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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to explore the dynamics of remote work and its impact on employee engagement in the post-COVID-19 epidemic era. Using a qualitative approach, researchers interviewed 20 employees from diverse industries in Pakistan and investigated the factors influencing engagement, challenges faced, and strategies for maintaining high levels of productivity and satisfaction in employees. Findings revealed key themes around flexibility, communication, technological adaptation, hybrid work models, and organizational support. Moreover, these themes provided valuable insights for organizations to navigate the evolving work landscape. The study is beneficial for managers and organizations to refine their remote work policies to maximize employee engagement and well-being.

Keywords: Remote work, post-COVID-19, employee engagement, Hybrid work model, qualitative

1. Introduction

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the nature of global workplaces has changed drastically, and remote work has become the one way of working styles in many organizations. This shift to remote work was initially introduced to keep workflows running smoothly while reducing the spread of the coronavirus in the surrounding environment. However, today it is also generally implemented by organizations as a long-term work strategy. As per the study of Toscano and Zappala (2020), this shift to remote work has many benefits for employees e.g. work flexibility, more autonomy, less travel time and costs, but it also has several disadvantages that can adversely impact employee well-being, performance, personal life and mental health.

The shift to remote work has radically disturbed the work-life balance of employees. Employees are often constantly busy managing their work responsibilities and household responsibilities, which ultimately leads them to an “always-on” work culture which causes increasing stress levels and tiring work hours. Kniffin et al., (2021) viewed that employees' lack of physical interaction with colleagues can cause them to feel disconnected, and socially isolated, and have psychological issues such as depression, fatigue, and anxiety. These challenges underscore the importance of comprehending the long-term impact of remote work on employees' performance, engagement, and well-being, especially in the post-COVID-19 landscape where remote work is expected to continue to play a key role in the workplace. As organizations adapt this shift to remote work, understanding its drastic impact on employee engagement towards work is critical.

Employee engagement is described as the level of organizational commitment and passion that an employee has towards his/her job, and it is one of the important causes of job satisfaction, performance, and retention of employees. As per the study by Gallup (2021), engaged employees are more often to endorse creativity, upgrade business outcomes, and go beyond their job duties. However, there might be substantial differences in the dynamics of employee engagement between remote work and traditional office settings. Employee lack of in-person interaction, dependence on digital tools, and shifts in communication styles can impact employee connection with their colleagues and jobs. This post-COVID-19 era depicts a rare opportunity to better understand these dynamics closely and helps to create plans for managing high levels of employee engagement in a recent remote or hybrid work setting.

Some recent studies have painted both the positive and negative impact of remote work on employee engagement. Gartner (2022) proved that remote work offers work flexibility and better management of work-life balance which can lead to greater job satisfaction and employee engagement. Moreover, employee engagement has not decreased with the long work-from-home hours due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kicheva, 2022). On the other hand, Adisa et al. (2023) viewed that the sudden shift from in-person to remote working brought about employee insecurity and online presenteeism, thereby negatively impacting the engagement of employees toward work.

The significance of the current study depends on its ability to shed light on the evolving landscape of remote work and how it affects employee engagement in the post-COVID-19 era. Some previous studies have highlighted both the advantages and disadvantages of remote working, but it is still unclear how these factors directly affect employee engagement in the current context, where remote working is widely accepted as the norm rather than a just short-term strategy. By concentrating on qualitative data from diverse industries, this study intends to uncover detailed and context-specific factors that impact employee engagement and offer practical recommendations for organizations to further enhance productivity and job satisfaction in a remote work setting. The current study will address the existing gap by offering a greater understanding of the association between remote work practices and employee engagement, particularly in the long-term post-pandemic situation.

By keeping in view these factors, this qualitative study aims to investigate the effect of remote work on employee engagement in the post-COVID-19 era. By conducting in-depth interviews of employees from diverse industries, this study intended to identify obstacles to remote work, determine the factors that impact employee engagement, and highlight practical solutions for organizations to maintain productivity and job satisfaction. The insight gained from this study will aid organizations in optimizing their policies on remote work and fostering an engaging work culture.

