

THE IMPACT OF REMOTE WORKING ON ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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Abstract

The global shift to remote working is one of the most significant transitions in work practice since the Industrial Revolution. Initially arising from the development of digital communication technology and subsequently imposed worldwide by the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working continues for many amidst fluctuating social distancing rules, lockdowns, the rise of new COVID-19 variants and a new acceptance of remote working as a viable solution to reduce operational costs. Studies suggest that employees experience a myriad of benefits from the flexibility and autonomy remote working offers; however such a dramatic change in organisational behaviour is also impacting organisational culture and raising questions about how those impacts can be managed.

This qualitative study explores employee perceptions of the personal impacts of remote working, and the impacts of remote working on organisational culture. The findings highlight issues to assist with effective organisational adaptation. Seventy-four participants from a range of organisations across Aotearoa New Zealand completed an online survey, and a focus group met to discuss themes arising from the survey data.

Findings suggest that, whilst employees report positive personal impacts from remote working, largely due to the beneficial emotional and practical effects of increased flexibility, the impacts on organisational culture differ widely. Remote working exposes the strengths and weaknesses in the existing culture. Positive impacts are contingent on employee perceptions of level of trust, the maintenance of social connections within teams and the wider organisation, and communication satisfaction including both relationship management and task support.

Key words: Flexible Working, Remote Working, Working from home, Organisational Culture, Human Resource Management, Trust, Communication, Work-life Balance

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital communication technology has resulted in a trend towards flexible and remote working in many industries. Jenkins (2019) noted the rise of flexible work programs in Australasia, with increasing numbers of employees spending a proportion of the working week outside traditional places of work, including working from home. Felstead and Henseke (2017) commented on additional dimensions driving the trend, including the growth of the knowledge economy, the changing demographics of the workforce and the need for increased organisational agility in a turbulent business environment.

Nobody could have predicted that during 2020, almost the entire global workforce would be forced to work from home because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many organisations did not have well-planned strategies in place for managing such a dramatic shift, with Green et al. (2020) noting the “lack of organisational preparedness, technological limitations, managerial reluctance” (p. 5) as key issues. Spicer (2020) highlights the profound impacts the shift to remote working is having on the workplace, stating that it “represents a significant opportunity to investigate how such a large-scale transition in society unsettles organisational culture and how those cultures might adapt” (p. 1737). A report for the European Parliament (Samek Lodovici et al., 2021) suggests that a change in organisational culture is required: “This [telework] requires a major shift in organisational cultures towards managing by results (as opposed to inputs, e.g. office attendance) and establishing trust-based relationships, which may be quite challenging in some sectors and companies” (p. 14).

Choudhury (2020) suggests that this radical relocation of the workplace is here to stay, with companies across the globe making the shift permanent. A survey by Gartner (NZ Business, 2020) identified that three out of four business leaders intend to move a percentage of their workforce to remote working permanently. Fujitsu in Japan have introduced work life shift policies (Fujitsu, 2020); Twitter in America have given their employees the option to work from home permanently (Kelly, 2020); 9gag in Hong Kong has terminated their lease on their physical offices and introduced a work from home forever policy (Chan, 2020); and in Aotearoa New Zealand a University of Otago survey of 2,595 people, found that 89% wished to continue to work from home if they were given the choice (O’Kane & Hathaway, 2020).

In the aftermath of the global shift to remote working, business leaders have begun asking questions about its impacts on culture, and how best to deal with these impacts. Speculation of this kind has been covered in business media such as the Harvard Business Review “*WFH doesn’t have to dilute your work culture*” (Hinds & Elliot, 2021); Bizwomen “*The pandemic and remote work has stressed company culture. Here’s what employees think*” (Mullen, 2020); HR Zone “*The remote revolution: how working from home is changing company culture*” (Hawksworth, 2020); MIT Sloan “*How to sustain your organization’s culture when everyone is remote*” (Howard-Grenville, 2020); and Gallup “*Remote work - is it a virtual threat to your culture?*” (Herway & Hickman, 2020). The assumption in these articles is that organisation culture will change and therefore organisational leaders need to have systems in place to mitigate any potential negative impacts. However, there is surprisingly little current academic research on the topic.

