted workplace relationships.

Several participants reported the limitations of digital communication in conveying tone, empathy, and understanding, which can often result in misinterpretation or miscommunication. Highlighting that while these digital allowed for connection when staff work remotely, interviewees often felt that the lack of physical cues such as body language meant that conversations often lacked clarity and emotional nuance. One participant stated that:

“tones of emails are open to interpretation where something could be really easily solved by calling into somebody's office a quick question and it can be solved there and then, whereas I think email threads can sometimes be misinterpreted and tones can be misinterpreted, so I

think at times it might have more of a negative impact I think on communication and relations.” (I1)

The above statement highlights a recurring theme in the data: that even though digital communication is efficient it also adds new layers of interpretation related complexity for professionals that requires them to navigate not just tone, but also clarity and intent without the aid of being physically present amongst their colleagues. Interview participants also described situations where their colleagues delays in replying was seen as disengagement or that there were scenarios where e-mails were misread and seen as passive-aggressive or rude due to the lack of softening cues. This aligns Byron (2008) literature around tone perception in digital communication, where written forms of communication can lead to misunderstandings and even cause difficulty in interpersonal relationships.

Hybrid work as also blurred lines when it comes to communication patterns. The layering of meetings with follow-up e-mails and chat threads was highlighted by interviewees as causing communication fatigue or communication overload. One participant noted:

“We have meetings, but then we have the summary emails and calls after... it’s like a constant loop.”(I8).

The interviews showed that hybrid work demanded a new skillset to manage communication tone, structure, and intent. Participants described developing greater awareness of their communication styles, including adapting their tone depending on the platform or audience. However, they also noted that this shift was not always evenly distributed among colleagues. One participant reflected on the difficulty of hybrid meetings specifically:

“I think what I find particularly challenging is if we're having a meeting in the office, but certain members are attending online. So it's like a hybrid meeting. I think that is particularly challenging.” (I1)

Hybrid meetings, where some participants are physically present in the office and others are remote, were reported to be particularly difficult. Issues such as uneven participation, IT issues, and lack of shared presence were seen to hinder both inclusivity and effective discussion. These findings align with existing research (e.g., Waizenegger et al., 2020)

highlighting that hybrid formats can further increase the digital divide between remote and in-person team members.

Interviewees also spoke about the increased demand for self-regulation and soft skill awareness in this new environment. For instance, one participant explained:

“We do so much online, everything is like on video at the moment... I also work with lots of different regions... the skills I’ve learned through that... has definitely strengthened my communication skills and my team skills, and that has crossed over to being in the office.”

(I6)

This insight highlights how digital fluency and intercultural awareness are becoming more important. The hybrid context requires employees to communicate effectively with diverse teams across multiple engagement platforms. Participants also acknowledged that these competencies were not always openly supported by the organisation but were developed through necessity and experience.

Interestingly, hybrid work also affected the spontaneity and emotional tone of in-person communication. Several interviewees reported that even when they came back into the office, interpersonal interactions felt more superficial than before:

“People don’t sit around and chat as much. In some ways, it’s very much like ‘how are you?’ and kind of moving on... the friendliness or the socialising that was there before isn’t as good because people don’t see each other as often.” (I6)

This comment highlights a key issue: that return to physical office space does not automatically restore the informal communication patterns of the pre-pandemic era. Instead, hybrid structures appear to have reconditioned workplace norms, potentially limiting deeper relationship-building and casual interaction.

For others, digital tools have permanently changed how even co-located teams interact. As one participant noted:

“Even when you’re in the office, there’s still a huge emphasis around things being online... people use AI to kind of take notes and do different things... so it has definitely changed the way of working.” (I6)

This indicates a change to work habits, where digital tools are embedded into both remote and physical settings. The result is a hybrid model that is not just a combination of remote and office work but a new style of working with its own set of expectations and communicative demands.

In summary, the transition to hybrid work has transformed how employees communicate. While digital tools have allowed for flexibility and remote inclusion, they also require more deliberate tone management, emotional understanding and an adaptive use of platforms. The data suggests that effective communication in hybrid contexts is not a given and that it must be actively supported through training, cultural adaptation, and thoughtful design of collaborative processes.

Theme 2: Reconfiguring Workplace Relationships

The second theme to emerge from these interviews was the disruption and ongoing changes to workplace relationships and social dynamics in the context of hybrid work. Participants often described how the frequency and the nature of in-person social and work related interactions had been reduced, which in turn has changed both the form and depth of professional relationships. Many participants highlighted the breakdown of spontaneous and informal interaction, like impromptu chats or shared breaks, these interactions had traditionally supported workplace rapport, trust, and social cohesion.

“We only come in once a week... so it doesn’t allow time to reconnect properly with colleagues.” (I5)

As face-to-face office time changes and become less frequent, there has been a growing sense of disconnection from colleagues. Participants spoke of how relationship-building, which once occurred organically, now demands more intentional planning and scheduling. The impact is really noticed among newer employees, who may lack the benefit of prior in-person bonding:

“It was like training people from scratch, even though we worked together online for months.” (I3)

This quote shows how even though online collaboration is functional it doesn't always facilitate meaningful social bonding within the workplace. Several participants explained that the remote onboarding processes and digital-only collaborations made it more difficult to get to know their colleagues. Returning to the office often revealed that there were gaps in interpersonal familiarity despite working collaboratively in a virtual setting.

As hybrid work structures continue, it was clear that there is a new form of boundary-blurring in the workplace. One participant reflected on the difficulty maintaining professionalism and navigating more casual interaction styles within limited in-person time:

"I think sometimes I've slipped into over-familiarity... we have so much to do, and it's hard to refocus." (I1)

This blurring is not only emotional but it's also spacial as open-plan offices and hot-desking systems were said to add these challenges by removing quiet zones or private space, which intensifies the demand on interpersonal discipline and boundaries.