2. Literature Review

Some past studies highlighted both the advantages and disadvantages of remote work. Flexibility and autonomy were often considered as key benefits of remote work that contributed to improved work-life balance of employees and higher work motivation (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Virtanen, 2020). While the feeling of isolation, communication barriers, decreased social interaction and challenges in work collaboration were some disadvantages of remote work (Counts, 2021; Flores, 2019; Virtanen, 2020). As per Kahn (1990), several factors such as leadership, workplace culture, and individual circumstances have

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an impact on employee engagement. The post-COVID-19 era offered unique opportunities and difficulties to comprehend these dynamics in a new context.

The role of an organizational supportive culture in sustaining employee engagement in remote settings is contingent. A positive and supportive work environment characterized by empathetic leadership, frequent check-ins, and acknowledgment might lessen some of the drawbacks of remote work (Wang et al., 2021). Leaders play a crucial role in setting the tone for remote work and maintaining employee engagement depends on their capacity to promote diversity and a feeling of community (Carrillo et al., 2021).

Microsoft (2020) conducted a study that highlighted the significance of organizational practices that promoted employees' well-being and professional development. Organizations that invest in virtual team-building exercises, mental health resources, and continuous learning opportunities helped employees feel valued and connected, thus enhancing their engagement. Furthermore, open communication about organizational objectives and modifications of the organization can foster confidence and reduce ambiguity which will increase engagement (Kniffin et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has hastened the appearance of remote work which has fundamentally changed the traditional work environment, and it has introduced new dynamics and difficulties. This literature review assessed the current trends and insights in this sprouting field from the past five years on remote work and employee engagement.

2.1. Benefits of Remote work

Remote work proposed many benefits that can directly impact on engagement of employees in the organizations. Flexibility was one of the most frequently cited benefits in the research that allowed employees to better manage their work-life balance (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Virtanen, 2020). As per the study by Buffer (2022), 97% of remote work employees suggested remote work to their colleagues due to the flexibility benefits it provided. According to Gartner (2022), this flexibility further led to increased employee engagement and higher job satisfaction.

Furthermore, online modes of working reduced commuting time, and led to enhanced well-being and productivity of employees. Kortsch et al. (2022) proved that workers in self-selected environments and working hours were happier in their jobs than their on-site colleagues. In addition, the capacity to design a personalized workspace boosted the overall productivity, efficiency, focus, and engagement of employees (Lund et al., 2021). As per the study of Makikangas et al., (2022), an effective homework environment, job-related self-efficacy, and high organizational support positively contributed to retaining high employee work engagement during remote work.

2.2. Detriments of Remote work

Despite its advantages, remote work originated with a lot of significant challenges that can decrease employee engagement. Sense of isolation was one of the primary concerns among all that can increase from remote work. Moreover, the lack of in-person interactions led to feelings of loneliness and alienation from the team (Bailey & Kurland, 2020). Another study viewed that available information and communication technology infrastructure were crucial challenges to remote work in their respective areas (Arunprasad et al., 2022; Urbaniec et al., 2022). Employee job motivation was significantly affected by both professional isolation and access to communication-enhancing technology (Sarfray et al., 2021). The motivation of employees at work was greatly impacted by both professional isolation and access to communication-enhancing technology (ACET).

2.3. Hybrid Work Models

After the post-COVID-19 epidemic era, hybrid work arrangements that blend in-office and remote work have commenced. The study by Lund et al. (2021) proved that hybrid work models raised employee engagement by giving flexibility and encouraging in-person collaboration when needed. Another study emphasized the necessity for organizations to change their HRM procedures due to the shift of workplace dynamics into remote and hybrid work models (Sokilic, 2022). Moreover, it underlined the importance of workplace flexibility in determining the form of work in the future and how it impacts on organizational effectiveness and employees' well-being.