To fill this gap in the literature this study investigates how working from home impacts on organisational culture and individual employees in a range of organisations across Aotearoa New Zealand, and identifies strategies for effectively managing remote working to reduce these impacts. The research aims were:

- To explore employee perceptions of the personal impacts of remote working.
- To explore employee perceptions of the impacts of remote working on organisational culture.
- To recommend strategies for the effective management of organisational culture in a remote working context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organisational culture has been characterised as the “personality” of the organisation (Lepeley, 2021, p. 4) as well as being called ‘the way we do things around here’ (Martin, 2006). Schein’s (2010) seminal work on culture posited that there are three levels of organisational culture that consist of artifacts, espoused beliefs, and values. These levels translate to the underlying norms, values, and assumptions that define the “right way” to behave in an organisation (Schein, 2010). Groysberg et al. (2018) then combined the work of Edgar Schein, Shalom Schwartz and Geert Hofstede and others to conclude that organisational culture is a combination of four attributes, in that it is shared, pervasive, enduring and implicit. Essentially, they posit that organisation culture manifests through shared behaviours, norms, and values that then permeate through all levels of the organisation via multidimensional communication channels such as visible symbols, stories, and rituals, which influence motivations and shared mindsets.

The culture is self-reinforcing by holding on to people that “fit” and releasing those that don’t, whilst individuals within the organisation recognise and respond instinctively to the organisation culture (Groysberg et al., 2018). This depiction of organisational culture suggests that it would therefore be susceptible to any fundamental change in the way work is done. This study integrates both Schein’s (2010, 2017) and Groysberg et al.’s (2018) characterisation of organisational culture as the basis for interpretation.

Whilst extant research has not provided the one ‘perfect’ organisational culture, how an existing culture influences a variety of organisational outcomes/outputs has been extensively researched. More recently these outcome variables include employee engagement (Rasool et al., 2021); employee well-being (Lopez-Martin & Topa, 2019); environmental sustainability and digitalisation (Isensee et al., 2020); innovation (Büschgens et al., 2013); job satisfaction (Meng & Berger, 2019); lean management (Bortolotti et al., 2015); and talent attraction and retention (Kontoghiorghes, 2016). Therefore, if a shift to remote working negatively impacts an existing effective organisational culture, then implications could be widespread. This is illustrated by Critical Mass CEO Dianne Wilkins who sees her organisational culture as their main source of competitive advantage, and therefore maintaining this highly valued culture becomes a key consideration within a remote working environment (Heskett, 2020).

Benefits and consequences of remote working

Remote working has been known by various names over the past 50 years, such as telecommuting, teleworking, e-work, working from home, and flexible working. Flexible working assumes that working hours as well as location are not dictated by the employer. In this paper we use the term remote working to mean working from any location other than a traditional workplace or work location specified by the employer, which for many employees currently means working from home and may or may not include operational flexibility.

Several benefits resulting from remote working have been shown to occur at both the individual and organisation level. Individual benefits include improved job satisfaction (Bloom et al., 2015; Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Irawanto et al., 2021); elimination of unwanted distractions, increased autonomy (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), and increased enthusiasm for work (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). These individual benefits result in reciprocal advantages for organisations in terms of improved performance (Bloom et al., 2015; Harker Martin & MacDonnell, 2012); increased productivity (Harker Martin & MacDonnell, 2012); lower employee turnover (Bloom et al., 2015; Harker Martin & MacDonnell, 2012); the ability to attract and retain skilled personnel (Harker Martin & MacDonnell, 2012; Thompson et al., 2015), and increased organisational commitment (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Harker Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). The Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2019) identified that, in addition to the benefits outlined above, flexible/remote working also supports workplace diversity, including encouraging an increased proportion of women to enter leadership roles.

However, some negative consequences have also been identified. For some, remote working decreases work efficiency (Aczel et al., 2021). Other studies note the negative impacts of social isolation (Bentley et al., 2016); professional isolation (Charalampous et al., 2019); an increased inability to switch off from work (Felstead & Henseke, 2017); increased work intensity and a longer working day (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Harker Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). For some, the term *working from home* has come to mean *living at work*.

The telling and sharing of stories is fundamental to the creation and continuation of organisational culture (Moussa et al., 2021; Schein, 2010), yet the communication disruption caused by remote working may impact on how this continues and manifests in the future. Additional studies cover the impact of remote working on a variety of other topics such as work-life balance and work-life integration (Basile & Beauregard, 2016); organisational performance; career progression (Leslie et al., 2012); employee wellbeing (Charalampous et al., 2019); and how remote working can become a successful organisational practice (Popovici & Popovici, 2020). This research has concentrated largely on the impact of remote working on individual and organisational performance (for example, Aczel et al., 2021; Gibbs et al., 2021; Green et al., 2020; Irawanto et al., 2021). Yet to date the impact of remote working on organisational culture has been overlooked.

Organisational culture and remote work

Webber et al. (2010) identify employee perceptions of managerial support, career consequences, temporal and operational flexibility as the keys to a culture which supports flexible working. Studies such as Timms et al. (2015) expand on this by highlighting the interconnectivity between flexible working arrangements and organisational culture, and note that flexible working arrangements will only work well in a supportive culture.

