



Understanding Leadership Dynamics in Relation to Employee  
Engagement in Contemporary Virtual Work Environments in Ireland

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This dissertation is submitted for the fulfilment of Master Degree in Business  
Administration

Submitted to the National College of Ireland

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## **ABSTRACT**

Reviewing the literature on virtual work, employee engagement, and virtual leadership, this research proposal aims to demonstrate that there is a gap in existing research on this significant area of study, justifying further analysis and making it a suitable focus for an MBA dissertation.

The author employs a grounded theory approach to examine data gathered from interviews with virtual employees in Ireland, aiming to explore and address the central research question: “How leadership need to evolve to influence employee engagement in Ireland’s contemporary virtual work environment?” through an inductive analysis process.

Drawing on these interviews with professionals in Ireland’s virtual workforce, the research identifies empathy, trust, autonomy, and emotional support as key leadership qualities that contribute to employee engagement. The study introduces Adaptive Relational Leadership style. A new leadership style that underscores the significance of responsive and purposeful communication in virtual work environments, stating that leaders who tailor their communication to individual preferences and cultural differences, while making effective use of digital platforms can foster stronger team connections and overall performance. The research advances current leadership theory by offering practical strategies for cultivating emotionally intelligent and digitally capable leadership. Further investigation is encouraged to examine how this model applies across various organisational structures and cultural environments.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of virtual work has existed for decades, it was not until the COVID-19 pandemic and rapid tech advancements that it became widespread. In Ireland, a survey by the Western Development Commission (2023) found that 59% of respondents work in a hybrid model, while 38% work fully remotely. While leadership's impact in traditional settings is well-documented, there is still limited understanding of how leaders should adjust their approach to support engagement and satisfaction in virtual environments post-pandemic.

This research explores whether Irish organisational leaders need to adapt their leadership styles to maintain employee engagement in virtual contexts. It addresses gaps in existing studies, which have focused on traditional workforce structures (O'Brien, 2020; Lima, 2021). Although some Irish research has looked at leadership styles (English, 2017), most was conducted before virtual work became mainstream (Froese et al., 2025).

Using a qualitative approach, this study draws on current research in virtual work, leadership, and engagement to offer new insights. It aims to support leaders in keeping their teams connected and motivated in digital settings.

This chapter outlines the study's background, problem statement, purpose, research questions, and key assumptions.

### 1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Back in 2013, a survey by International Data Intelligence predicted that one-third of the global workforce would eventually work virtually (Brunelle, 2013). Virtual work refers to using digital communication tools to allow employees and leaders to carry out tasks from any location (Pérez et al., 2004). However, it was not until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 that virtual work became a necessity, reshaping how organisations operate (Cooke et al., 2020). With faster internet and secure VPN access, employees could attend meetings via video calls and work virtually, leading to a major shift in workplace norms (Lapova & Delera, 2021).

In Ireland, only 23% of workers had virtual experience before the pandemic. That number surged to 80% during lockdowns (CSO, 2021). A 2023 study found that over 90% of respondents preferred hybrid or full virtual setups and considered it a key factor when choosing employers (McCarthy et al., 2023). Ireland now ranks second in Europe for virtual work, with 21.4% of employees working from home, well above the EU average of 8.9% (Eurostat, 2023).

The sudden shift forced both leaders and employees to reassess their work and personal lives (Carney, 2021). While virtual work offers benefits like reduced office costs, better work-life balance, broader talent access, and higher productivity, many organisations were unprepared for the transition (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). This created new challenges for leadership and organisational strategy (Antonakis, 2002).

## 1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Leadership is essential for sustaining employee performance, engagement, and well-being, regardless of where or how people work (Bartsch et al., 2020). Yet, managing virtual teams presents new challenges. A global survey by Statista and Forbes found that half of leaders struggle with managing virtual teams, and over half face communication issues (Lunendonk, 2025). Meanwhile, 46% of employees feel their leaders are not equipped to handle virtual team dynamics, and 53% express concerns about how their productivity is assessed, calling for clearer evaluation methods and stronger trust from leadership (Barnes et al., 2024; Ashkenas, 2025).

Without physical presence, building trust and accountability becomes harder, and team cohesion can suffer (Marjolein, 2023; Vaishak, 2024). These factors make it more difficult to maintain high levels of engagement (Larson et al., 2020). Engagement remains a top priority for leaders, as it directly influences organisational success and competitiveness (Strom et al., 2013). In virtual settings, the quality of relationships between managers and their teams plays a key role in job satisfaction, retention, performance, and commitment (Golden, 2006; Golden & Veiga, 2008).

The business world is increasingly recognizing the viability of virtual work (Barrero et al., 2020). Despite this shift, much of the research on virtual leadership, employee engagement, and work behaviours has been conducted in traditional work environments and before the COVID-19 pandemic. In Ireland, studies in real virtual settings remain limited, with few contributions from English (2017) and Kieran et al. (2023).

Given the scale of change since COVID-19, more research is needed to understand how leaders can adapt and effectively engage virtual teams.

### 1.3 PURPOSE

As virtual work grows in Ireland, leadership styles must shift to keep employees engaged. Traditional approaches relying on physical presence are less effective (Makowski, 2023). Instead, trust, clear digital communication, and employee autonomy are key (English, 2017).

Encouraging collaboration, psychological safety, and structured online interactions helps maintain engagement (Kohntopp & McCann, 2020). With virtual work reshaping how teams operate, leaders need to adjust their strategies to stay connected and motivate staff.

### 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

Virtual employees are over twice as likely to feel disengaged compared to on-site staff (Armano, 2021). Virtual work requires stronger leadership to sustain motivation and connection.

Much of the existing research on virtual leadership precedes the pandemic when virtual work was less widespread and digital tools were limited. The pandemic accelerated virtual work, making it a core part of organisational life. Leaders now depend on platforms like video calls and messaging apps, but there is still a lack of research on how to use these tools effectively for long-term leadership success (Alonzo & Oo, 2023).

The impact of virtual work on employee engagement, especially when referring to leadership style, has been contentious, indicating a gap in research. This leads the author to ask the following question:

“How leadership need to evolve to influence employee engagement in Ireland’s contemporary virtual work environment?”

And sub questions:

” What is the impact of virtual work on employee's engagement and how can the leader mitigate any negative impact in Ireland?”

“How effective are existing leadership styles in engaging virtual employees in Ireland?

## 1.5 ASUMPTIONS

This study assumes that leadership is vital for sustaining employee engagement in Ireland’s changing virtual work landscape. As virtual and hybrid models become the norm, traditional leadership based on physical oversight may lose effectiveness (Barnes et al., 2024; Bravo-Duarte, 2024). Instead, behaviours like building trust, clear communication, and supporting autonomy are likely to influence engagement (Zhang, 2025).

Virtual work brings challenges such as limited communication, isolation, and reduced collaboration (Silva, 2022). To overcome these, leaders must adjust their approach, using digital tools and flexible management styles (Kohntopp & McCann, 2021). Autonomy also matters, when paired with structured support and motivation, it can boost engagement (Swe & Lu, 2019).

Technology is central to this shift, requiring leaders to adopt effective platforms for communication and collaboration (Tian & Zhang, 2020).

As Ireland’s work culture evolves, this study aims to offer practical guidance for organisations adapting to virtual leadership.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary objective of this literate review is to show evidence that there is a gap in relation to leadership in the context of employee engagement in virtual working environments in Ireland.

The analysis begins by looking at how virtual work has evolved over time, highlighting its pros and cons for both companies and their employees. Then, it shifts to explore what drives employee engagement and the results it can produce. Finally, it introduces the idea of virtual leadership, examining different leadership styles and those most often recommended in academic research to help improve engagement and satisfaction in virtual work settings.

### 2.1 VIRTUAL WORK

#### 2.1.1 DEFINITION

A virtual working environment is characterized by three key features: the absence of a shared physical workspace, reliance on information and communication technologies (ICT) for work processes, and fragmented interactions and connections among workers (Morrison-Smith, 2020). The feasibility of virtual work is attributed to advancements in modern communication and information technologies, including computers, the internet, video conferencing applications, and tools for virtual collaboration. Unlike traditional work, virtual work allows employees to complete their tasks without the necessity of being physically present in the office (Zelma, 2024). Alternatively, they can operate from any location while having access to essential equipment and internet connectivity (Dingel & Neiman, 2020).

Virtual work has existed for decades under various terms like teleworking, virtual work, and hybrid work (Raghuram et al., 2001). However, virtual work environments offer a broader perspective, emphasizing technology as the key medium of interaction (Krishnamoorthy, 2022). While virtual work gained traction, it faced criticism, Yahoo's CEO Marissa Mayer eliminated it in 2013 due to productivity concerns (Peck, 2015).

The term hybrid work, emerging post-COVID-19, represents a blend of traditional and flexible arrangements, though scholars argue its definition remains too narrow (Krishnamoorthy, 2022).

Future workspaces will integrate homes, offices, shared spaces, and informal locations (Choudhary, 2021). Additionally, non-work environmental factors such as lighting, noise levels, workspace availability, and privacy impact performance (Bersin, 2021a; Lorenzo Mura et al., 2023; Moos et al., 2008).

Given these shifts in how work is structured, the term *virtual working environment* is used throughout this study to reflect the ongoing evolution of work practices. It encompasses both fully remote setups and hybrid models, capturing the broader, long-term adoption of digital workspaces.

## 2.1.2 VIRTUAL WORK EVOLUTION

Virtual work has evolved significantly since its inception. Nilles et al. (1972) introduced the concept, proposing a framework where employees could work virtually using contemporary communication tools (Zaika et al., 2024). By the 1980s, virtual work gained traction, leading to corporations specializing in virtual services. Toffler (1980) envisioned the electronic cottage, eliminating commuting, while Drucker (1989) predicted that commuting would become irrelevant (Streitfeld, 2020).

The 1990s internet boom made telecommuting more accessible, enabling virtual employment (Zaika et al., 2024). By the early 2000s, firms like IBM, Sun Microsystems, and Cisco adopted virtual work models (Kurland, 1999). In 2009, Cisco reported \$277 million in productivity savings from its virtual strategy (Dubie, 2009).

By 2010, Eurofound (2016) data showed one-fifth of European workers operated virtually, rising to three in ten by 2015. Growth was fueled by technological advancements, knowledge-based industries, and increased female workforce participation (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). However, virtual work remained secondary, subject to revocation if productivity concerns arose (Peck, 2015).

In 2020, COVID-19 accelerated global virtual work adoption turning it into an economic necessity (Kniffin et al., 2020; Sahut & Lissillour, 2023). Virtual work became central to Industry 4.0, reshaping business models beyond technology (Mkhize & Mkhize, 2024). This shift marked a

defining moment for the labor market (Zelma, 2024), with organisations and employees adapting to unfamiliar virtual structures.

### 2.1.3 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL WORKING

Virtual work has enabled employees to work from any location around the globe (Cook, 2023). Simultaneously, it offers companies both competitive benefits and novel challenges (Arunprasad et al., 2022).

The rapid adoption of virtual work models by businesses has led to a growing body of research examining the associated advantages and disadvantages of virtual work (Ferreira et al, 2021; Ingusci et al, 2023; Beño, 2021; Rakhimjonov, 2024). Irrespective of the definitions of virtual work, there is consensus among academics on the nature of virtual work, encompassing both its advantages and disadvantages (Ingusci et al., 2023).