In addition to frequency and tone of interaction, participants noted that the quality of workplace relationships had changed. In-person collaboration came across more emotionally rich and engaging in interviews, in contrast with transactional or *"to-the-point"* digital communications:

"When we go to the office, we want to catch up with the colleagues with friends and then one day is not enough sometimes." (I5)

Another participant highlighted the loss of everyday social rituals that reinforce team cohesion. Others also recognised how returning to in-person communication reawakened sensitivities to body language and expression, cues that had often been muted or lost during prolonged screen-based interactions:

"Sometimes it's very, very challenging but at the same time it's very nice because I can see how people interact, how the faces change when you talk to them, when they smile, when they do gesture with the hands." (I5)

These reflections suggest a renewed appreciation and the importance of physical presence for many professionals. Non-verbal communication, is often crucial to building rapport and

trust, appears to remain a key component of successful workplace relationships in hybrid settings.

Several participants also described their experiences of relationship-building in the context of onboarding and organisational transitions. One participant who joined a new organisation during remote work noted:

“I kind of started off in this new company during COVID... it just didn’t sink in as quickly as maybe a half an hour meeting over a cup of coffee with someone would have done.” (12)

This quote illustrates the subtle ways in which casual social interactions contribute to workplace learning and development. While digital systems allow for information exchange, they often fall short of delivering the social knowledge required to build trust or informal support networks.

Another participant noted the benefit of physical proximity in identifying and supporting struggling colleagues:

“Had we been working remotely, we’d never have got to see that. We would have just seen numbers drop... everything has gotten a lot better since that.” (17)

This reflects how in-person interactions can offer important opportunities to identify unspoken challenges or to respond empathetically to emotional distress, insights that may be masked or delayed in digital-only settings.

However, the return to the office was not universally experienced. One participant noted that even now, some colleagues remained reluctant to engage in social interaction:

“Some people still have difficulty to talk to you or look at your face... some people they get very close. I’m not sure if they were like that before.” (15)

This quote highlights the varied emotional readiness of employees to reintegrate socially. Hybrid arrangements may intensify individual differences in communication styles or comfort with interaction, suggesting that reconfiguring relationships is not just logistical, but deeply psychological and cultural.

Overall, the findings show that hybrid work has transformed workplace relationships from casual, proximity-based dynamics into more deliberate processes that require additional effort. Trust, understanding, and collaboration now require more time and effort,

particularly for new hires or colleagues who lack a pre-pandemic reference point. While digital platforms maintain collaboration, they cannot fully replicate the relational depth fostered through spontaneous, in-person connection. The evolving challenge for organisations lies in bridging these relational gaps while accommodating the flexibility that hybrid work provides.

Theme 3: Emotional Labour and Empathy

One of the most consistent and striking themes across participants' interviews was the increased presence of emotional labour in their day-to-day roles. The pandemic appeared to act as a catalyst for heightened emotional sensitivity in the workplace, as employees and managers alike became more aware of the personal challenges their colleagues faced. This included issues such as mental health, caregiving responsibilities, and burnout. For many, this awareness continued into the hybrid phase, reshaping how empathy was expressed and integrated into the workplace.

“I became much more attuned to how colleagues might be managing the challenges that they had with those situations or with that situation and fully aware of burn out you know people working longer hours because they're at home and they're on you know they can they can just access the laptop and that and also then being aware of, you know, what family support they might need and, you know, if they're, you know, if they're caring for a member of the family type of situation. So I just, I suppose I adjusted my approach to be more empathetic towards that and those type of situations.” (I4)

This quote highlights the shift from empathy as a desirable trait to empathy as a key interpersonal and managerial competency. For some participants, managing team wellbeing became part of their performance oversight duties. There was a growing recognition that understanding an employee's personal context was necessary in order to fairly assess their engagement and productivity.

Empathy was not limited to emotional awareness but it was also strongly connected to physical presence. Several interviewees noted that their ability to detect emotional cues improved when they returned to the office environment. The loss of these cues in remote

settings had created emotional distance, and it often made it harder to know when support was needed:

“But as you're back into the office you can sense the emotion, you can sense what people are going on, like you can get a vibe off somebody if they're not doing well. They might be very quiet sitting there beside you or they could be a little bit jittery. You can get a sense of how they're feeling. Whereas when you're working at home, you don't necessarily get that even if you're speaking to them on the phone or even if you're you know, doing a face-to-face call with them. It's a lot different.” (13)

The inability to “read the room” while remote often led to misunderstandings or missed opportunities to support colleagues. In contrast, being present in the office allowed for early identification of distress, which participants felt could lead to more timely interventions.

One participant reflected on a particular issue with a colleague where being present in the office revealed an unseen issue:

“Had we been working remotely, we'd never have got to see that. We would have just seen numbers drop and it would have all come to a head when it was too late.” (17)

In this case, physical presence allowed for colleagues a conversation that revealed an undiagnosed case of neurodivergence that had been impacting their performance. This allowed the organisation to make small but impactful adjustments, highlighting the role of emotional labour in inclusive leadership.

This suggests that for many, emotional labour in hybrid settings involved active observation and checking in, not just being available, but being aware. Some participants described how the workplace had grown more supportive post-pandemic, where colleagues would raise concerns about each other's wellbeing to managers, fostering a more compassionate culture:

“You'd have junior members of staff potentially coming up to me to say, I spotted such and such earlier was whatever... might just need a bit of time and attention.” (17)

Empathy extended beyond formal roles, with team members themselves becoming more proactive in identifying when others were acting out of character. This type of vigilance

reflects a cultural shift where emotional attentiveness has become part of everyday professional behaviour.

Participants also spoke about the challenge of balancing empathy with boundaries, particularly when managing workloads. One described the difficulty of staying focused while trying to maintain emotional openness in the workplace:

“Some people they are very nice and they try to be patient even when we are in the office or online but other people... they want everything to be solved very quickly... especially when we work remotely so they don’t want to talk too much they want to only go straight to the point.” (15)

This highlights the tension between productivity and emotional patience, especially in time-pressured digital environments. For non-native speakers, like interviewee 5, these moments were particularly difficult as they required extra time to process and respond in English. The need for compassion in such situations became even more noticeable in hybrid settings, where time was tightly managed, and communication was often summarised.