2.4. Employee engagement

In past research, the idea of employee engagement has gained popularity in management research because it is considered essential for promoting positive human and organizational outcomes (Bailey, 2022; May et al., 2004). Employee engagement is considered important for any type of organization, especially for companies that work with remote employees. As per Turner (2020), employee engagement was a positive work-related state where employees were emotionally and rationally connected to their organization and jobs. It led to proactive and motivated behavior that increased both personal and organizational outcomes. There were many ways in which organizations benefited from remote workers. For instance, companies spent less money on office spaces and saw their employees more productive because employees commuted less and devoted more of their time to work (Forbes, 2017)

As per Chandani et al. (2016), employee engagement, in turn, resulted in a decrease in employee turnover intention and a rise in innovative work-related behaviors of employees. Moreover, they proved that organizations could increase engagement through opportunity thinking, enhancing employee decision-making, and commitment. Employee engagement has a statistical relationship with employee productivity, retention, safety, and customer satisfaction (Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002). Employee engagement has a relationship to some outcomes that were considered important to organizations such as safety, productivity, employee retention, and customer service (Harter et al. 2002; Little et al., 2006).

To keep the employees engaged and motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations have used various online engagement activities such as team meet-ups over video conferences, short online game sessions, virtual courses, communication exercises, live sessions for new-skill training, online counseling sessions, etc. These initiatives proved helpful for both employees and organizations to promote skill development and maintain morale (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). The study by De-la-Calle-Duran and Rodriguez-Sanchez (2021) proposed that conciliation, cultivation, confidence, compensation, and communication acted as key drivers of employees' engagement and well-being during the COVID-19 epidemic.

2.5. Employee engagement and remote working

The study of Makikangas et al., (2022) viewed that organizational support, a functional homework environment, job-related self-efficacy, and job crafting were key supporting factors for sustainable engagement of employees and these factors highlighted some strategies to enhance well being of employees in multi-locational work settings. During the COVID-19 epidemic era, the transition in labor from in-person to remote work led to increased work intensity, online presenteeism, instability, and poor adaptability to distant work. These stress factors depleted essential resources thereby negatively impacting employee

engagement levels at the workplace (Adisa et al., 2023). These stress-related variables put a great deal of pressure on employees' mental health, and wellbeing and generate psychological strain.

Conservation of resources (COR) theory was considered an important theoretical framework for placing the attitudinal and behavioral effects of stress variables to both work and nonwork (Hobfoll et al., 2003). The fundamental premise was that employees strived to retain, nurture, and preserve valuable resources or anything that they believed to be useful in achieving their goals. Employees considered these resources as valuable factors such as material (money, status, shelter, or physical environment), social (interpersonal support and mutual respect), and personal (positive self-regard and optimism), and these factors helped to improve well-being and sense of meaning in life (Hobfoll et al., 2003). According to COR theory, working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic era depleted important social and personal resources undermining one's ability to prosper and accomplish work-related goals. These resources include the goal of the workplace, positive coworker relationships, individual accountability, and support systems (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Van Veldhoven et al., 2020)

The study of Swaroop and Sharma (2022) revealed a significant relationship between employee engagement parameters and HR roles such as employee champion, change agent, and strategic partner in a remote work context. Another study examined the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on remote working and employee engagement, and it highlighted the need for the human resource department to equip their employees with some key skills for gaining effective engagement. It proposed giving employees more autonomy, involving employees in future organizational planning, providing flexible practices, and enhancing accountability (Pass & Ridgway, 2022). The objectives of the current study are:

- To investigate the experiences and perceptions of employees about working remotely and its impact on their engagement in the post-COVID-19 era.
- To identify the key factors and challenges affecting employee engagement in remote work environments and provide organizations with practical advice on how to improve employee engagement.

3. Methodology

This study is based on an interpretive philosophical approach designed to explore respondents' subjective experiences of remote working in the context of COVID-19. According to Saunders et al. (2009), interpretivism enabled researchers to observe, gather, and deduce information by drawing inferences from occurring patterns throughout an event.

Collectively there are two reasons for selecting this qualitative research approach in the current study: i) it permits a more thorough investigation of the subjective knowledge and arbitrary decisions connected to a certain lived experience and ii) it is a useful addition to previous studies on remote working and employee engagement, most of those studies have employed quantitative methods that tend to overlook the various decision making nuances within human experiences.