#### 2.1.3.1 VIRTUAL WORK ADVANTAGES

Virtual work has long been associated with benefits like flexible schedules, fewer disruptions, and time saved from commuting (Bartik et al., 2024). It also allows employees to better manage family responsibilities, avoid unwanted social interactions, and enjoy a more relaxed work environment (Yucel & Laß, I., 2024). Studies show that virtual workers often report higher job satisfaction (Chen et al, 2024).

Additionally, research highlights other advantages, including lower commuting costs, improved work-life balance, especially for those with dependents, greater autonomy, reduced supervision, and better relationships with colleagues (Ferreira et al., 2021; Ingusci et al., 2023; Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Working from home has also fostered empathy among team members and reshaped how managers and employees view virtual work (Aczel et al., 2021).

Higher satisfaction linked to virtual work has been shown to boost engagement and productivity (Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2021), with flexible hours playing a key role (Willcocks, 2020). As a result, many employees now prefer companies that offer virtual options. A randomized study found that virtual work had especially positive effects for women, including better productivity, well-being, and time for family, due to improved time management and work organisation (Angelici & Profeta, 2020).

### 2.1.3.2 VIRTUAL WORK DISADVANTAGES

In contrast, virtual work presents notable challenges for both individuals and organizations, particularly in maintaining employee engagement (Dhanesh & Picherit-Duthler, 2021). Physical separation from colleagues and the absence of a traditional office environment can lead to isolation and a weakened sense of team cohesion (Parker et al., 2021). Additionally, the "autonomy paradox" emerges, while virtual work offers flexibility, it can also create erratic work patterns influenced by personal ambition or digital oversight, often disrupting work-life balance due to blurred boundaries (Vargas et al., 2020).

Leadership faces hurdles in fostering strong relationships without face-to-face interaction (Kelley & Kelloway, 2012). Morrison-Smith (2020) highlights further obstacles in global virtual teams, such as heavy reliance on technology, coordination costs, and collaboration difficulties. Harvard DCE (2025) also points to communication gaps, trust issues, and productivity concerns as major barriers in virtual team management.

Online communication lacks the richness of in-person exchanges, often leading to delays or misunderstandings (Avolio et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2020). These barriers can erode group identity, trust, and engagement, while also affecting productivity and alignment with organizational values (Ford et al., 2017; Fuhrmans, 2021; Molino et al., 2020; Angelici & Profeta, 2020).

## 2.2 EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

### 2.2.1 DEFINITION

Employee engagement is increasingly viewed as a strategic priority by organisations worldwide, given its perceived role in driving performance and competitiveness. In Ireland, recent findings from Adare's HR Barometer Series 8.2 show that 51% of organisations place engagement at the forefront of their agenda as they approached 2025 (Adare, 2024).

The concept itself gained traction in the 1990s, due to Kahn's work on personal engagement, which he described as the physical, emotional, and cognitive involvement of individuals in their work roles (Kahn, 1990). Since then, the term has attracted attention across disciplines such as psychology, management, and organisational behaviour, though scholars still debate its definition

and measurement (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Bridger, 2015). This lack of consensus presents challenges for employers and policymakers who aim to use engagement as a lever for improving performance. Over time, several definitions have emerged: Kahn's original idea (CIPD, 2022), Schuck's view of engagement as the opposite of burnout (Schuck, 2011), and the Utrecht Group's framing of it as a state marked by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). More recently, CIPD (2022) defined engagement as a combination of emotional commitment, motivation, and connection to the organisation. Numerous studies support the link between engagement, improved well-being, performance, and retention (Christian et al., 2011; Crawford et al., 2010), while others highlight its role in driving competitive advantage and financial outcomes (Albrecht et al., 2015; Barrick et al., 2015; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Salanova et al., 2005; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). In hybrid work environments, CIPD (2022) emphasises the importance of reengagement to maintain cohesion and productivity. However, the absence of a comprehensive systematic review (Bailey et al., 2017) raises concerns about the robustness of current strategies. The World Scientific and Engineering Academy and Society (WSEAS) conducted a systematic literature review on employee engagement and its effect on organisational performance, recognizing constraints within existing research (Kurniawati & Raharja, 2023).

## 2.2.2 OUTCOMES OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

While definitions of employee engagement vary, its impact on organisational performance is well-established. Gallup's 2020 meta-analysis of 276 organisations and 2.7 million employees showed that engaged teams had 81% less absenteeism, 64% fewer injuries, and 23% higher profitability (Harter et al., 2024). In contrast, disengagement contributes to deficient performance and high turnover, costing the global economy an estimated \$9.6 trillion annually, about 9% of global GDP (Gallup, 2025).

Kahn (1990) defined engagement as the personal investment of energy and identity into work roles. Bailey et al. (2017) linked it to job satisfaction and commitment, while Witemeyer (2013) noted traits like initiative, collaboration, and knowledge sharing. Lartey and Randall (2022) emphasized intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and organisational support as key engagement drivers.

Engagement also benefits employees. It reduces burnout and builds resilience (Hakanen et al., 2018), with dedication and absorption linked to better mental health (Brown & Pashniak, 2021;

Svenson et al., 2021). However, over-engagement can harm work-life balance, making recovery and detachment essential (Gifford & Young, 2021).

In summary, engagement drives retention, productivity, and well-being. Organisations that foster it through meaningful work, recognition, and supportive leadership are better equipped to succeed in today's evolving work environments.

### 2.2.3 DRIVERS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Identifying what drives employee engagement is crucial for improving organisational performance. Baley et al. (2017), in a review of 155 studies, found that job resources, positive mindsets, and supportive leadership all contribute to stronger engagement. Saks (2019) added factors like job design, recognition, supervisor support, and organisational justice in his engagement model.

Wollard & Shuck (2011) grouped 42 drivers into personal traits, such as self-esteem, optimism and organisational elements like feedback and culture. Other sources, including Hewitt, Gallup, and Gibbons, point to management style, career growth, recognition, teamwork, and fair compensation as key contributors (Popli, 2016).

Relationships at work also matter. Hameduddin & Lee (2019) found that strong connections with colleagues and managers improve employee experience. Lemon (2019) highlighted the role of clear communication in aligning staff with company goals, while Shen & Jiang (2019) stressed leadership transparency through regular updates and feedback.

Rai (2018) used the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model to show how job resources and training can enhance engagement, especially under pressure. Albrecht et al. (2018) identified six organisational resources, HR practices, leadership, goals, adaptability, strategy, and autonomy, recommending involving employees in decision-making and aligning efforts with company strategy.

Shelke & Shaikh (2022) found that workplace happiness boosts engagement, acting as a link between engagement drivers and employee commitment.

By combining well-being initiatives with engagement strategies, organisations can build loyalty and support long-term growth.

## 2.3 VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP

### 2.3.1 LEADERSHIP DEFINITION

Leadership has long captured scholarly attention and continues to be a central concern as workplaces adapt to technological and cultural shifts (Antonakis & Day, 2017). Historical models, such as the priest-led administrative systems of the Sumerians around 25 BC, laid early groundwork for leadership thought (Estrada, 2007). In the 19th century, Galton (1869) argued that leadership was an innate quality, reserved for those with exceptional traits. However, contemporary perspectives suggest that leadership can be cultivated through structured training and organizational development (Daft, 2006).

Over time, a wide array of leadership theories have emerged, reflecting its critical role across industries (Deng et al., 2022; Asif et al., 2019). Despite the breadth of research, scholars have yet to agree on a single definition. Still, certain behaviours, such as effective communication, adaptability, and ethical decision-making are consistently linked to successful leadership outcomes (Gandolfi, 2016).

Conceptualizations of leadership have evolved significantly. Tannenbaum and Massarik (1957) emphasized interpersonal influence, while Burns (1978) introduced the idea of value alignment between leaders and followers. Hersey et al. (1979) described leadership as a reciprocal process, later models by Zaccaro and Klimoski (2001) and Derue et al. (2011) focused on task execution, team dynamics, and performance outcomes. More recently, Northouse (2016) defined leadership as the ability to guide a group toward a shared goal, reflecting a synthesis of earlier theories.

Leadership effectiveness depends on strategic competencies, communication, and inspiration (Kozminski et al., 2022), though context-specific variations exist (Antonakis & Day, 2017). Measuring effectiveness remains a challenge, particularly within virtual environments (Hao, 2024).

### 2.3.2 LEADERSHIP STYLE

Leadership style refers to the deliberate way a leader guides a team toward a shared goal that differs from the current state (Gandolfi & Stone, 2016). It reflects a mix of personal traits, emotional intelligence, and background influences. Understanding one's style is important for growth and for evaluating its impact on others. No single style fits all, different situations and teams require different approaches (Edleston, 2023).

Since the 1930s, scholars have studied leadership styles to better understand how they shape organisational outcomes (Ismail et al., 2015). Research shows that a leader's style plays a key role in the success of virtual work (Usama et al., 2025). The right approach can reduce or even eliminate the negative effects of physical separation (Nielson & Gahlwat, 2012; Luyiggo, 2024).

### 2.3.3 THEORETICAL VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP MODELS

Organisations rely on leaders to create environments that foster employee engagement (Nikolova et al., 2019). Studies consistently show that leadership style and behaviour play a significant role in shaping engagement. Petrou et al. (2018) found moderate to strong correlations between different leadership styles and employee engagement. Leadership theory has evolved alongside changes in workplace culture and organisational needs.

While traditional leadership has been widely studied, research on leading virtual teams is still emerging. Recent studies point to clear differences between in-person and virtual leadership, especially in the skills and behaviours needed to succeed (Greimer et al., 2023; Shirish et al., 2023).

Earlier models focused on autocratic, bureaucratic, and laissez-faire styles. Over time, the focus shifted toward more collaborative approaches like transformational and transactional leadership (Ismail et al., 2015).

#### 2.3.3.1 TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Transformational leadership is widely regarded as a model where leaders inspire and motivate employees to pursue both personal growth and organisational goals through meaningful change (Bass & Riggio, 2006). It encourages individuals to align with the organisation's vision, often

placing collective interests above personal ones (Sparks, 2022). Originally introduced by Burns (1978) in a political context, the concept was later adapted by Bass (1990) for organisational use, highlighting psychological mechanisms and introducing measurable components.

Bass's framework identifies four core traits: charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Scholars like Freeman (2017) and Gupta (2025) argue that transformational leaders build strong team identity, communicate a clear vision, and embody shared values. Empirical research supports its impact. Top et al. (2020) found that inspirational motivation and personalized support improve employee performance. Shahid (2024) noted that leaders who apply all four traits foster commitment to change and align teams with strategic goals. Transformational leadership also drives innovation (Getnet et al., 2025).

However, it's not without criticism. Some warn it can lead to over-reliance on leaders, potentially encouraging authoritarian tendencies if not balanced ethically (Alatawi, 2017). Its effectiveness also varies across industries and cultures (Chaplin-Cheyne, 2023), and the constant push for change may cause burnout (Eisenberg et al., 2019).

To address these concerns, many advocate blending transformational and transactional leadership. This hybrid model offers structure and accountability while maintaining vision and motivation (Ali et al., 2004), making it more adaptable to diverse organisational needs.

#### *2.3.3.2 TRANSACTIONAL LEADERSHIP*

Transactional leadership, introduced by Hollander in 1978 (as cited by Ali et al., 2023), is based on a system of rewards and penalties to ensure compliance (Layek & Koodamara, 2024). It operates through mutual expectations and ongoing negotiation, focusing on efficiency, structure, and performance rather than innovation. In this model, leadership is viewed as a social exchange where both parties benefit (Dong, 2023), with rewards used to drive results (Nurlina, 2022).