Another layer to this emotional labour was the expectation that employees would naturally possess or develop these soft skills without formal support. Several participants expressed frustration at the lack of training or development opportunities focused on interpersonal or emotional competencies:

“There was no understanding of the importance of tone of voice or words that you use or body language or being able to adapt them to the situation. They just didn’t do any training on any of that.” (18)

This gap between expectation and support aligns with findings from organisational behaviour literature, which caution against assuming soft skills are innate. Instead, participants advocated for structured interventions like team-building exercises, conflict resolution training, and workshops on emotional intelligence.

Ultimately, emotional labour in hybrid work was not just about expressing empathy but also about managing emotional visibility, an individuals’ ability to self-regulate, and relationship equity. Some participants worried that certain groups, particularly women or non-native speakers might be expected to do more emotional work, though this concern was more implied than explicitly addressed in the interviews. Nonetheless, the overall findings point to

a need for organisational cultures to value, train for, and equitably distribute emotional labour in ways that foster both psychological safety and productivity.

Theme 4: Generational and Cultural Differences

The hybrid transition has highlighted underlying generational and cultural divides in workplace expectations, particularly in relation to communication, collaboration, and daily professional practices. Several participants highlighted a clear difference between employees who began their careers before the pandemic and those who entered the workforce during it. This divide has significant implications for communication preferences, social engagement, and adaptability within hybrid environments.

A recurring observation was the difficulty younger workers, particularly those with no prior in-person office experience, have in adjusting to in-person work. These participants were often described as having grown professionally within digital workspaces, and therefore less inclined toward face-to-face interaction in an office environment:

“You can kind of see some people have come straight out of college only ever worked in a in a kind of remote world, when they come into the office, it is very new to them. It takes a lot of adjustment to work in an office environment and there's almost like an unwillingness to want to work in an office from some of the younger people I work with.”(12)

This quote shows how hybrid work has generated a difference in comfort levels with physical presence in the office. While senior staff often regarded office-based engagement as normal and beneficial, junior employees tended to prefer autonomy and flexibility, often displaying discomfort or hesitation when required to collaborate in person. One participant reflected on the contrast between older and younger generations in how they perceive collaboration

“That's a generation of people that are heading for retirement and are ultimately going to be replaced by what appears to be another generation of people who don't really want to be coming into an office, don't really want to have their cameras on if they can avoid it at all, don't really want to have phone calls if things can be done in writing. And that's not very conducive to the role that we have.”(18)

This perception of generational difference is not just about preference in work environments but it also reflects deeper differences in professional socialisation. Older workers, having developed their communication habits in in-person structured office environments and place a higher value on tone, body language, and in informal rapport-building. These are traits that younger colleagues may have had fewer opportunities to develop. One interviewee linked these differences to an erosion in interpersonal connection and even suggested that it could have broader societal implications:

"I just think the young people are making decisions at 18, 19 years of age... if remote working becomes this like, oh, I can work from home, I can work from home, that's great. Well, we're not going to have bus drivers, we're not going to have nurses... I just worry about that. I really do." (I8)

While this may be a more extreme view, it highlights a common concern that was expressed across interviews: that hybrid models may also have weakened the transmission of traditional workplace norms and soft skills. Such concerns reflect a wider uncertainty about what professionalism looks like when the physical office space is no longer a default learning space for employees.

From a training and development perspective, this generational divide presents both challenges and opportunities. One participant noted that older employees often came "*pre-trained*" in interpersonal communication due to years of in-office experience:

"This particular team have oodles of experience in that regard... sitting in an office, having to interact, having to have the water cooler chats and building relationships. So I've been very lucky in this job to have a team like that." (I8)

However, this skillset of interpersonal engagement was not guaranteed across organisations. Another participant observed that their previous employer placed "*no regard*" on communication training, despite its relevance to the job:

"There was no understanding of the importance of tone of voice or words that you use or body language or being able to adapt them to the situation... They just didn't do any training on any of that." (I8)

This lack of formal training shows generational inequity, as younger workers are expected to master soft skills, skills that were once naturally acquired through immersion within the

workplace without enough support. It also leaves managers responsible for bridging this gap, often without organisational backing.

Beyond generational concerns, the hybrid transition also exposed cultural and linguistic barriers to full engagement. Participants from international backgrounds described the difficulties of navigating professional communication in a second language, difficulties that were compounded by hybrid settings. One participant stated:

“English is not my first language so sometimes was really hard to, you know, communicate with my colleagues and my boss. And when I come back to the office after the pandemic, I have to be now once per week... when I have to go to the office, sometimes I feel really tired through interaction.” (I5)

The quote highlights the cognitive and emotional toll of switching between digital and physical methods of communication, especially for those for whom English is a second language. The exhaustion described is not only physical but social and linguistic, showing how hybrid contexts require additional layers of adaptation for some employees.

Further elaborating on this, the same participant described how in-person interaction is both challenging and enriching:

“Actually I felt very difficult when I have to talk to my colleagues and then look in the face... but at the same time it’s very nice because I can see how people interact, how the faces change when you talk to them... and then I think we miss that.” (I5)

This reflection suggests that while face-to-face engagement is more demanding, it also fosters a deeper sense of human connection that digital interaction often lacks. In hybrid settings, the loss of these subtle cues can make it harder to read emotional tone, resolve misunderstandings, or to build trust, especially across cultural or linguistic boundaries.

Some participants described frustration when colleagues lacked patience with those who communicated differently or more slowly due to language barriers:

“Some people don’t have patience... I need to think more than them to talk. And some of them is very like, ‘OK, OK, understand’... and then they cut you when you try talk.” (I5)

These type of incidents highlight the need for empathy in communication and the importance of inclusive practices in diverse teams. For multicultural or international

workplaces, hybrid structures risk exacerbating existing inequities unless steps are taken to foster patience, active listening, and mutual understanding.

The findings suggest that these challenges, both generational and culture are not impassable but they so demand deliberate responses. Participants proposed solutions like intergenerational mentoring, structured soft skills training, and more intentional in-office onboarding. One participant suggested that phased office returns could help ease the transition for newer or younger staff:

“Coming into the office maybe one or two days a week at first just to get people used to being back... before going back in full time, I think that would help people.” (I3)

Another pointed to structured interaction as a way of building relationships and improving collaboration:

“If they do trainings and improve the communications, improve the interaction... I think it’s going to be good.” (I5)

These suggestions reflect a strong desire to make hybrid work more socially sustainable and inclusive. The transition from fully remote to hybrid has shown how reliant traditional workplaces were on informal, in-person learning. Without redesigning systems to account for these lost opportunities, especially for newer and international employees organisations risk weakening both productivity and cohesion.