In this study, the snowballing sampling technique is used to select respondents from the initial respondents who were selected at the beginning of our research. A purposive sampling technique was further used to reinforce this method and make sure the sample we chose was representative of the study population (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The eligibility criteria of this study were that respondents must be residents of Pakistan from different industries and working from home because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights. A total of twenty employees across various industries agreed to participate in the study, ensuring a diverse sample in terms of age, gender, job role, and experience with remote work. The participants represented different sectors and occupations such as accounting and finance, sales, marketing, project management, etc. (see demographic details below Table 1)

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Marital status	No. of kids	Occupation	Years of experience
Ali Ahmed	35	Male	Married	2	Marketing executive	9
Hassan	47	Male	Married	3	Accountant	8
Anaya	31	Female	Married	1	Marketing officer	4
Rashid	29	Male	Single	0	Lecturer	4
Rubab	37	Female	Married	3	Lawyer	4
Saba	42	Female	Married	2	Accounts officer	3
Ahsan	28	Male	Single	0	Admin officer	6
Jameel	47	Male	Married	3	Administrator	7
Naeem	36	Male	Married	2	Auditor	8
Firdos	38	Female	Married	1	HR officer	9
Zaheer	41	Male	Married	3	Sales officer	6
Asma	27	Female	Single	0	Lecturer	5
Huma	29	Female	Single	0	Finance officer	6
Imran	46	Male	Married	2	HR specialist	8
Shahzad	32	Male	Single	0	Council officer	9
Hadiya	35	Female	Married	1	HR officer	4
Javed	26	Male	Single	0	Administrator	7
Rafia	48	Female	Married	4	Project manager	10
Aneela	37	Female	Married	3	IT manager	8
Yousaf	29	Male	Single	0	Auditor	5

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between November and December 2022 with a time duration of thirty to forty minutes with detailed insights. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. The focus of the interviews was on how the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions had negatively impacted the participants' work engagement levels, forcing them to work from home.

4. Findings

The analysis identified five major themes that influenced employee engagement in remote work settings: i) flexibility and work-life balance; ii) communication and collaboration; iii) technological adaptation; iv) organizational support and culture, and v) hybrid work models. These themes reflected various types of work and nonwork stressors that lower employee work engagement levels in remote workers. Given the diversity of our data, it is evident how remote work in the context of COVID-19 may seriously impair employees' ability to do their tasks effectively.

4.1. Flexibility and Work-Life Balance

Participants consistently stated that the flexibility provided by remote work, and significantly enriched their work-life balance, and increased their work engagement and job satisfaction. Employees appreciated the capacity to better balance personal and professional obligations more effectively which reduced stress and increased overall well-being. Some respondents mentioned, "Remote work enables me to maintain my productivity at work while spending more time with my family as well." Garner's report (2022) discovered that flexibility is a key driver of employee satisfaction and engagement in remote work settings, which supports this idea. The study of Toscano and Zappala (2020) proved that remote work has work flexibility and autonomy. However, some participants also highlighted the difficulties in managing work-life balance, accentuating the need for organizations to offer clear support and assistance to guide employees to maintain this work-life balance.

4.2. Communication and Collaboration

In the remote work model, keeping employee engagement has been found crucially dependent on effective communication. Participants accentuated the significance of recurrent check-ins, open communication, and the use of collaborative tools for the purpose of staying connected with their team members. Lack of impulsive interactions and person-to-person communication were found to be important challenges and ultimately it caused feelings of isolation in employees. Some respondents mentioned, "It's harder to build relationships and feel like a member of the team when you only interact through screens. "This finding is in accordance with the study conducted by Marlow et al. (2017), who accentuated the significance of virtual communication and the potential negative influence of communication barriers on work engagement of employees. Now organizations can reduce this challenge by introducing an open communication culture and offering training programs on effective virtual collaboration.

4.3. Technological Adaptation

The shift from traditional workplace dynamics to remote work required rapid technology adaptation which performed a crucial role in maintaining employee engagement. Though, some employees initially struggled to understand this technological shift and some reported that digital tools ultimately enhance their efficiency and connectivity with others. For facilitating communication and collaboration, some digital tools such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, zoom, etc were widely utilized. However, the phenomenon of "videoconference fatigue" was also noted, with participants expressing exhaustion from prolonged virtual videoconference meetings. Some respondents mentioned, "Back-to-back virtual meetings are tiring. It's hard to stay engaged and involved." This finding is in accordance with the study of Doring et al. (2022), who discussed the mental impact of prolonged videoconferencing fatigue on employees. Now organizations need to balance the use of technology and provide staff members the necessary assistance and training accordingly.