Research supports its effectiveness in maintaining workflow and operational consistency. Devie et al. (2015) found it useful for knowledge transfer and building competitive advantages like speed and reliability. Zahoor et al. (2024) showed it encourages both tacit and explicit knowledge sharing, especially in competitive environments.

However, the model has limitations. Its reliance on external rewards may reduce intrinsic motivation and foster compliance over genuine commitment (Bass, 1990). The focus on tasks and procedures can limit employee development and adaptability (Dong, 2023). It is also less suited to dynamic environments, where flexibility and innovation are key (Kebe et al., 2025). Ethical concerns include rigid hierarchies that may restrict collaboration and inclusivity (Peralta et al., 2025).

#### *2.3.3.3 LAISSEZ-FAIRE*

Lewin in 1939 introduced the concept of laissez-faire leadership, a French term meaning “letting go” or “passive.” This style involves minimal decision-making, delegation of responsibility, and limited authority from the leader (Moosa et al., 2023). Traditionally, it was viewed unfavorably due to links with increased stress and reduced motivation (Robert, 2021). However, some research suggests it can foster autonomy, job satisfaction, creativity, and team performance (Yang, 2015).

Recent studies show its effectiveness depends on context and employee preferences. While some struggle without structure, others excel in independent settings (Desgourdes et al., 2024). Autonomy plays a central role, self-directed individuals tend to respond more positively (Kamal et al., 2024). Rather than being inherently ineffective, laissez-faire leadership produced different outcomes shaped by situational and cultural factors (Nothhaft, 2025).

#### *2.3.3.4 SERVANT LEADERSHIP*

Servant leadership, introduced by Greenleaf (1973), centers on serving others by prioritizing followers’ needs and supporting their growth. Research shows it enhances organisational performance, engagement, and workplace culture (Haider et al., 2025), fostering trust, satisfaction, and commitment, factors that reduce turnover and improve productivity (Eva et al., 2019). It also encourages collaboration, making it ideal for team-oriented environments (Liden et al., 2014).

Ethically grounded, servant leadership promotes fairness, transparency, and accountability. Leaders who embrace it often model ethical behavior and support social responsibility (Rao, 2023). Its effectiveness, however, can vary across cultures. While collectivist societies align well with its values, individualistic cultures may require adjustments (Zang et al., 2019).

In competitive or rigid hierarchies, servant leadership may be less effective (Langhof & Güldenberg, 2019). Research is also challenged servant leadership by inconsistent measurement, though progress is being made (Liden et al., 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic renewed interest in this style, as empathetic and well-being-focused leadership proved especially valuable in virtual and uncertain settings (Haider et al., 2025).

#### *2.3.3.5 ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP*

Adaptive leadership, introduced by Heifetz (1994), guides organisations through transformative change by addressing challenges that demand new learning, innovation, and shifts in values and behaviours. Unlike technical problems solved with existing knowledge, adaptive challenges require fresh thinking and a break from routine approaches (Towns, 2025).

Over time, the concept developed into a structured framework focused on navigating complexity, engaging stakeholders, and building resilience. The “balcony perspective” encourages leaders to step back for a strategic view, helping them adjust behaviours and strategies to meet changing demands while involving teams in collective problem-solving (Northouse, 2016).

Orchestrating conflict is central to adaptive leadership, ensuring difficult issues are addressed constructively to drive transformation (Heifetz et al., 2009). Salicru (2017) emphasises the need for contextual intelligence, an ability to read the environment and respond strategically to evolving conditions.

In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic shifts, or rapid tech changes, adaptive leaders foster resilience, agility, and innovation, helping teams meet challenges and seize opportunities (Vito et al., 2024; Chiu et al., 2021).

#### *2.3.3.5 AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP*

Authentic leadership has been studied from various angles, yet a universally accepted definition remains elusive (Northouse, 2016). Drawing from psychology, researchers have identified core traits such as self-awareness, ethical behavior, and relational transparency (Gardner et al., 2011; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Pengera & Černe (2015) found that employees’ perceptions of authentic leadership strongly influence job satisfaction and overall well-being.

Walumbwa et al. (2008) introduced the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ), outlining four key traits: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and transparency. Barbosa (2018) linked authentic leadership to optimism, hope, and trust. Read & Laschinger (2015) echoed the same four defining characteristics. Srivastava & Dhar (2019) emphasized ethical behavior, value alignment, and fairness. Gavin (2019) described authentic leaders as principled, accountable, and trust-building.

In virtual settings, Klein & Scott (2021) identified traits like openness, humility, and relationship-building as essential for resilience and inspiration. Daraba et al. (2021) found a strong connection between perceived authenticity and performance, noting gender differences in how leadership support is experienced. Kelly (2023) highlighted mindfulness as a key factor in virtual authentic leadership, showing how transparency and trust improve well-being and productivity.

### 2.3.4 CONCEPTUAL PROGRESSION

Transformational leadership is widely recommended for studying leadership in virtual work environments due to its emphasis on inspiration and motivation (Whitford & Moss, 2009; Brunelle, 2013; Alward, 2017; Mutta, 2021; Boccoli, 2024). It is associated with improved team support (Görgens-Ekermans & Roux, 2021), performance (Kovjanic et al., 2013), engagement (Mutha & Srivastava, 2021), and well-being, including job satisfaction and positive emotions (Breevaart et al., 2014; Wijaya et al., 2023).

By aligning personal and organisational goals, transformational leaders build trust and reduce perceived distance between teams and management (Brunelle, 2013). Bagga et al. (2023) highlighted its success in managing virtual IT teams across Asia-Pacific.

However, Boccoli et al. (2024) noted that most research focuses on traditional settings, with limited studies in virtual contexts. Some findings challenge its effectiveness in virtual environments. Wong & Berntzen (2019) and AL-Nawafah et al. (2020) stated that it may hinder virtual team dynamics. Jones & Schöning (2021) reported increased psychological safety but lower job satisfaction, especially when relational support is lacking. Graham et al. (2015) pointed to issues like micromanagement and reduced impact in virtual teams, suggesting a need for a more empathetic, adapted approach.

Comparative studies show both transformational and transactional leadership styles influence trust, efficiency, and performance. Sedrine et al. (2022) found both styles build trust, while Al Ameri (2019) linked transformational leadership to stronger team efficiency in the UAE. Chang & Lee (2013) also found it boosts learning in virtual teams.

Cultural context matters. Brown-Reid (2018) found transformational leadership works better in collectivist cultures, while transactional leadership suits individualistic ones. Magner (2014) and Couverthie (2019) observed similar trends in gaming communities and Puerto Rican virtual teams, where transactional leadership was preferred.

Other research highlights the value of laissez-faire leadership in fostering autonomy and creativity when teams are skilled (Gross, 2018; Mangente, 2020).

Still, combining transformational and transactional styles often yields better results. The Full-Range Leadership (FRL) model supports this hybrid approach, showing benefits in communication, goal achievement, and relationship-building (Fraboulet, 2021; Epitropakii & Radulović, 2020). Studies in nursing (Duffy, 2018) and project teams (Kuang & Sumara, 2021) also support a blended model. Emotional intelligence (Ferronato, 2017) and psychological capital (Gera, 2020) further enhance transformational leadership's impact in both virtual and in-person settings.

Overall, no single style guarantees success in virtual teams. A flexible, combined approach tailored to team culture, industry, and leadership adaptability tends to be most effective (Hao, 2024).

## 2.4 EMERGING TRENDS: LEADERSHIP & ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

AI encompasses computer systems designed to execute tasks that traditionally require human cognitive abilities, including learning, reasoning, problem-solving, and decision-making (Russell & Norvig, 2020), with predictions that it will surpass human performance in various tasks (Hassani et al., 2020; Bundy, 2016). Academic research highlights the growing intersection between AI and leadership, driven by rapid technological advancements (Aziz et al, 2024).

AI has the potential to transform leadership by providing data-driven insights, automating routine tasks, and optimizing decision-making processes (Asirvathan et al, 2024), prompting researchers to explore its impact on leadership efficiency (Schrettenbrunner, 2020; Noponen et al., 2023). Some studies emphasize AI's ability to stimulate leaders' creativity and enhance cognitive

processes (Sim, 2019; Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2023). However, debates persist on whether AI serves as a leadership enhancer or a potential replacement (Richter & Resch, 2021).

While AI-driven data-based decision-making improves efficiency, concerns arise regarding its failure to account for ethical and social factors (Wang et al, 2022; Agarwal, 2022). Organisations that embrace AI while addressing its limitations will be better positioned for adaptive and effective leadership in the digital era (Asirvathan et al, 2024).

The increasing adoption of AI is reshaping leadership strategies, requiring further investigation into its long-term implications (Wagner, 2020).

## 2.5 SUMMARY

Employee engagement plays a vital role in driving organisational success. Research shows that when employees are highly engaged, performance, productivity, and job satisfaction tend to rise (Christian et al., 2011; Albrecht et al., 2018; CIPD Ireland, 2022). In contrast, disengagement can harm outcomes and even affect broader economic trends, as noted by Gallup (2025).

While early leadership theories like Kahn's (1990) focused on traditional workplaces, recent studies have shifted toward virtual environments, especially after COVID-19 (Kopp & McRae, 2022; Wigert, 2022). Virtual work offers benefits such as flexibility and better work-life balance (Ferreira et al., 2021) but also introduces challenges like isolation and communication gaps (Parker et al., 2021). Leaders must adapt their strategies to maintain engagement and foster strong communication online (Kim & Ausar, 2018).

Leadership style is another key factor influencing engagement. Approaches like transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, adaptive, and autocratic each have their strengths. Some research suggests blending transformational and transactional styles may work well, but there's no clear agreement on the best approach for virtual teams (Hao, 2024).

Artificial intelligence is also changing leadership by enhancing decision-making, creativity, and efficiency (Asirvathan et al., 2024; Sim, 2019; Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2023). However, ethical, and social concerns remain (Wang et al., 2022; Agarwal, 2022). As AI becomes more integrated, understanding its long-term effects on leadership will be essential (Wagner, 2020; Richter & Resch, 2021).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study applies Saunders et al., (2019) 'Research onion' framework, offering a structured path for aligning research philosophy and strategy with study goals. Its layered approach helps identify appropriate data collection methods and remains adaptable across diverse contexts (Bryman, 2012). This chapter also presents an overview of research philosophies, approaches, and methods, including an in-depth analysis of case study research as a key methodological component.

This section details the research approach adopted to explore the main research question and its related sub-questions, as introduced in chapter 1.4.

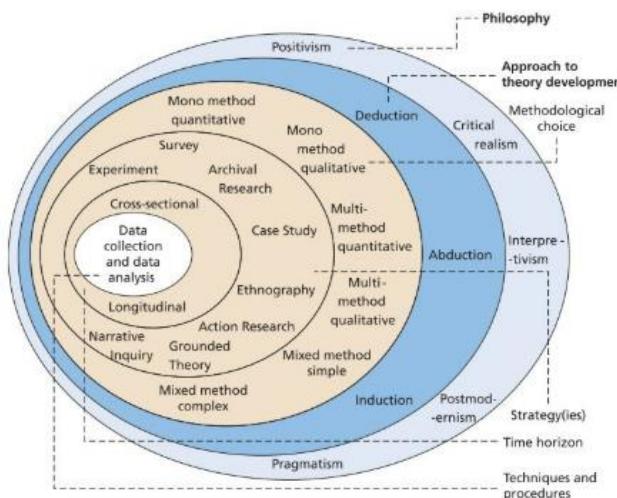


Figure 1. Research Onion. Source: Sanders et al. (2019).