Ultimately, the hybrid transition reveals as much about evolving work preferences as it does about long-standing organisational issues. By recognising generational and cultural differences as opportunities for growth, organisations can design more supportive, equitable, and adaptive workplaces.

Theme 5: The Burden and the Benefit of Soft Skills

One of the most noticeable findings from the interview data concerns the central yet often undervalued role of soft skills in navigating hybrid and remote work structures. While digital tools facilitated the continuity of operations during the pandemic, participants widely

reported that their success in these settings depended less on technical fluency and more on interpersonal competencies like tone management, empathy, adaptability, and digital etiquette. For many, the hybrid context placed additional expectations on employees to self-manage their relationships, emotions, and their interactions without substantial organisational support or structured training.

Participants spoke candidly about the gaps they observed among colleagues, particularly in managing tone and communication effectively when face-to-face cues were absent. As one interviewee recalled from a previous role:

“There was no programs run, there was no understanding of the importance of tone of voice or words that you use or body language or being able to adapt them to the situation. They just didn't do any training on any of that. They just were more about the technicalities of the job, you know, that it was very administrative. Despite the fact that this administration was done over the phone with customers and so on, I'm just very surprised that there was very little training ever done on communication and a lot of these people in this company had come from other companies and it wasn't a feature for them either you know.” (I8)

The absence of formal communication training was described as a big problem in hybrid environments, where a large portion of interpersonal interaction occurs through digital platforms. Many interviewees expressed concern that soft skills were being treated as optional, instead of as essential competencies for professional success. Without in-person opportunities to observe and model behaviour, junior employees in particular were seen to be at a disadvantage, while organisations often failed to offer support that might have bridged this skill gap.

Some interviewees noted that their own ability to adapt was rooted in prior experience and intentional development. As one participant stated that:

“I had done a lot of training. I had delivered a lot of training courses on interpersonal skills and now was the time for me to actually put those things into real practice to see if they actually transferred into an environment you're working entirely differently.” (I8)

However, this depth of preparation was not universal across all interviewee experiences. The differences in soft skill ability between staff members created tension, especially in contexts that required collaborative problem-solving or nuanced communication. The hybrid

environment also made it more difficult to detect tone, mood, or intention, which contributed to a range of misunderstandings:

“People who are maybe at home listening in on their Teams or whatever sometimes might interpret things differently than if they were there in the office in person... there’s a lot more to thinking about when you’re engaging with people now because of the various routes that you have to engage with them on.” (18)

These challenges extended past peer interactions to include the customer-facing aspects of professional roles. Communication with clients, customers, and external stakeholders increasingly required soft skills that could not be assumed or left to chance. Yet, participants felt that training initiatives often overlooked these realities:

“You can do absolute lots of courses in soft skills and learn, you know, whatever it is, communication, whatever, but I find working with somebody that has that, those skills, is easier for me to learn personally from a person or people.” (14)

The change in how and where people worked also exposed different generational and professional attitudes towards soft skill acquisition. Some participants came from environments where communication training was part of the management and staff development programmes on offer. Others entered hybrid workplaces that placed importance technical skill but neglected the soft skills that are needed to support emotional labour and conflict resolution. One participant described their surprise at the lack of investment:

“It’s surprising at the amount of people I come across now who have no concept of that. At all. It doesn’t even feature really in some of the training that they get in their jobs.” (18)

Despite this lack of attention, participants overwhelmingly acknowledged that soft skills were now more important than ever. In particular, empathy, adaptability, and emotional awareness were frequently considered to be crucial to navigating the complexity of hybrid work. Managers in particular discussed the strategic value of empathy in team coordination:

“I suppose that’s collaboration really in terms of, and the teamwork would come hand in hand, I suppose. And like the agile practices like stand-ups and sprints, you know, that evolved online... I’m more proactive in terms of engaging team members, you know, and to

sort of maintain momentum around projects and to prevent sort of them feeling, and me feeling I suppose as well, isolated.” (14)

Another interviewee highlighted how communication now involved greater responsibility for clarity and inclusion:

“You do have to really think about the message that you're sending... and people who are maybe at home listening in... might interpret things differently than if they were there in the office in person.” (18)

In response to these challenges, some participants felt that management should be responsible for modelling strong interpersonal practices. Good leadership was described not only in terms of technical direction or operational success, but also in terms of openness, communication accessibility, and empathy:

“We've a fantastic leadership and they lead from the top in terms of how they communicate. Like for me, on right now and go directly to the global head CEO of my company and speak to her. No problem about anything. So for me, for any person in the company to have that is massive.” (14)

The accessibility of leadership and their willingness to engage on a personal level contributed to a greater sense of psychological safety and organisational belonging. Unlike participants working in less communicative environments, where they expressed feelings of isolation or misunderstanding, especially when interpersonal issues were handled without care.

Several interviewees linked the erosion of in-person interaction to broader psychosocial impacts, like loneliness, disengagement, and the loss of informal mentorship opportunities. One participant noted that:

“That's a generation of people that are heading for retirement and are ultimately going to be replaced by what appears to be another generation of people who don't really want to be coming into an office, don't really want to have their cameras on... not very conducive to the role that we have where a lot of what you're dealing with is complaints... And I would have a concern that... a lot of people treat their work as very impersonal.” (18)

This comment highlights wider concerns around the future of workplace culture. In hybrid settings, where physical co-presence is no longer standard, many of the informal opportunities for learning and interpersonal development, such as shadowing, mentoring, and casual feedback are either diminished or lost entirely.

The perceived over-reliance on digital platforms for relationship-building, combined with the lack of training, has led to a widespread sense that organisations are not doing enough to provide staff with the soft skills needed for the present and future workplace. Some participants suggested that mentoring and on-site learning would be more effective than generic online training:

“More mentoring from my boss... working closer with him to benefit from the soft skills that he has... I find working with somebody that has that, those skills, is easier for me to learn personally from a person or people.” (I4)

Ultimately, this theme shows a key contradiction within the hybrid working model and although soft skills are just as important than ever, they are often left to individual employees to acquire them informally or through trial and error. The uneven distribution of soft skill competency and the inconsistent organisational efforts to support it mean that there is a lack of backing for effective communication, collaboration, and wellbeing.