4.4. Organizational Support and Culture

The role of organizational support and culture emerged as a crucial factor in retaining employee engagement and productivity. Respondents valued empathetic leadership, consistent feedback, acknowledgment, and opportunities for professional growth. A supportive work environment characterized by open communication and inclusive practices was found to be crucial for boosting employee morale, engagement, and motivation. Some respondents mentioned, "When my manager checks in regularly and acknowledges my work, I feel more connected and engaged towards work." This finding is in accordance with the study conducted by Wang et al. (2021), who accentuated the importance of organizational support and positive work environment on employee engagement in remote work environments. Now organizations can boost the engagement level of employees by providing continuous learning opportunities, mental health resources, and virtual team-building actions.

4.5. Hybrid work models

The appearance of hybrid work environments which combined both in-office and remote work was deemed as a promising strategy to take the benefits of both work settings. Most of the respondents preferred to choose a hybrid model which provided them flexibility and in-person options for team building and cooperation. This technique was supposed to balance the benefits of both remote work such as flexibility and autonomy and office work such as social interaction and direct collaboration. Some respondents mentioned, "Having the option to work both from home and the office is the best of both worlds." The same was the finding of a study conducted by Lund (2021), which accentuated that hybrid work models can enhance the engagement of employees by providing the best aspects of both in-office and remote work models. In the same way, another study highlighted the significant impact of hybrid work models on major HR strategies, and functions in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era (Verma et al., 2023). Now employers should develop comprehensive hybrid work models that take these factors into account.

4.6. Discussion

The findings of the current study are consistent with existing literature on remote work and employee engagement. The findings emphasized the significance of flexibility, effective communication, organizational support, hybrid work models, and technological adaptation in determining employee engagement. Work-life balance and job satisfaction have been found to be significantly improved by flexible work arrangements which enable employees to better balance their personal and professional responsibilities more effectively. However, it was still difficult to maintain boundaries between personal life and work, thus organizational support systems and policies that were specifically designed to address this issue necessary to minimize any negative effects. In remote work settings, effective communication and coordination were recognized as crucial for retaining team cohesion and raising employee engagement. It emphasized how important it is for organizations to support their employees' virtual collaboration skills by offering training and investing in communication technologies.

The post-COVID-19 pandemic era bestows an opportunity for organizations to review their engagement strategies and take advantage of the benefits of remote work while resolving its drawbacks. Now organizations should concentrate on creating a supportive and inclusive remote work culture, making investments in technologies, and offering continuous professional development opportunities.

5. Conclusion & Future Implications

Remote work has now become an integral part of the modern work environment, and it has a wide variety of effects on employee engagement. The present study empirically provided information about important factors that influence on work engagement of employees especially in remote work settings and it gave practical recommendations to businesses as well. In the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, organizations can boost the work engagement of their employees by giving priority to flexibility, communication and collaboration, technological adaptation, organizational support, and hybrid work settings.

Looking forward, the managerial implication of the current study recommended that organizations should improve their existing remote work settings and policies. Moreover, managers should utilize the findings of current research to maximize their employees' well-being and work engagement. This required the strong development of technological infrastructures, implementation of effective communication strategies, and enriching a supportive workplace culture that gives high importance to acknowledgment and employee engagement.

The present study is based on a cross-sectional approach which does not record the behavior changes of responses with time. In future experimental or longitudinal design can be used to evaluate the sustainability and long-term effects of remote work on organizational performance, employee engagement, and mental health of employees. The study has a small sample size and no equal proportion of male and female respondents which has less generalizability. Moreover, there is a strong need for addressing ongoing innovation in virtual collaboration tools and strategies to mitigate digital fatigue in employees to ensure that all employees in diverse workplaces have equitable access to resources and get assistance from their respective organizations.

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