#### 3.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Research philosophy concerns the way knowledge is acquired and understood (Saunders et al., 2019). It typically involves two key perspectives: ontology and epistemology (Saunders et al.,

2019; Bryman, 2012). Ontology, often described as the “science of being,” examines perceptions of reality and social structures, what exists (Al-Saadi, 2014). Epistemology, as defined by Richards (2003), relates to beliefs about the nature of knowledge and how it is developed. Cohen et al. (2017) further explain it as the set of assumptions that shape how knowledge is formed, interpreted, and communicated.

Positivism holds that reality is fixed and can be objectively observed and described. However, critics argue that its reliance on brief questionnaires may lead to shallow insights when richer data is needed (Anderson, 2015). In contrast, interpretivism acknowledges that individuals perceive and experience the world differently. It often employs interviews and observations to explore these subjective realities. Saunders et al. (2019) highlight that interpretivist researchers must adopt an empathetic stance, immersing themselves in participants’ perspectives. Yet, this approach can be demanding, as managing large volumes of qualitative data requires careful organization to ensure clarity (Anderson, 2015).

As a response to positivism, Bhaskar (1970, cited in Saunders et al., 2019) introduced critical realism, which seeks to uncover the deeper social mechanisms behind organizational events. This often involves examining historical developments within social and institutional structures (Ringel, 2024). It’s important to distinguish this from direct realism, which asserts that reality exists independently of human perception or conceptual framing (Saunders et al., 2019; Ehmann, 2024).

Pragmatism, meanwhile, focuses on practical outcomes. It values knowledge for its usefulness in solving real-world problems and bridging theory with practice (Gamage, 2025; Allemand et al., 2022). Rather than emphasizing abstract understanding, the pragmatic paradigm aims to generate insights that lead to tangible societal benefits (Saunders et al., 2019).

The choice of research approach depends on the study’s objectives (Goldman, 2016) with the author selecting an interpretivist research approach that emphasizes individual experiences and perspectives, as the most suitable framework for this research. This paradigm offers valuable insights into how leadership needs to shape virtual employee engagement in Ireland, considering social and contextual influences beyond numerical analysis.

### 3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

Knowledge generation in research typically follows one of two main approaches: inductive or deductive (Hyde, 2000). Inductive reasoning begins with specific observations and builds toward broader generalizations or theories. In contrast, deductive reasoning starts with established theories and tests their applicability to particular cases (Hyde, 2000). A third, less common method, abduction recognizes that many scientific breakthroughs have emerged through reasoning that does not strictly follow either path. Abduction involves inferring possible causes from observed outcomes (Kirkeby, 1990; Taylor et al., 2002; Lamma et al., 1999).

This study adopted an inductive approach. It began with a review of existing literature to inform the development of interview questions. Interviews were conducted, and the resulting data analyzed to generate relevant theoretical insights. This method allows flexibility and avoids the limitations of predefined hypotheses (Saunders et al., 2019). Although leadership and employee engagement are well-researched topics, the intersection with virtual leadership remains underexplored. A rigid theoretical framework could constrain the study's ability to uncover new perspectives.

### 3.3 RESEARCH METHODS

Research can be conducted using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods (Quinlan et al., 2019). Quantitative research, rooted in the positivist paradigm, views the world as composed of measurable facts and often involves generating numerical data to test hypotheses. It typically relies on large, random samples to support generalizable findings. In contrast, qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena within real-world contexts, using smaller, purposefully selected samples to explore depth and meaning (Golafshani, 2003). While sometimes criticized for limited generalizability (Agius, 2013), qualitative methods prioritize rich, contextual insights over broad representation. Mixed methods combine both approaches within a single study to leverage their respective strengths (Quinlan et al., 2019).

This study adopts a qualitative approach to gather detailed perspectives from employees on leadership and engagement in virtual settings. It aims to explore personal experiences and perceptions that may not be captured through numerical data alone.

### 3.3.1 BASIS FOR USING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN THIS STUDY

Qualitative research effectively examines leadership dynamics and employee engagement in virtual settings by exploring experiences, perceptions, and interactions. Unlike quantitative methods, it provides contextual insights into how leadership shapes engagement in virtual environments, making qualitative research the most suitable approach (Starman, 2013) for this study. While other methods can be applied, Starman (2013) highlights that the paradigmatic foundation of qualitative research is closely tied to the nature and characteristics of case studies. Qualitative research employs diverse methodologies to explore social phenomena through context, experience, and subjectivity, providing deep insights into individual perspectives beyond numerical analysis (Lim, 2025). Twycross (2018) notes that researchers become immersed in the subject, serving as the primary data collection tool, enabling dynamic insights.

### 3.3.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Qualitative research has several limitations, including subjectivity, researcher bias, and limited generalizability (Saraswati, 2025). Studies often rely on small, non-random samples, making it difficult to apply findings to broader populations (Chukwuemeka, 2022). Additionally, data interpretation can be influenced by the researcher's perspective, potentially affecting objectivity and reproducibility (Drew, 2023). Participant access and rapport-building during data collection also impact outcomes (Saunders et al., 2019).

When selecting participants, researchers should ensure a balanced sample to incorporate diverse viewpoints, preventing any single group from disproportionately shaping findings (Saraswati, 2025).

## 3.4 RESEARCH STRATEGY

A research strategy outlines how a study addresses its research question. Denzin and Lincoln in 2018 described it as the link between philosophical stance and chosen methods for data collection

and analysis (Saunders et al., 2019). Saunders et al. (2019) identify several strategies, including experiments, surveys, case studies, ethnography, action research, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry; each suited to qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods depending on the study's aims.

Grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, is a qualitative approach focused on building theory from participants' experiences rather than testing existing hypotheses (Saunders et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2017). It explores how individuals make sense of their daily lives across varied contexts (Charmaz, 2014), including business and management. This method is especially effective for examining processes and interactions, such as employee engagement across organisational levels (Young et al., 2020).

It suits this study's open-ended questions and the goal of understanding how leadership influences engagement in virtual settings, allowing new insights to emerge from participants' narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

### 3.5 TIME HORIZON

Researchers consider two main time horizons for their studies: cross-sectional and longitudinal. A longitudinal time horizon is used by researchers who need to compare differences between significant pre- and post-events, thus considering two distinct time periods relevant to the research phenomenon. Conversely, a cross-sectional time horizon focuses on the present or time, rather than two or more separate periods. This approach helps examine a research phenomenon within a single time limit (Saunders et al, 2019).

A cross-sectional time horizon has been selected for this analysis as it captures a snapshot of an actual specific period. The interviews were conducted within two weeks in June 2025.

### 3.6 SAMPLE

The study focused on individuals in Ireland with experience leading virtually, as well as those who have been led across hybrid and fully virtual work settings. Twelve participants were selected, a sample size considered sufficient to capture meaningful insights without generating repetitive data (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Sampling methods are divided into probability and non-probability categories. This research used a non-probability purposive sampling technique, allowing the researcher to intentionally select participants most aligned with the study's objectives (Saunders et al., 2019). The sample included three men and eight women at various career stages within the virtual workforce, due to the limited access to the broader population in Ireland.

Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of professionals with over three years' experience in virtual work environments (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024). Participants came from a mix of multinational organisations across both public and private sectors, including technology, non-profit, localization, BPO, construction, and banking. All held qualifications ranging from professional diplomas to PhD, had at least ten years of professional experience, and a minimum of two years with their current or last employer. Roles spanned from specialist to executive level, and participants fell into the Early Mid-Career (35–44), Mid-Career (45–54), and Late Career (55+) age brackets.

### 3.7 DATA COLLECTION

Data collection refers to the method researchers use to gather information relevant to their study. Common techniques include questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, scales, diaries, and projective methods (Quinlan et al., 2019).

This research relied on semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool, enabling both virtual leaders and employees to share their experiences with leadership adaptation, engagement strategies, and communication challenges in virtual environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The author employed two tailored interview formats initially developed by Gilchrist (2023); one for leaders and one for individual contributors, each comprising 25 questions aligned with the study's objectives (see Appendix A).

The interviews began with introductory questions to foster a comfortable atmosphere and encourage open conversation. These were followed by questions about participants' demographics and professional backgrounds, such as career stage, role, and organisational context, which helped confirm sample diversity and added depth to their insights.

Drawing from the literature review, the remaining questions were grouped into four thematic areas.

**Leadership and Virtual Adaptation:** Focused on how participants perceived leadership in virtual versus traditional settings, how they adapted their practices, and what competencies were needed for effective virtual leadership.

**Engagement, Communication, and Relationships:** Explored prior use of technology, current team dynamics, and the role of digital communication in maintaining emotional connection and support.

**Strengths and Challenges of Virtual Leadership:** Investigated the limitations and advantages of leading virtually, including technology-related issues.

**Future Trends:** Examined participants' views on how AI and automation might influence leadership and employee engagement going forward.

All interviews were conducted synchronously via MS Teams, lasting between 30 and 50 minutes. With participants' consent, sessions were recorded to ensure accurate transcription. The data was then analyzed using selective coding to identify recurring themes and relationships (Charmaz, 2008).

### 3.8 DATA ANALYSIS

The process began with transcribing the recorded interviews verbatim to ensure the authenticity of participants' responses (Charmaz, 2014). Open coding was then applied to identify key concepts, phrases, and ideas within the transcripts (Chen et al., 2024).

Once initial codes were established, axial coding was used to group related codes into thematic clusters. This step led to the identification of eight distinct themes, which clarified subcategories and their interconnections (McLeod, 2024). As analysis progressed, these themes were refined into three broader categories that captured the core dimensions of the research focus.

As described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), using the grounded theory approach these categories formed the foundation for developing a central theory. This emerging framework offers insight into leadership and engagement within virtual teams, shedding light on the challenges faced and the practices that support effective remote leadership.

### 3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics involves the principles that guide conduct, particularly in relation to the rights of individuals who participate in or are affected by research (Saunders et al., 2019).

In this study, formal invitation, and informed consent to participate and record the interviews were obtained from all participants. Their data was anonymised to maintain confidentiality and securely stored in compliance with GDPR and other relevant data protection standards. Participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the research, its objectives, and how the findings would be used.

## 4. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings derived from the interviews conducted with the following participants (Figure 2).