Participants’ reflections highlight that soft skills are not static attributes, but they are evolving competencies that are shaped by context, experience, and leadership. As hybrid and remote work continue to redefine the workplace, there is a clear need for organisations to move past rhetoric and invest in systematic soft skill development. This includes not only formal training but also structural supports such as mentoring, peer-learning, feedback culture, and inclusive leadership.

Discussion

This study explored how the change in working structures, have influenced the use and the perception of soft skills in professional working environments by using qualitative interviews thematic analysis. The following discussion critically reviews the findings of this study with the existing literature reviewed. Key themes from the interview data include;

1. The shift in communication methods
2. The erosion of informal social interaction
3. Emotional and psychosocial adjustments
4. Generational and cultural differences
5. The need for improved soft skill structures.

Changing Communication Methods and Their Impact

One of the main findings in this study is the increasing use of digital communication tools even after the return to office spaces. Interview participants described a continued reliance on Microsoft Teams, Slack, emails and other platforms, these platforms have been noted by participants to sometimes cause issues due to lack of clarity, misinterpretation of tone and emotional nuance, which confirms the findings of Keyton et al. (2013) who highlighted the key role of information sharing and the challenges around communication in work environments. During the course of this research interview participants stated that digital tools sometimes led to tone misinterpretation and communication overload, issues that were also discussed by Byron (2008), who noted the difficulty of perceiving emotional intent in written communication. Findings suggest that although these tools streamline task management and enhance efficiency, they also have prevented spontaneous and informal “watercooler conversations”, this was traditionally seen as the foundation of workplace camaraderie and innovation. Participants repeatedly referenced how face-to-face meetings before the pandemic allowed for organic discussions and that these discussion feel overly structured. Several interviewees mentioned how these “watercooler conversations” have now been replaced by scheduled Teams calls and online meetings, which reduces spontaneity and increasing perceived barriers to initiating casual conversations. This aligns with the insights of Kraut et al. (1990), who showed the importance of proximity in fostering

informal collaboration and Bloom et al. (2013), who linked physical presence to increased productivity.

Several interviewees described scenarios in which actions were interpreted differently depending on how a message was communicated. In some cases, silence in a chat was viewed as avoidance, or a delayed reply was perceived as a sign of disrespect or disengagement. Attribution theory helps to explain these interpretations, particularly the tendency of individuals to link other individuals behaviours to internal traits while viewing their own actions as responses to external circumstances. The ambiguity within digital communication appears to amplify these attribution errors, leading to unnecessary tension, fractured collaboration, and a potential loss of goodwill. This confirms the theoretical work of Roy (2023), who argued that perception is shaped not by objective reality but by memory, context, and expectation. In hybrid environments, these distortions become more noticeable, showing the need a stronger organisational focus on perceptual awareness and bias reduction.

In remote and hybrid environments, the shift toward structured digital communication has limited the informal, interpersonal learning typically facilitated by in-person proximity. This includes the loss of spontaneous conversations, mentoring through observation, and casual knowledge sharing (Waizenegger et al., 2020).

These changes may explain why a number of participants reported that they felt unsure how to navigate interpersonal cues or that they felt socially disconnected post-Covid-19. Before remote working came into practice, employees may have passively absorbed workplace etiquette, tone and culture due to proximity they now rely heavily on explicit messaging that may lack context.

As interview participants have confirmed that communication has become less organic and more deliberate, this highlights the need for new strategies to recreate informal communication digitally or encourage them when in-person during hybrid working schedules.

Organisational strategies must find ways to encourage informal interaction within formal work structures, this could potential done by planned team in-office day, informal digital lounges or cross-functional huddles. The literature supports this with Bhati (2022)

highlighting that informal communication and cultural context are necessary for shaping employee perception and engagement.

Emotional Labour, Psychosocial Fatigue and Adaptability

Interviewees repeatedly referenced emotional strain, this is a theme that is strongly linked to communication and soft skill application. Due to having to navigate inconsistent presence across teams and managing hybrid meeting, employees reported increased levels of fatigue and stress. This emotional labour is reflective of what Goleman (1995) describes as the demand for emotional intelligence in modern workplaces. In hybrid contexts, the demand for flexibility, patience and empathy appears to have increased, this requires employees to consciously breakdown non-verbal cues and maintain relationship norms despite physical distance.

Interviewees descriptions of their own adaptability, supports Tongia et al. (2024), who highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence and adaptability as key predictors of interpersonal success and leadership effectiveness. Some interviewees described these emotional adjustments as a learning curve, one interview participant noted that it took time to reacclimate to physical office dynamics and how it became more tiring trying to read body language and communicate in person after years of digital interaction. A number of interview participants also described emotional fatigue from the dual expectations that were placed upon them, both managing interpersonal challenges and maintaining professional clarity in digital settings in hybrid teams. This was intensified by the lack of support or training provided by their organisation. One participant noted the difference between the expectation of soft skills within the organisation despite the lack of structured training or organisational support for developing them. This gap aligns with concerns raised by Moldoveanu (2024) and Bhati (2022), who warned against the belief that soft skills are intuitive and advocated for formal development structures. The emotional labour that is required to sustain team cohesion in absence of physical presence can be overwhelming. Participants felt that informal conversations and conflict resolution require more intentional effort. These findings suggest that emotional resilience is a competency that should be

acknowledged and supported through development programmes, mentoring and mental health supports.

Another possible consideration within this theme is how emotional labour is gendered and differently experienced within organisational hierarchies. Although this is not directly referenced in each interview, this topic has been discussed in other literature around organisation behaviour. For example, women are often expected to take on the burden of emotional caretaking within teams. Emotional visibility and empathy are easier to expect than to evaluate by they contribute significantly to workplace wellbeing. Organisational cultures should actively challenge these assumptions and increase their understanding of equitable emotional workloads.

Erosion of Informal Interactions and Workplace Relationships

Several interviewees reported a perceived erosion of informal workplace interaction, which has reshaped how relationships are built and maintained. Responses emphasized how social interactions during breaks, hallway conversations and social interactions during breaks have decreased. This is also discussed in Kolemba's (2024) study, which showed how virtual environments compromise trust-formation and relationship-building. Although remote work increases flexibility it does reduce interpersonal engagement. Participants acknowledged that rapport, collaboration and trust now require more effort especially in hybrid models where non-synchronous communication is dominant. Therefore the findings of this study echo wider concerns around how the loss of communication undermined workplace culture and contributes to emotional fatigue. In practice this breakdown of interpersonal connection has implications for onboarding, training and innovation. This can be linked with Majid et al. (2012) who found that without clear emphasis on teamwork and communication, individuals may fail to recognise their own soft skills gaps.

Organisations may consider approaches such as peer-learning, mentorship programmes and inter-departmental lunch and learns. These initiatives can act as soft skill incubators as they offer safe space for conversation and interpersonal feedback.

Generational and Cultural Differences in Communication

Another theme that emerged for interviewees was how different generations have different preferences in communication practices and different perceptions on communication styles. Interviewees believed that older colleagues were more likely to turn on their cameras in virtual meetings, that they prefer in-person engagement and value traditional workplace relationships. In contrast, younger colleagues seen to be more skilful digitally but that they were less inclined to seek social engagement in the workplace. This resonates with the findings from Giles et al. (2003) whose study demonstrated generational differences in communication preferences. Although not universal, these generational patterns indicate shifting expectations around workplace engagement. The younger generation's prioritisation for flexibility and autonomy can appear to older colleagues as them being disengaged or uninterested. These perceptions can cause friction within teams if they are not proactively dealt with.

Cultural differences were also discussed by participants, particularly for interviewees that are working in multinational environments. Sharma (2020) stated that perception is filtered through cultural and personal frameworks which leads to potential stereotyping, and misinterpretations. Interview participants described language barriers, misinterpretation of tone and miscommunications linked to differences in workplace norms, factors that can make collaboration more complicated and require increased emotional awareness.

To prevent cultural and generational divides, organisations should provide training and resources that improve communication awareness and flexibility.

Organisational Support, Leadership and Gaps in Training

Interviewees acknowledge the increased importance of skills, many highlighted the lack of organisational initiatives or formal training to support them. Participants felt that the transition back to the often occurred without clear instruction or coaching. This aligns with the article by Padney and Shukla (202?) that noted that organisations undervalue soft skills and often leave employees to develop them without any guidance or training. Several participants indicated the need for structured training around hybrid communication and boundary setting, areas where misunderstandings are most likely to occur. Others called for

interdepartmental training to restore cohesion. These findings show the importance of effective leadership. Effective leaders, as described by interviewees, modelled inclusivity, empathy and transparency. This echoes the work of Goleman (1998) and Bass and Avolio (1994), who noted the importance of transformational leadership's role in fostering employee growth and psychological safety. Participants who reported high satisfaction with leadership often mentioned that regular communication, feedback mechanisms, and emotional availability of managers as success factors.

Organisational development teams must consider implementing soft skill audits and coaching programmes. These could help to reinforce behavioural expectations and create safe environments for feedback and reflection. As highlighted in the literature, particularly by Moldoveanu (2024), the future of soft skill development will likely depend on moving from intuition to intentionality, ensuring these skills are not left to chance or personality. Crucially, these support structures must be evaluated for inclusivity and accessibility. Just as hybrid work has restructured communication channels, organisations must now reimagine learning ecosystems to support this diversity.

Participants expressed a shared recognition that soft skills were necessary but not adequately supported. While their organisations may have acknowledged the importance of teamwork, effective communication, and empathy in principle, there was a notable absence of structured training, performance frameworks or development opportunities that prioritised these capabilities. A number of participants felt that they had been expected to adapt to hybrid communication norms on their own, often through trial and error, without clear guidance or feedback. This reinforces the arguments made by Moldoveanu (2024) and Pandey and Shukla (2020), who discuss that soft skills are undervalued despite their importance.

The idea that soft skills are intuitive, natural, or fixed is potentially harmful. Soft skills are highly dependent on context and must be continuously developed, especially in dynamic environments with technological change, social diversity, and distributed teams. The insights gained from this study suggest that organisations need to adopt an intentional, evidence-based approach to soft skill development, one that includes mentoring, coaching, and inclusive training.

Perception, Attribution and Workplace Judgements

The data reflected recurring tensions in how individuals interpret others' behaviour in hybrid settings which is often influenced by perceptual bias. Some participants noted a decrease in empathy and tolerance, with judgments being made about communication preferences without full context. These challenges align with attribution theory as outlined by Sharma (2020), where individuals tend to overemphasise internal characteristics when interpreting others' actions while attributing their own behaviour to external factors.

In hybrid environments, where visibility is reduced, these biases may become more obvious. For instance, the absence of a colleague from a video call may be interpreted as disengagement, when it could be due to technological or accessibility issues. Likewise, delayed responses can be perceived as indifference or disrespect, reinforcing negative attribution cycles.

Roy (2023) notes the role of memory and perceptual framing in decision-making, factors that shape how past experiences influence future judgements. The findings of this study suggest that raising awareness of these biases, through training and coaching as this can help to mitigate their impact and foster more inclusive and empathetic workplaces.

This discussion highlights how hybrid and remote work models have not eroded the value of soft skills but highlighted the need for formal development.

The emerging post-pandemic workplace requires new methods of interpersonal effectiveness, one that blends both emotional intelligence and digital fluency.

Communication is not just about information exchanges, it is an emotionally nuanced practice that requires continuous learning and development. Organisations that wish to foster collaborative and resilient teams must invest in communication strategies, empathetic leadership and structured soft skills training that is inclusive. These interventions will support long-term productivity and engagement and productivity in a changing work environment whilst also preventing fatigue and disconnection described by interviewees. An integrated approach that includes human-centric values with technological advancement will be key to sustaining workplace effectiveness.

Future research could explore industry differences and develop frameworks that measure soft-skill development in hybrid teams. Research could also look at how technological advancements like AI can be used without eroding interpersonal connection.