Interviewee	Leader/Individual Contributor (IC)	Age	Gender	Education	Industry	Company size	Work experience	Role	Company tenure	Virtual set up
1A	IC	45-54	Female	Degree	Technology	1000 +	20 years	Customer Success Manager	2 years	Hybrid_2dwv
2E	IC	35-44	Female	PHD	Technology	1000 +	10 years	Reliability Engineer	9 years	Hybrid_2dwv
3G	Leader	45-54	Male	Master	Construction	1000 +	25 years	Chief Surveyor	18 years	Hybrid_3dwv
4E	Leader	45-54	Female	Degree	Non Profit Organisation	<50	30 years	Finance Manager	20 years	Hybrid_4dwv
5V	Leader	45-54	Female	Diploma	Online training	1000 +	25 years	Director of Content	22 years	Fully virtual
6D	Leader	55+	Male	Degree	Business Process Outsourcing	1000 +	30 years	Senior Team Lead	13 years	Hybrid_4dwv
7M	IC	45-54	Female	Degree	Localization	50-199	24 years	Translation Quality Manager	3 years	Fullyvirtual
8A	IC	45-54	Female	Master	Public Sector	50-199	28 years	Information Specialist	4 years	Hybrid_4dwv
9B	IC	35-44	Female	Master	Pharma	1000 +	18 years	Senior Analyst	7 years	Fullyvirtual
10F	Leader	35-44	Male	Chartered Accountant	Business Process Outsourcing	1000 +	17 years	Finance Business Partner	13 years	Hybrid_4dwv
11B	IC	55+	Female	Degree	Technology	1000 +	37 years	Senior Support Engineer	23 years	Hybrid_3dwv
12A	Leader	35-44	Female	Degree	Banking	1000 +	20 years	Team Leader	18 years	Hybrid_2dmv

Figure 2. Participants details. Source: Author.

With the initial codes in place, axial coding helped cluster related concepts, resulting in the emergence of eight key themes.

### 4.1 TRUST & AUTONOMY

All participants unanimously emphasized the importance of self-management, with leaders providing insights.

*“When you’re not physically present, you can’t micromanage or chase people—you have to focus on targets and goals” (3G)*

*“So, I really encourage them to take the initiative” (4E)*

*“It all circles back to a simple principle: give people responsibility” (6D)*

Individual contributors echoed this sentiment, highlighting the leadership evolution by objectives and flexibility.

*“Now, especially in a virtual environment, leadership is much more about leading by objectives rather than constant oversight. There’s a greater sense of flexibility on both sides”* (7M)

*“I like to feel like I’m my own boss to some extent”* (11B)

Additionally, most participants underscored the importance of trust, built through flexibility, openness, reassurance, and accountability, as key to effective leadership.

*“It’s also important to build trust with employees so they feel empowered and supported in their work, while still making sure they’re aligned with the company’s goals”* (2E)

*“I think it requires a lot of trust—both from leadership and from the employee. It goes both ways, and for me, that’s incredibly important. That means providing clear direction and expectations but not being overly controlling”* (11B)

*“You want to trust your employees, but also ensure they are effective and deliver results. It’s about striking a balance”* (8A)

*“In a virtual environment, I think leadership should focus on fostering trust rather than micromanaging. It’s important to have regular check-ins and give consistent feedback, but without falling into the trap of over-monitoring”* (7M)

The evolution from close supervision to focusing on outcomes reflects how virtual work is changing. It’s a move toward independence and trust, but it also brings up the ongoing challenge of balancing trust with accountability, especially mentioned by the males all leaders, in comparison with the females interviewed.

*“Give them the task or the instructions that they need to do and check in with them on a regular basis to make sure the deliverables are being achieved. I found myself leaning on a more rigid structure”* (10F)

*“Letting people know that as long as they’re doing their best...”* (3G)

*“As leaders, we need to honor that feeling by giving them the responsibility to manage their own day-to-day work. If someone is expected to be signed on and ready by 8:00 AM, they should take ownership of that. If they’re not, there need to be consequences.” (6D)*

Many interviewees noted a shift from controlling leadership to trusting teams to work independently, especially when direct oversight wasn’t possible in virtual settings.

*“There is an element of trust—you have to trust that people are basically at work” (4E)*

Autonomy was framed not only as a functional necessity but also as a motivational driver. Multiple leaders described a deliberate effort to promote initiative.

*“I really encourage them to take the initiative when I feel they’re ready” (4E)*

*“Give people more control and trust them with the responsibility to lead themselves” (6D)*

Not all experiences were positive, suggesting that trust without engagement can produce ambiguity, especially when leadership presence feels abstract rather than supportive.

*“They were leading the larger organisation, but they weren’t really leading me in my duties and in my role.” (8A)*

*“Leadership should focus on fostering trust rather than micromanaging,” but advice it must be complemented by “regular check-ins and consistent feedback.” (7M)*

Overall, participants felt more motivated and productive when trusted to manage their own work. Trust and autonomy had a stronger impact than micromanagement. It needed to be built, not taken for granted.

## 4.2 CLARITY, STRUCTURE, AND CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION

Participants emphasized the importance of clear and consistent communication in virtual leadership, especially in the absence of face-to-face cues. Building trust in virtual settings requires leaders to communicate purposefully and stay well-organized.

*“Being clear and having high expectations... people need to understand clearly what is expected from them.” (1A)*

*“In a remote setting, communication needs to be much clearer, leaving no room for misinterpretation.”* (2E)

*“Clarity is key—especially in a virtual environment where we’re not all in the same physical space.”* (5V)

Interviewees highlighted the need to establish clear goals, expectations, and performance frameworks to avoid ambiguity.

*“Set the right expectations, KPIs... regular weekly discussions and also document things.”* (1A)

*“Leadership is structured around clear objectives and frequent virtual meetings.”* (7M)

*“Defining long-term goals... consistently checking progress ensures that expectations are met.”* (5V)

*“When you’re not face-to-face, you lose the ability to read between the lines, which means you have to be direct and precise—both when conveying information and requesting it.”* (3G)

Regular and inclusive communication routines were seen as essential to building cohesion and maintaining momentum.

*“We have virtual one-to-ones every month... weekly calls that serve as a forum for everybody.”* (5V)

*“Weekly online meetings are held, alongside efforts to meet in the office once a week when possible.”* (4E)

*“We’d have social meetups that weren’t about work... quizzes and fun activities.”* (11B)

Leaders were expected to be accessible and responsive, with open communication channels and proactive engagement viewed as critical to team wellbeing.

*“My team also knew that I was always available.”* (10F)

*“Being available at any moment remains important.”* (4E)

*“You need to proactively have chats and check in with your team.”* (10F)

Participants also stressed the importance of written and verbal clarity, noting that virtual work demands greater precision and intentionality.

*“Since remote work relies heavily on written communication, I’ve learned that clarity is key.”* (9B)

*“I focus on clear, concise communication—both verbal and written. There’s no room for ambiguity.”* (6D)

Purposeful communication, anchored in clarity, structure, and empathy was seen as central to sustaining alignment, motivation, and connection in virtual environments.

*“Try and listen... remote work forces you to be a better communicator.”* (10F)

*“Effective communication is key.”* (8A)

*“Making time for in-person connections and maintaining open communication channels ensures effective management.”* (4E)

#### 4.3 EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND HUMAN CONNECTION

Participants highlighted that virtual settings limit opportunities for personal connection and make emotional cues harder to detect. Without in-person contact, casual bonding fades, and leaders struggle to read body language or offer support at the right time.

*“We probably lose a dimension of meeting the person. When meeting in person, there are certain things that might happen more naturally and more organically when you meet virtually.”* (4E)

*“You miss out on that intuitive sense—your gut feeling—of how someone is responding.”* (6D)

*“In contrast, it’s been more difficult to connect with newer colleagues who joined after we went remote.”* (11B)

Virtual work limits casual check-ins, making it harder for leaders to sense team dynamics. Participants stressed that empathy and personal connection are key to keeping teams emotionally aligned.

*“Leadership is about striking a balance between expectations and empathy, recognizing that work is not isolated from personal circumstances.”* (4E)

*“Having a sense of empathy and understanding for your team’s personal and professional needs and objectives, I think was very important.”* (10F)

*“Emotional intelligence has really helped me in leadership. Even when we are working virtually, I try to have that intuitive sense—recognizing when someone might be struggling or needs some extra support, even from a distance.”* (12C)

In the absence of physical proximity, leaders were expected to compensate by being emotionally present and accessible. Availability was not just about communication; it was a signal of care and attentiveness.

*“It’s incredibly difficult to build a meaningful relationship over distance alone. The key is to extend that gesture with real warmth.”* (6D)

*“He always makes himself available whenever I reach out.”* (9B)

*“Even though I’m not sitting beside them, I’m still there. Available, reachable—just in a different way.”* (5V)

Participants described emotional engagement as closely tied to involvement and shared purpose. Leaders who fostered a sense of unity and inclusion were seen as more effective in maintaining motivation and team spirit.

*“The key is to align everyone, create a shared sense of purpose, and ensure people understand they are part of something bigger.”* (3G)

*“The most important thing to get people to work together is to make sure they are truly involved in what we’re trying to achieve.”* (3G)

*“Building confidence in a team starts with accessibility.”* (3G)

Informal rituals and social moments, such as virtual coffee chats, birthday celebrations, and games were seen as essential tools for building emotional connections and reinforcing team identity.

*“Some of the things that really worked were the virtual coffee mornings... Games are another fantastic tool.”* (6D)

*“We have a team gathering at the end of Friday. It’s informal to wrap up in good spirits.”* (1A)

*“We’d have social meetups that weren’t about work... quizzes and fun activities.”* (11B)

Participants also stressed the importance of creating space for personal expression and human interaction, especially for new team members who lacked the benefit of in-person bonding.

*“It’s especially important to make sure that new employees are properly introduced to the wider team.”* (7M)

*“I also believe it’s important to build a personal relationship with the people on your team.”* (12C)

*“Her style is incredibly engaging and human. She shares personal stories, encourages open conversation, and creates a space where everyone feels comfortable connecting.”* (9B)

Emotional engagement isn't optional, it's central to leading remotely. Leaders need to build connections through empathy, presence, and inclusive habits to keep teams grounded and supported.

*“Without engagement, productivity suffers.” (3G)*

*“Getting people involved is the key, whether on-site or remotely.” (4E, 12C)*

*“It wasn't just about work—it was about fostering a sense of belonging.” (9B)*

#### 4.4 HYBRID WORK AS OPTIMAL STRUCTURE

All participants in this study but three (5V, 7M, 9B) were working in hybrid environments, splitting their work time between home and office.

While all participants expressed satisfaction with their current arrangements.

*“4 days remote and 1 day in the office. I am very happy with this work arrangement” (8A)*

*“Hybrid. 2 days office, 3 at home.*

*As long as flexibility is there, because sometimes life happens, it really makes a difference. (11B)*

The majority viewed hybrid work as the most effective model, offering a balance between autonomy and collaboration. They mentioned flexibility and convenience as dominant advantages.

*“That's why hybrid work is essential in my role. I need to be on-site to physically assess progress and identify potential challenges.” (3G)*

*“I like flexibility. Home days are focus time for deep work. Office days are for meetings and collaboration. Hybrid brings the best of both worlds.” (2E)*

They appreciated the ability to tailor their schedules, reduce commuting time, and optimize their productivity.

*“It saves time from the office. If you have to meet, you can have a quick chat or a call.” (1A)*

Some participants also reported higher productivity in virtual settings, attributing their efficiency to fewer distractions and better time management.

*“So, it has been very positive for me. I've been far more productive since I've started working virtually.” (8A, 12C)*

However, despite these benefits, participants acknowledged that face-to-face interaction remains essential for building relationships, enhancing visibility, and fostering team spirit. The lack of physical presence was seen as a barrier to emotional connection and informal bonding.

*“It is challenging to create team rapport. They barely met one another. We've only met the entire team once. It's hard in that sense.” (5V)*

*“That focused attention you'd naturally get in a face-to-face meeting is just harder to maintain online.” (6D)*

*“And I do think that those little, let's say, tea station or water cooler conversations that you have, maybe we talk more about someone's family or general chit chat was gone and I think that's harder to achieve in a remote environment.” (10F)*

Participants also pointed to the value of physical presence in training, team building, and leadership visibility.

*“Working with the team in India has been a bit more challenging, mainly because all the training has been done virtually.” (1A)*

*“It is good to have a physical presence; being in the office, grab a coffee or having lunch. It builds the team.” (1A)*

*“As a leader or manager, it is often easier to assess employees' needs and challenges in face-to-face interactions.” (4E)*

Still, two participants noted that working entirely remotely would be a better fit for them.

*“If anything, full remote work has worked in my favor—and it aligns better with the kind of person I am and how I like to work.” (9B)*

*“Personally, I could easily work from home five days a week and wouldn't mind it at all.” (11B)*

These findings suggest that virtual work brings flexibility and efficiency, but hybrid setups provide a better balance, increasing productivity while keeping teams connected and engaged.

#### 4.5 TECHNOLOGY AS ENABLER AND LIMITATION

Participants described digital platforms such as Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp, Slack, and similar tools as essential for sustaining leadership, collaboration, and responsiveness in virtual environments. These technologies were widely praised for improving efficiency, enabling real-time communication, and supporting team coordination.

*"For me, Teams has become a more vital tool than Outlook—it's where most of our day-to-day interaction happens." (5V)*

*"Before, I'd receive maybe dozens of emails per day, but in my current role, I hardly get any—because we use Slack not just internally, but also with many of our customers." (7M)*

*"Things are going faster like AI is, you know is that transformative like a chat GPT was not here like two years ago and now everybody is trusting ChatGPT." (1A)*

Video calls and on-screen presence were seen as helpful for fostering connection and visibility, especially in the absence of physical proximity.

*"Now with video calls, we have a kind of a policy of on screen on the call so that you can see everybody. So, I see that as an improvement." (5V)*

*"Although it's not strictly enforced, and many people don't follow it, I personally prefer having my camera on—especially when it helps build relationships with people I don't know well." (9B)*

However, participants also acknowledged that digital tools have limitations, particularly in replicating the spontaneity, emotional depth, and creative energy of face-to-face collaboration.

*"While email and virtual collaboration tools, such as Teams, facilitate communication, they cannot fully replicate the ease of assessing employees' situations in a physical setting." (4E)*

*"Sometimes, the best way to explain something is old-school—grabbing a blackboard and sketching things out." (3G)*

*“In virtual meetings, such as on Teams or Zoom, interpreting added layers of communication became more challenging.” (4E)*

Participants noted that nonverbal cues and spontaneous feedback are harder to detect online, which can affect emotional engagement and decision-making.

*“It was sometimes difficult to gauge whether someone genuinely agreed with something or was just saying yes.” (4E)*

*“Without face-to-face interaction... interactions that once took place in real life are now conducted through digital platforms.” (7M)*

*“At first I thought Teams and Zoom, I didn’t think meetings would work very well that way and I found it very draining and now of course it’s second nature.” (8A)*

Despite these challenges, many participants described a learning curve and eventual adaptation, with some expressing a sense of achievement in mastering new tools.

*“In the end, it turned out to be a real learning experience. Once I got the hang of it, I thought, ‘OK, it’s not that difficult.’” (11B)*

*“It did take a while to get better systems in place—improving network coverage, gaining access to more effective tools, and making things run more smoothly overall.” (12C)*

Several participants emphasized the importance of investing in infrastructure and equipment to support virtual work effectively.

*“Remotely, a system issue can leave someone completely inactive for hours or even an entire day. That’s why investing in robust, responsive IT infrastructure is critical.” (6D)*

*“Another area of support is making sure we’re set up for success at home. That means having the right equipment—like a larger screen or a comfortable headset.” (7M)*

The data suggests that while digital tools are critical enablers of virtual teamwork, their effectiveness depends on intentional use, thoughtful adaptation, and awareness of their limitations. Leaders must recognize that technology can facilitate connection, but cannot fully replace the depth, spontaneity, and emotional richness of in-person interaction.

## 4.6 ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Interview data revealed that effective virtual leadership is closely tied to the level of organisational support available to leaders.

One interviewee described how mentorship, talent management, and leadership training programs have become increasingly important in her organisation, helping leaders build the skills needed to manage virtual teams.

*“Over the last four or five years, the company has placed more emphasis on talent management. I’ve received training, I train others—there’s mentorship, coaching, a broader leadership culture.” (5V)*

*“Focusing on talent development and career pathing—has made a real difference.” (5V)*

Other participants stressed that training must be ongoing and embedded in daily practice, rather than limited to occasional sessions. Leadership in virtual environments requires continuous reinforcement and skill-building.

*“It all comes down to training and communication—over and over again. A single group training session twice a year just isn’t enough.” (6D)*

*“Offering communication training can really help—teaching people how to express themselves clearly, how to ensure their messages are understood, and what kind of follow-ups are necessary.” (2E)*

Organisational maturity was also seen as a critical factor. One participant noted that clarity around tools, processes, and mentoring is essential for enabling leaders and teams to thrive.

*“We are overloaded with information: new things, tools. So, I think that there’s still a cultural maturity that organisations need to reach. Be clear about the tools, processes and mentoring to enable people to understand them.” (1A)*

In addition to technical support, participants emphasized the importance of role clarity, career progression, and inclusive support structures that go beyond operational tasks.

*“The key is creating awareness and ensuring proper training, so employees understand their role.”* (4E)

*“One aspect that has been particularly helpful is having younger colleagues. Their insights can contribute significantly.”* (4E)

*“So yes, having the right tools is essential. Just as important is having the right people in the right roles, and a clear path for career progression. You also need a level of support that goes beyond just work tasks.”* (12C)

Participants also highlighted the need for inclusive engagement strategies and global awareness, especially in diverse and distributed teams.

*“Larger organisations often have Learning and Development, Training, or HR departments. Across those functions, there needs to be a strong focus on how we’re empowering leaders to manage their teams, achieve objectives, and operate effectively in remote environments.”* (10F)

*“Getting people involved is the key, whether on-site or remotely. In every organization, employees need to be aware of their roles, their importance, and the timing of tasks. Without engagement, productivity suffers.”* (10F)

*“That’s why it’s so important to have structured channels for sharing information about what’s happening across the organization globally.”* (7M)

*“Some training about different cultures apart from this also”* (9B)

Overall, the findings suggest that virtual leadership is not sustainable without strong organisational backing. Structured development pathways, cultural readiness, and inclusive practices are essential to ensure leadership efforts are consistent, and responsive to the evolving demands of virtual work environments.

#### 4.7 GLOBAL AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Participants emphasized the importance of understanding time zones and communication style differences when managing virtual teams. Demonstrated sensitivity to both cultural and individual diversity emerged as a key enabler of inclusive leadership and collaborative engagement.

*“But obviously having everybody in various locations, it is challenging to create team rapport.”* (5V)

Interviewees consistently highlighted the need for emotional intelligence in navigating multicultural dynamics. Leaders were expected to recognize and respond to differences in background, experience, and diversity, especially in remote settings where nonverbal cues are limited.

*“Emotional intelligence for me is a big one. But I do think sometimes you need some emotional intelligence to know that you're working with different people from different backgrounds, different cultures in the multinational environment that a lot of us work in these days and to understand why someone is behaving their bit.”* (10F)

*“I think you have to be extra emotional intelligence when dealing with virtual teams. It's not the same. It's a challenge. There are also different cultures, different experience, different backgrounds.”* (1A)

Participants described how cultural sensitivity and inclusive practices are essential to building trust and cohesion in virtual teams. Differences in communication styles, response times, and tone were seen not as obstacles, but as realities to be understood and respected.

*“Another key difference with remote work is being mindful of tone in emails. You can't hear someone's voice, so it's important to think about how your words come across.”* (9B)

*“I work with international teams... Polish colleagues tend to be more direct, Irish colleagues tend to be softer in tone... colleagues in Brazil may take longer to respond, while German colleagues often reply within hours with detailed responses.”* (9B).

One participant also noted that some aspects of diversity, such as neurodivergence, may be harder to detect remotely, making emotional intelligence and inclusive leadership even more critical.

*“Working remotely, it can be hard to notice if someone has ADHD, autism, or another cognitive difference... only when working side by side in the office did certain things become more visible.”* (12C).

Overall, the data suggests that global and cultural sensitivity is not optional, it is foundational to effective virtual leadership. Leaders must cultivate emotional intelligence, embrace diversity, and adapt their style to meet the needs of culturally and cognitively diverse teams. In doing so, they foster inclusion, trust, and collaboration across borders.

#### 4.8 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) IN LEADERSHIP

Participants acknowledged that while AI is still emerging in leadership, it shows promise in improving efficiency and supporting routine tasks.

*“Things are going faster like AI, ChatGPT was not here two years ago and now everybody is trusting ChatGPT. These tools help you to be more efficient with your time and there are constantly new tools.”* (1A)

*“I think AI can empower people if it's used the right way... Even at a very light-touch level, the tools I've used can definitely speed things up.”* (10F)

*“There are already sections in our business where robots handle various tasks... It's an interesting development.”* (12C)

Despite its benefits, participants stressed that AI should complement—not replace—human expertise.

*“So, while AI is a powerful tool, it's essential to use it wisely—as a supportive resource, not a replacement for true expertise.”* (3G)

*“The key going forward is learning how to use these tools thoughtfully... and evaluate the responses critically.”* (7M)

Concerns were raised about overreliance, especially in areas requiring judgment and emotional nuance.

*“Even though I'm a computer scientist... unless you double-check; you don't know what's real.”* (2E)

*“I find myself questioning how helpful it truly is... Does it support us, or does it risk switching off our own thinking?” (11B)*

AI's limitations in emotionally sensitive situations were also noted.

*“AI is going to play a big role... especially when there's a risk of emotional friction.” (6D)*

*“It will be one defined path... I don't believe it will naturally offer the middle road or accommodate nuance.” (6D)*

Leadership, participants agreed, must retain a human element.

*“That said, I believe leadership will always require an element of human connection.” (8A)*

Organisational guidance and training were seen as essential for responsible AI use.

*“We are developing an AI policy as part of the management team. It feels somewhat daunting.” (4E)*

*“One of the big challenges... will be training employees on how to use AI effectively and responsibly.” (7M)*

Overall, AI was viewed as a valuable tool, but one that must be used with emotional intelligence, ethical awareness, and human oversight.

## 5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents the research findings using grounded theory to develop an understanding of the relational, structural, and technological shifts required for effective virtual leadership in relation to the existing literature reviewed in Chapter 2, while also aligning the results with the central research question and its associated sub-questions.

### 5.1 EMERGENT THEMES

The eight categories of findings of the study have been organized into three thematic categories reflecting key dimensions of virtual leadership as per figure 2.