This study highlights the need to review how we support human connection in increasingly digital professional landscapes. Ultimately, this study highlights the need to rethink how we support human connection in increasingly digital and fragmented professional landscapes.

Conclusion

The findings of this dissertation confirm that changes to working structures, particularly the rise of remote and hybrid work, have massively reshaped how soft skills, especially communication, are both demonstrated and perceived within professional environments. While the technological infrastructures that enable hybrid work have created new opportunities for flexibility and accessibility, they have also challenged the basis of interpersonal interaction that were once taken for granted in office-based environments. The core presumption emerging from this study is that soft skills are no longer supplementary traits that enhance professional performance but that they have become essential capabilities that organisations must recognise, cultivate, and support if they are to function effectively in an increasingly complex working environment.

The interviews conducted as part of this qualitative study consistently revealed that while communication remained an important part of the participants' roles, the way in which it was carried out had changed. Participants frequently spoke about the difficulty of interpreting tone and intent in digital communications, particularly in email and on messaging platforms. Where face-to-face interactions once allowed for immediate clarification, shared understanding, and the ability to more easily pick up emotional cues, digital mediums often led to misinterpretation and emotional fatigue. This supports earlier findings by researchers such as Byron (2008), who highlighted the risk of emotional miscommunication in text-based methods of communication. What the present study adds is a direct and lived account of how this dynamic has evolved in hybrid structures, where formal communication has replaced informal interaction, and where spontaneity is no longer part of the working day.

A recurring experience across participants was the erosion of informal communication and the weakening of workplace relationships. Several interviewees described how casual conversations that once happened naturally in shared spaces now require planning, scheduling, and purpose. These changes have implications, they affect how trust is built, how new employees integrate into the organisational culture, and how knowledge is shared. The loss of such interactions appears to have reduced opportunities for emotional connection and mentorship, both of which play key roles in the development of soft skills. The findings of this research echo and extend on studies like those by Kraut et al. (1990) and Kolembe (2024), who argue that informal communication is essential for social cohesion, for learning and for collaboration. In the absence of this layer of interaction, communication becomes more transactional and requires employees to adapt by relying more heavily on emotional intelligence and digital etiquette.

The participants in this study also noted the emotional and cognitive demands of working in hybrid environments. Interviewees expressed an increased sense of responsibility for managing not only their own emotional state but also that of their colleagues. This aligns with Goleman's (1998) theory that emotional intelligence is a core leadership competency, but the findings from this study suggest that this expectation has now extended to all employees, not just those in leadership roles. Empathy, active listening, and situational awareness are critical tools for workplace success. Yet, these tools are often left undeveloped, and unsupported by the organisations that rely on them.

This study also found that perceptions of communication style and competency were heavily influenced by generational and cultural context. Younger employees, many of whom entered the workforce during the pandemic, appeared more comfortable with digital tools and communication, but less comfortable with in-person engagement and the unstructured social dynamics of the office. In contrast, older employees often expressed frustration with the perceived lack of initiative or engagement shown by younger colleagues in face-to-face settings. These generational differences were not just about preference but also reflected differences in socialisation and workplace expectation. This reinforces the need for cross-generational learning strategies around communication norms. Similarly, cultural and language differences added to these challenges, particularly for non-native speakers who described heightened fatigue and self-consciousness when navigating English-language

interactions. These findings align with prior work by Giles et al. (2003) on intergenerational communication and by Sharma (2020) on the impact of perceptions, but this study adds context to these insights within the environment of hybrid working, where misunderstandings can more easily remain unaddressed.

Although the findings of this research are robust, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The participant group, though diverse in background and role, was relatively small and limited to professional environments. Broader studies that include other industries, organisational sizes, and international perspectives could provide additional insights or reveal different dynamics. Additionally, the research was framed primarily from the perspective of employees. Incorporating the views of trainers, senior management and HR professionals could add to these findings and develop more complete organisational responses.

By centring the lived experiences of employees and using thematic analysis to find recurring pattern, it provides a particular understanding around how soft skills are evolving in today's workplace. It challenges the idea that hybrid and remote work are neutral or purely logistical changes and instead views them as major changes in the social and emotional infrastructure of the workplace. Communication, in this context, is not just about sharing information, it is also about navigating ambiguity, building trust, fostering inclusion, and sustaining human connection across fragmented workplaces.

The implications of this study are clear: organisations that want to thrive in a hybrid world must treat soft skills as core competencies, that are worthy of the same investment and attention as technical capabilities. This includes redefining what effective communication looks like in a hybrid environment and designing training that is relevant to the digital tools and interpersonal realities of modern work. It also means creating psychologically safe spaces where people can share feedback, without fear of judgement or exclusion.

Finally, the future of work is not only digital, it is perceptual, emotional and relational. The ability to communicate clearly, connect meaningfully, and collaborate across will define success in the changing workplace landscape. Organisations, educators, and policymakers should recognise that supporting soft skills is a strategic necessity. The challenge is no longer just to adapt to hybrid work, but to humanise it, to ensure that even in a world of screens

and schedules, we continue to listen with intent, communicate with clarity and lead with empathy.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 - Qualitative Interview Questionnaire

These questions aim to understand how working structures influence communication and soft skills in the workplace.

Section 1: How do people perceive their soft skills after remote working

1. Since returning to the office after working remotely, how would you describe any changes you've noticed in your communication or interpersonal skills?
2. Can you share a situation where you felt your soft skills—like teamwork, adaptability, or emotional intelligence—were especially challenged or strengthened back in the office environment?
3. How confident do you feel in your ability to connect and collaborate with colleagues now, compared to during remote work, and why?

Section 2: How do people perceive soft skills of their colleagues/ stakeholders after remote working?

1. Since returning to the office, have you noticed any changes in how your colleagues or stakeholders communicate or collaborate? Can you give an example?
2. How would you describe your perception on the level of empathy, adaptability, or teamwork shown by others now compared to before returning to the office?
3. Have your expectations or perceptions of others' soft skills—like listening, conflict resolution, or relationship-building—shifted since the transition back to in-person work?

Section 3: What supports would be helpful

1. What kind of support or training do you think would help you strengthen your own soft skills now that you're back in the office?
2. Are there any resources or practices you believe would help your team or stakeholders improve how they communicate and collaborate in person?
3. Looking back at the shift from office to remote to in-office/hybrid work, what kinds of support—formal or informal—would have made the transition easier in terms of reconnecting with others?

Final Questions:

1. Is there any additional information that you would like to add that was not covered in the other questions?
2. Do you have any additional thoughts on this topic that you would like to share?

Appendix 2 – Consent Form

Research Participant Consent Form

Please read the following statements carefully. By ticking the checkbox, you confirm that you understand and agree to all points listed below.

Section 1

1. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. Required to answer. Single choice.

Yes

No

2.1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. I understand that participation involves an interview that will take place over Microsoft Teams. I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

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

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

7. 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.

8. I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in this dissertation.

9. 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.

10. I understand that interview recordings will be deleted immediately once they have been transcribed, and all potentially identifying information will be deleted from interview transcripts.

11. I understand that signed consent forms and interview transcripts will be stored on a password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account that only the student and their supervisor will have access to.

12. 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.

13. I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above. This is only until identifying information has been removed. After this time, it will not be possible to access the information I have provided as the information will have become anonymised.

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

I confirm that I understand and agree to all of the above.

Section 2

Contact information

Contact information for myself as the researcher is as follows: Gillian Edghill, my email is x23156961@student.ncirl.ie and the dissertation supervisor for this module is Assoc. Professor in Psychology, Dr David Mothersill who is available at David.mothersill@ncirl.ie

3.Full name. Required to answer. Single line text.

Enter your answer

4.Today's date. Required to answer. Date.

Please input date (dd/MM/yyyy)

Appendix 3 – Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information sheet template

TITLE OF THE STUDY: The perception on how working structures have impacted soft-skills with a focus on communication styles in the workplace.

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide 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

My name is Gillian Edghill, I am a final year part-time MBA student who works as a HR Manager for a logistics company in Ireland and the UK, I have 6 years' experience in Human Resources and prior to that I spent 7 years working in Accountancy and Finance. I have studied business, done several chartered accountancy exams, I have a degree in HRM strategy and practice and an advanced diploma in Irish and UK employment law. I have a keen interest in many areas of business including organisational psychology, human resources, and ethics. This study combines many of my interests and I am eager to understand individuals' who are working in professional services perception on how working structures have impacted soft-skills and their viewpoints on this. This research will form my dissertation as part of my MBA course.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

Taking part in this research will involve a Microsoft Teams interview where we will discuss your perception on how working structured have impacted soft skills in the workplace, both your skills and the skills of the stakeholders that you engage with. This session will be audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription interview recordings will be deleted immediately once they have been transcribed, and all potentially identifying information will be deleted from interview transcripts. Signed consent forms and interview transcripts will be stored on a password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account that only the student and their supervisor will have access to.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

This research requires individuals who work in professional services that worked full-time in the office prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, then during the pandemic were required to transition to working remotely and have since gone back into the office in a hybrid or full-time capacity.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

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

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

There are no direct benefits but taking part may help you, the participant gain insight into your thoughts on this issue. There is not expected that there are any risks, but in the unlikely event that you the participant become distressed while conducting the interview, you may exit any time by notifying the researcher and closing Teams. Contact details of relevant supports will be provided at the end of the interview.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

Taking part is confidential and all transcripts and consent forms will be stored on a password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account that only the student/researcher and their supervisor has access to.

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

Interview recordings and Consent Forms completed and submitted over Microsoft Forms will be stored on a password protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account that only myself as the student and my dissertation supervisor will have access to. Interview recordings will be deleted immediately once they have been transcribed, and all potentially identifying information will be deleted from interview transcripts. Anonymised data will be stored on NCI servers in line with NCI's data retention policy, and that it is envisaged that anonymised data will also be uploaded to a secondary data repository to facilitate validation and replication, in line with Open Science best practice and conventions. In any report on the results of this research the participant's identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing their name and disguising any details of their interview which may reveal their identity or the identity of people they speak about.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The results of this study will be used purely for the purposes of my dissertation. However, the results may be presented in a conference paper, presentation or in a journal article.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

Contact information for myself as the researcher is as follows: Gillian Edghill, my email is x23156961@student.ncirl.ie and the dissertation supervisor for this module is Assoc. Professor in Psychology, Dr David Morthersill who is available at David.mothersill@ncirl.ie

THANK YOU

Appendix 4 - Debriefing Sheet

Study Title: The perception on how working structures have impacted soft skills with a focus on communication styles in the workplace

Researcher: Gillian Edghill
MBA Student, National College of Ireland
Email: x23156961@student.ncirl.ie

Supervisor: Dr David Mothersill
Assoc. Professor in Psychology
Email: david.mothersill@ncirl.ie

Thank You for Your Participation

Thank you for taking part in this research study. Your contribution is valuable and will support a greater understanding of how evolving working structures—such as remote and hybrid models—have influenced soft-skills and communication styles in the professional services sector.

Purpose of the Study

This research seeks to explore individual experiences and perceptions around how workplace structures have affected soft skills, particularly communication, post-COVID-19. Your insights will help form part of a dissertation project for an MBA degree at the National College of Ireland.

What Happens Next?

- Your interview has been audio-recorded and will be transcribed for analysis.
- All identifying information will be removed from transcripts.
- Audio files will be permanently deleted once transcription is complete.
- Transcripts will be securely stored on a password-protected National College of Ireland OneDrive account, accessible only to the researcher and supervisor.
- Anonymised data may be retained and used for future academic purposes in accordance with Open Science best practices.

Right to Withdraw

You may withdraw from the study or request removal of your data up to **two weeks after the interview**. If you choose to do so, please contact the researcher at the email above.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

All data will be treated confidentially and stored securely. No personal identifiers will be used in any publications or reports. You retain the right to access your data before it is anonymised, in line with Freedom of Information legislation.

Support

If participation in the study has raised any concerns or distress, please reach out to a trusted support network or consider contacting:

Samaritans Ireland

Available 24/7, free of charge

Phone: **116 123**

Email: jo@samaritans.ie

Website: www.samaritans.ie

Further Questions or Clarification

Please don't hesitate to contact me or my supervisor using the details above if you have any questions now or in the future.