CATEGORY	THEME	CONNECTION
TRUST & AUTONOMY	HUMAN CENTER LEADERSHIP	Self management empowerment and flexibility
CLARITY, STRUCTURE, AND CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION		Clear goals and communication
EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND HUMAN CONNECTION		Empathy and emotional safety Blends flexibility with connection and structure
HYBRID WORK AS OPTIMAL STRUCTURE	VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS	Thoughtful use of digital tools Addresses institutional support, training, and leadership maturity
TECHNOLOGY AS ENABLER AND LIMITATION		
ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT	LEADERSHIP ADAPTATION & TECHNOLOGY	
GLOBAL AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY		Cultural and individual awareness
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) IN LEADERSHIP		Responsible, human-centered AI

Figure 3. Thematic categories. Source: Author

#### 5.1.1 HUMAN CENTER LEADERSHIP IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

The first theme highlights the importance of human-centered leadership in virtual environments, where the lack of physical presence can lead to emotional disconnect and weakened relationships. Participants consistently stressed the need for leaders to show empathy, emotional availability, and attentiveness, qualities seen as vital for building trust and psychological safety. These insights reflect Edmondson's (1999) theory, which emphasizes the value of creating spaces where

individuals feel safe to speak and collaborate. Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence framework supports this, pointing to empathy, self-awareness, and social skills as key leadership traits, especially when communication is facilitated by technology. However, emotional intelligence has faced criticism for its vague definition and inconsistent measurement (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005), with its effectiveness varying across cultures and contexts.

Participants also noted the need for organisations to invest in emotional development, echoing servant leadership principles (Greenleaf, 1973), which focus on empowering others. Yet, this style may lack decisiveness in fast-paced settings. Eva et al. (2019) argue that while servant leadership fosters ethical and inclusive practices, it may fall short in performance-driven environments.

Cultural and generational awareness also emerged as essential for managing global teams, aligning with Livermore's (2025) concept of cultural intelligence, the ability to adapt to diverse norms and behaviours. Still, applying emotional and cultural intelligence consistently across international contexts remains a challenge.

In summary, virtual leadership must be intentionally relational, grounded in emotional and cultural competence. Without this, leaders risk creating transactional dynamics that weaken morale and team cohesion. As virtual work continues to grow, organisations must support emotional literacy and cross-cultural awareness while critically evaluating their application.

### 5.1.2 VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICE FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS

The findings indicate that effective virtual leadership relies on structural transparency, empowered autonomy, and purposeful communication. Participants described a shift away from traditional models toward approaches that encourage independence through clear goals, regular feedback, and performance-driven practices. This reflects transformational leadership theory, which promotes initiative and ownership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), and aligns with self-determination theory, which links motivation to trust, competence, and control (Slemp et al., 2021).

While autonomy was widely valued, participants emphasized the need to balance it with accountability. Situational leadership theory offers a framework for adapting leadership based on team members' competence and confidence (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988), though critics argue it

oversimplifies complex team dynamics (Pigola et al., 2024). Transformational leadership also faces criticism for relying too heavily on charisma, which may not suit all cultural or organisational contexts (Crede et al., 2019).

In virtual environments, where informal cues are limited, structured communication is essential. Zettna et al. (2025) highlight the need for defined roles, expectations, and communication rhythms to maintain alignment. However, excessive structure can hinder creativity and reduce flexibility, especially in teams that thrive on innovation (Acar et al., 2019).

Participants also viewed hybrid work positively, combining remote flexibility with the relational benefits of in-person interaction. Still, hybrid models must be carefully managed to avoid disparities in visibility and inclusion between virtual and on-site staff (Choudhury et al., 2021). Overall, virtual leadership must strike a balance between freedom and structure, fostering trust, clarity, and performance while adapting to the evolving nature of virtual work.

### 5.1.3 LEADERSHIP ADAPTATION & TECHNOLOGY

The third theme explores how digital technologies and AI are reshaping leadership in virtual work environments. Participants noted that these tools boost efficiency, responsiveness, and global reach. Yet, they also voiced concerns about technology's limits in fostering emotional connection, empathy, and deep thinking. This reflects Avolio et al. (2014) ideas, who argue that effective digital leadership goes beyond technical knowledge; it requires maintaining meaningful, human-centered relationships. Media Richness Theory supports this, suggesting that digital platforms differ in how well they convey emotional nuance, especially when non-verbal cues are missing (Ishii et al., 2025).

There was also unease about growing dependence on AI for decision-making, with fears that it could weaken human judgment and reduce intellectual engagement. Scholars like Gerlich (2025), and Floridi et al. (2018) stress the need for ethical oversight and transparency in algorithmic systems. Leaders must not only grasp how AI works but also evaluate its outputs critically. Kim et al. (2024) highlight the importance of analytical rigor and intellectual discipline in navigating complex, data-driven contexts.

Still, some researchers challenge the idea that technology erodes emotional connection. DeFilippis et al. (2022) suggest that people can adapt to digital platforms, improving their ability to communicate over time. This implies emotional engagement is not lost, it evolves with experience and digital fluency. Critics of Media Richness Theory also argue that it oversimplifies virtual communication, ignoring factors like team familiarity, platform design, and shifting norms (Gajendran et al., 2024). While ethical concerns about AI are valid, others point out that, when used responsibly, algorithms can enhance decision-making by offering speed, consistency, and reducing bias (Bird et al., 2020).

In short, leading effectively in the digital age means balancing tech skills with empathy, ethics, and critical thinking. This balance is not fixed, it must adapt to new technologies, user behaviors, and organisational needs.

## 5.2 ADAPTIVE RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Developed through the integration of three central themes, relational leadership, structural design, and technological adaptation, this study develops a grounded theory of *Adaptive Relational Leadership* within virtual work environments in Ireland.

The findings indicate that successful leadership in digital settings requires more than simply transferring traditional leadership practices into virtual environments. Instead, it demands a detailed approach integrating emotional intelligence, strategic clarity, and digital competence. Leaders must invest in cultivating trust, empathy, and psychological safety to mitigate the emotional distance that often accompanies virtual work collaboration. These interpersonal attributes are not secondary but fundamental to maintaining team cohesion and sustained engagement.

At the same time, the structural dimension of leadership remains critical. Participants emphasised the importance of clear expectations, consistent feedback, and autonomy balanced with accountability. This reflects a shift from control-based monitoring to a more empowering leadership style, where clarity and structure replace informal cues lost in virtual settings. Hybrid

work models were frequently cited as effective, but only when designed with intentionality to ensure equity and inclusion across virtual and in-person team members.

The technological landscape adds another layer of complexity. While digital tools and AI offer efficiency and expanded reach, they also present challenges in expressing emotional tone and maintaining critical thinking. As a result, leaders must be digitally literate and ethically aware, capable of engaging with technology without becoming overly reliant on it. The theory suggests that effective virtual leadership is adaptive, requiring leaders to respond to evolving team needs, technological shifts, and cultural dynamics with a combination of emotional awareness, strategic planning, and critical thinking. This model views leadership as a dynamic process influenced by human relationships, structural strategy, and technological advancement.

### 5.3 THEORETICAL INTEGRATION

The grounded theory of *Adaptive Relational Leadership* draws on a range of established frameworks to explain how leadership evolves in virtual work environments. It integrates emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) to highlight the importance of empathy and trust in virtual teams. Structural clarity and autonomy are supported by transformational leadership (Bass and Riggio, 2006), self-determination theory (Slemp et al., 2021), and situational leadership (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988), emphasising the need for flexible oversight. Technological engagement is framed through media richness theory (Ishii et al, 2019) and ethical concerns around AI (Floridi et al., 2018; Binns, 2018), reinforcing the role of critical thinking (Kim et al, 2024) in digital decision-making. Cultural intelligence (Livermore, 2025) further expands the model, recognising the complexity of leading across diverse and distributed teams. Together, these theories form a cohesive foundation for understanding leadership as a dynamic, relational, and context-sensitive practice in the digital contemporary age.

### 5.4 THEORY APPLICATION

The *Adaptive Relational Leadership* model serves as a practical guide for navigating leadership in virtual settings. It can support the development of training programs that emphasize empathy, ethical engagement with technology, and flexible communication strategies. Organisations may adopt the framework to create inclusive policies, support team cohesion, and ensure fairness in

virtual environments. Additionally, the theory offers a valuable basis for scholarly exploration into digital leadership and multicultural team dynamics. It equips leaders to respond effectively to the evolving demands of virtual collaboration by integrating relational insight, strategic structure, and digital fluency.

## 5.5 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study sheds light on virtual leadership through the lens of Adaptive Relational Leadership, several limitations should be considered.

The participant pool was small and limited to Ireland, which may restrict how broadly the findings apply, especially since no individuals aged 25–34 were included, and there was an uneven spread across other age groups. Additionally, nine out of twelve participants identified as female, creating a gender imbalance. Since leadership styles can be shaped by age, gender, and cultural background, future research would benefit from a more diverse and representative sample.

Although many participants worked in global organisations, differences in culture, infrastructure, and economic context may still affect how applicable these insights are outside Ireland (English, 2017). Measuring employee engagement also poses challenges, as it is influenced by both organisational culture and individual motivation, making it difficult to assess consistently (Tian & Zhang, 2020).

Another limitation stems from the use of self-reported data. Participants may have shaped their responses based on what they thought was expected, rather than sharing their full, authentic experiences (Kohntopp & McCann, 2020). This kind of bias can obscure important relational dynamics. To strengthen future studies, researchers could use observational methods, longitudinal approaches, or combine qualitative insights with quantitative data to improve accuracy and reduce subjectivity (Creswell, 2014).

Finally, while digital tools offer new ways for leaders to adapt, they do not fully replace the nuances of face-to-face interaction. Overreliance on virtual communication can sometimes weaken trust and collaboration (Silva, 2022). As AI and immersive technologies become more embedded

in the workplace (Barnes et al., 2024), further research is needed to explore how these tools affect leadership and team dynamics over time.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study explores how leadership is evolving in response to Ireland's evolution toward virtual work. It considers how virtual settings affect employee engagement, how leaders are responding to these changes, and how well current leadership styles are working in keeping teams connected and motivated.

This research adopted a qualitative approach, drawing on contemporary studies in leadership, employee engagement, and virtual work. Guided by grounded theory, the findings revealed a growing need for leadership that is both adaptable and relational, particularly within virtual and hybrid work environments.

Interview data highlighted that effective leaders do not rely on fixed strategies. Instead, they continuously adjust their approach to meet the evolving needs of geographically dispersed and culturally diverse teams. Several recurring themes emerged from participant responses, including trust, empathy, flexibility, and intentional communication. The latter was described as a deliberate and emotionally aware form of messaging, leaders who communicate with clarity and strategic sensitivity were seen as more successful in fostering engagement.

Participants also emphasized the importance of leader availability and digital proficiency. It was not simply the use of technology that mattered, but how leaders used digital tools to create connection, visibility, and support. Emotional support and autonomy were identified as key drivers of employee well-being and long-term commitment, especially in virtual settings where individuals often seek reassurance and recognition beyond task completion.

Interestingly, while most participants expressed satisfaction with their current virtual work arrangements, the majority indicated a preference for hybrid models. This suggests that occasional in-person interaction continues to hold value in maintaining team cohesion and emotional connection.

From these insights, the Theory of Adaptive Relational Leadership was developed. This framework reflects a style of leadership that is responsive, emotionally intelligent, and culturally aware. Leaders who tailor their communication and engagement strategies to the unique

preferences of their team members are better equipped to bridge the physical and psychological gaps inherent in virtual work. Rather than following rigid models, they build inclusive and high-performing environments by leading with empathy and contextual understanding.

The findings suggest a shift in leadership development priorities. Digital fluency, emotional intelligence, and contextual awareness are no longer optional, they are essential capabilities for leaders navigating the complexities of modern work.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR LEADERS

INTERVIEW QUESTION	PURPOSE FOR ASKING QUESTION	PROBING QUESTIONS
<i>INTRODUCTION AND DEMOGRAPHIC SECTION</i>		
<b>1)</b> Thank you for agreeing to participate today. I really appreciate it. How are you feeling today?	The purpose of asking this question is to build rapport with the participants to ensure that they are feeling comfortable and at ease.	Before we start, do you have any questions you would like to ask?
<b>2)</b> I'm going to ask some demographic details about yourself. Please could you provide me your: a.) Age group (25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55+) b.) Gender c.) Highest qualifications. d.) The industry you're based in currently. e.) Company size (Less than 50, 50-199, 200-499, 500-999, 1,000+ employees). f.) Number of years of work experience.	The reason for this question is to obtain the demographic details of the respondents, as part of ensuring adequate variability amongst the sample group.	
<b>3)</b> What is your current position/title, and could you briefly describe this role?	This question is asked to gain a bit of context of the participant, and to gain further understanding of the participant's role in the organisation they are currently working at. It also serves to confirm variability amongst the sample.	
<b>4)</b> How long have you worked in your current position and how long have you worked at your organisation?	This question will be asked to obtain further background information on the participant. It also confirms their working position and where they are currently in their careers.	
<b>5)</b> Please can you describe the current work arrangement for	This question enables the researcher to know the current working conditions in which	Are you happy with this work arrangement?

	what experience they had prior to the transition.	
<b>12)</b> Could you please describe the competencies that you have developed due to the increased virtual operation?	The purpose of this question is to establish what competencies were developed as virtual leaders. This question also determines the necessary critical competencies needed for optimal virtual leadership.	
<i>ENGAGEMENT, COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS IN VIRTUAL TEAMS</i>		
<b>13)</b> Could you please describe the way you communicated with your team before working virtually, and now?	This question aims to determine how frequently technology was used prior to working remotely as it may indicate how ready the team was to shift into the virtual sphere and how much of a shock it was to adapt to this new working condition.	Could you elaborate on the differences in how communication is conducted now in comparison to before working virtually, and how, if so, communication has changed?  Do you feel that this form of communication is effective or ineffective? Please explain.
<b>14)</b> Can you please tell me about the interaction and relationships you have within the team?	This question is intended to establish the current social dynamics within the virtual teams with which the virtual leader operates to gain further context.	
<b>15)</b> How do you think that the relationship between you and your team changed due to the practice of virtual leadership?	This question is intended to establish how technologically mediated environments impact the social dynamics and relationships within working teams and to see if e-leadership influences this.	Can you tell me why you think this is the case?
<b>16)</b> What leadership practices did you initiate to maintain your relationships with your employees and other leaders since working virtually?	The purpose of this question is to establish what practices are useful in conveying the same emotional and social experience when communicating digitally	Are you still using these practices?  Have you found them helpful?

12) Could you please describe the competencies that you have developed due to the increased virtual operation?	The purpose of this question is to establish what competencies were developed as virtual leaders. This question also determines the necessary critical competencies needed for optimal virtual leadership.	
<i>ENGAGEMENT, COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS IN VIRTUAL TEAMS</i>		
13) Could you please describe the way you communicated with your team before working virtually, and now?	This question aims to determine how frequently technology was used prior to working remotely as it may indicate how ready the team was to shift into the virtual sphere and how much of a shock it was to adapt to this new working condition.	Could you elaborate on the differences in how communication is conducted now in comparison to before working virtually, and how, if so, communication has changed?  Do you feel that this form of communication is effective or ineffective? Please explain.
14) Can you please tell me about the interaction and relationships you have within the team?	This question is intended to establish the current social dynamics within the virtual teams with which the virtual leader operates to gain further context.	
15) How do you think that the relationship between you and your team changed due to the practice of virtual leadership?	This question is intended to establish how technologically mediated environments impact the social dynamics and relationships within working teams and to see if e-leadership influences this.	Can you tell me why you think this is the case?
16) What leadership practices did you initiate to maintain your relationships with your employees and other leaders <u>since</u> working virtually?	The purpose of this question is to establish what practices are useful in conveying the same emotional and social experience when communicating digitally	Are you still using these practices?  Have you found them helpful?

	within virtual teams for virtual leaders.	
17) How do you provide support to your employees within virtual teams?	This question serves to determine what kind of support has been provided to virtual teams by e-leaders.	
<i>VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP: STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES</i>		
18) Could you please elaborate on situations where you feel limited by digital tools?	The purpose of this question is to hear the participants' views on how technology has limited them since technology is essential to the practice of e-leadership.	Have you done anything to help overcome these limitations?  Do you still experience this limitation currently?
19) What are the benefits of leading virtual teams as a virtual leader?	This question explicitly asks about the direct benefits that leaders have encountered.	
20) What are the top leadership challenges that you have faced or are facing when leading teams as a virtual leader, if any?	This question explicitly asks the direct challenges that virtual leaders have encountered.	How did you overcome these leadership challenges?
<i>SWEEPER QUESTION</i>		
21) To be effective in a virtual setting, what does a team leader need to do?	This question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question has been tailored in a way that allows participants to express competencies that they believe e-leaders require as well as provide advice of what e-leaders should do to be deemed effective.	
22) Are there things she/he should not do?	This sweeper question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question has been tailored in a way to gain insight regarding the negative experiences participants have had leading as an e-leader, the lessons they have learnt as well as any specific advice for other e-leaders to prevent them from	

	jeopardizing the success of the virtual teams that they lead. FUTURE TRENDS	
<b>23)</b> How do you think artificial intelligence and automation will influence leadership and employee engagement in the coming years?		
<b>24)</b> How do you think organizations can support leadership development to overcome the challenges of virtual work environments?		
<b>25)</b> What advice would you give to leaders who are about to transform into the virtual realm leading virtually?	<p>This sweeper question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview.</p> <p>Specifically, this question is tailored in such a way that it focuses on the advice (positive and/or negative) shared by participants to potential other leaders based on their experiences leading as a virtual leader.</p>	

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS

INTERVIEW QUESTION	PURPOSE FOR ASKING QUESTION	PROBING QUESTIONS
<b>INTRODUCTION AND DEMOGRAPHIC SECTION</b>		
1) Thank you for agreeing to participate today. I really appreciate it. How are you feeling today?	The purpose of asking this question is to build rapport with the participants to ensure that they are feeling comfortable and at ease.	Before we start, do you have any questions you would <u>want</u> to ask?
2) I'm going to be asking for some demographic details about yourself. Please could you provide me your: a.) Age group (25-24, 35-44, 45-54, 55+) b.) Gender c.) Highest qualifications. d.) The industry you're based in currently. e.) Company size (Less than 50, 50-199, 200-499, 500-999, 1,000+ employees). f.) Number of years of work experience.	The reason for this question is to obtain the demographic details of the respondents, as part of ensuring adequate variability amongst the sample group.	
3) What is your current position/title, and could you briefly describe this role?	This question is asked to gain a bit of context of the participant, and to gain further understanding of the participant's role in the organisation they're currently working at. It also serves to confirm variability amongst the sample.	
4) How long have you worked in your current position and how long have you worked at your organisation?	This question will be asked to obtain further background information on the participants. It also confirms their working position and where they are currently in their careers.	
<b>DESCRIPTION OF TEAM AND ROLE</b>		
5) Please can you describe the current work arrangement for your team (Full-Time Virtual (5 days a week), Hybrid Virtual (3-4 days a week), Occasional Virtual (1-2 days a week)).	This question enables the researcher to know the current working conditions in which the participant operates within. Would you mind explaining how this works?	Are you happy with this work arrangement?  Please explain.

6) What has been your experience so far being led virtually?	By asking this question, it allows for the participants to explicitly state their personal experiences being led by a virtual leader within virtual teams.	
<b>LEADERSHIP &amp; VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMATION</b>		
7) What is your understanding of leadership, and virtual leadership?	This question is intended to gain an understanding of what leadership and virtual leadership mean to the participants.	
8) Based on your understanding of leadership, how do you translate the idea of traditional leadership into virtual leadership practice?	This question is intended to establish participants' personal view on what they believed the leader needs to do to translate leading conventionally to leading virtually to get the same effect/output essentially.	What specific methods have you noticed your leader used to help sustain traditional leadership practices?
9) How in your experience has leadership changed from working in person to working virtually or in a hybrid work situation?	This question intends to address how participants view their leader in the virtual environment compared to how they view their leader previously when being led traditionally (i.e., in-person).	From your experience, how would you say being led by an e-leader in the virtual environment differs compared to being led traditionally?
10) What are some qualities of virtual leadership to sustain employee engagement that you believe in, and feel should be practiced?	The purpose of this question is to determine what competencies are needed for successful virtual leadership.	How do they compare to traditional leadership?
11) What were your initial thoughts when you were introduced to the new practices of technology?	The purpose of this question is to establish how readily prepared participants felt with transitioning into the virtual realm as well as determine what experience they had prior to the transition.	How did your leader assist in the transition to a virtual team?
12) Could you please describe the competencies that you have developed due to the increased digital operation?	The purpose of this question is to establish what, if any, competencies were developed because of leading as virtual leaders. This question also determines the necessary critical competencies needed for optimal e-leadership.	
<b>ENGAGEMENT, COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS IN VIRTUAL TEAMS</b>		

13) Can you please tell me about the relationship and interaction within the team?	This question is intended to establish the current social dynamics within the virtual teams with which the e-leader operates to gain further context.	Could you elaborate on the differences in how communication is conducted now in comparison to before COVID-19, and how, if so, how communication has changed?
14) Do you think that the relationship between you and your team has changed due to your current work situation?	This question is intended to establish how technologically mediated environments impact the social dynamics and relationships within working teams and see if virtual leadership influences this.	Do you feel that this form of communication is effective or ineffective? Please explain.
15) How has your relationship changed with your manager?	The question establishes whether the act of remote leadership has impacted virtual team members' relationship with their leaders.	
16) What, if any, leadership practices did you notice that your leader initiated which helped in maintaining your relationship with your leader and work colleagues?	This question establishes what practices are useful in conveying the same emotional and social experience when communicating digitally within virtual teams for remote leaders.	
17) How does your leader provide support to you and your colleagues within virtual teams? Is there anything more that they could do?		Are they able to create a supportive environment?
<b><i>VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP: STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES</i></b>		
18) Could you please elaborate on situations where you <u>felt</u> like you are limited by digital tools?	The purpose of this question is to hear the participants' views on how technology has limited them since technology is essential to the practice of virtual leadership.	
19) What do you think are the benefits of being led virtually?	This question explicitly asks about the direct benefits that virtual team members have	

20) What do you think are the challenges of being led virtually?	encountered with regards to virtual leadership.	
21) To be effective in a virtual setting, what does a team leader need to do?	This question explicitly asks the direct challenges that virtual leaders have encountered.	What do you think virtual leaders can do to overcome these challenges?
<b><i>SWEEPER QUESTION</i></b>		
22) Are there things she/he should not do?	This question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question has been tailored in a way that allows participants to express competencies that they believe e-leaders require as well as provide advice of what e-leaders should do to be deemed effective.	
23) How do you think artificial intelligence and automation will influence leadership and employee engagement in the coming years?	This sweeper question provides an opportunity for participants to detail anything that had not been addressed in the interview. Specifically, this question has been tailored in a way to gain insight regarding the negative experiences' participants have had leading as a virtual leader, the lessons they have learnt as well as any specific advice for other virtual leaders to prevent them from jeopardizing the success of the virtual teams that they lead.	
24) How do you think organizations can support leadership development to overcome the challenges of virtual work environments?		