Parker et al. (2003) highlight the importance of relationships to organisational culture, and recent literature confirms that leader-follower relations, team dynamics and other organisational relationships play a pivotal role in creating a psychological climate which either hinders or supports employee productivity. Greedy (2020) focusses on the importance of trusting relationships, which are built over time as people work together in person, drawing attention to concerns amongst business executives who believe that flexible working arrangements may dilute or damage company culture.

A European Union Parliament report on the shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic (Samek Lodovici et al., 2021) found that, “Workplace surveillance can send a message to employees that management does not trust them, or they are under-performing and require closer monitoring, or that they lack commitment to their work and/or employer” (p. 57).

They conclude that working remotely has impacted on employees’ physical and mental wellbeing. Trusting leader-follower relations and trusting, cohesive team relationships are fundamental to making remote working successful, and trusting relationships are at the heart of how a high-functioning organisational culture is experienced and developed (Hungerford & Cleary, 2021). The importance of communication is implicit in these findings, however, is not specifically addressed in much of the literature, a gap which this study highlights.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) *trust* is based around the understanding that another person is reliable and that you can depend on them; it includes feeling safe and being treated honestly. Trust can be both a feeling and a behaviour, and organisations can be characterised along a continuum from high-trust to low-trust (Hungerford & Cleary, 2021). As trust is a ‘behaviour’ and a ‘belief’ and these are both key components of an organisation’s culture (Schein, 2010), a shift in how trust is felt, experienced or perceived becomes pertinent in determining the impact remote work has on organisational culture.

As a fundamental dimension of trusting team relationships, *social connectedness* is a multi-dimensional construct that includes socialising, social support and belonging (Frieling et al., 2018). Van Zoonen and Sivunen (2021) found that remote work increases perceptions of isolation and that this could be due to a lack of belongingness and social connection with people at work. Frieling et al. (2018) explain that “socialising refers to the interaction between two or more individuals coming

together (whether planned or unplanned) to have a good time and enjoy each other's company" (p.8); whilst social support refers "to the support from people that is either provided or perceived to be readily available in times of need" (p. 9); and, lastly, belonging is "the feeling of being connected to and valued by other people" (p.10). A significant amount of work-related learning has also been shown to happen in informal social settings at work (Tannenbaum et al., 2010). The shift to remote working has the potential to dramatically alter the dynamics of social connectedness.

Literature has focused on which dimensions of culture are best suited to the remote working environment, or has emphasised how organisational culture impacts the implementation of different work-life balance initiatives (for example, Harrington & Santiago, 2006; Timms et al., 2015; Webber et al., 2010) but not vice versa. Spicer (2020) requests researchers to critically reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on organisational culture and the challenges of the new remote work context. He specifically asks questions about how it is possible to transport a culture from a physical space into a virtual space, and how to uphold a collective culture in the context of physical separation.

This study seeks to shed some light on the issues raised by Spicer, exploring some of the impacts of remote working on organisational culture and people, and asking whether remote working impacts organisational culture positively or negatively. This study also provides advice on how leaders and HR professionals can provide support, strategies, and processes to ensure an effective organisational culture is maintained in the presence of an increased remote workforce. Until now there has been little focus on how remote working impacts organisational culture. It is important that we now uncover what is happening and identify strategies for influencing and creating organisational cultures that will continue to drive effective performance in this new prevailing work context.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This was a qualitative study conducted between June and October 2021. Data was gathered via an online survey including relevant demographics and open-ended questions covering participant perceptions of the positive and negative impacts of remote working on them and their organisational culture. Participants were also asked to describe strategies their teams and organisations have implemented for managing those impacts. The intention was to provide a snapshot of participants' experience and perceptions of remote working on organisational culture and themselves and gather insight into strategies that helped deal with these impacts. A focus group met to discuss themes emerging from the initial coding of the survey responses.

Participants

Seventy-four participants completed the survey, which was promoted via a link with an explanatory article on the New Zealand Management Magazine website, shared on social media and distributed to our local business network via the Chamber of Commerce and business consultant Fiona MacKenzie. Survey respondents were also invited to participate in a focus group discussion exploring themes identified via the qualitative survey data. The focus group met in an online meeting which was recorded. The discussion was transcribed to enable thematic analysis of the data.

The use of qualitative data from both the survey and focus group means that fewer respondents are needed to provide data saturation and provide credible research results (Guest et al., 2017). Fugard and Potts (2015) found that for the purposes of thematic analysis of qualitative data, 29 participants produced data saturation. Weller et al. (2018) propose that, in qualitative research, *data salience* is more relevant than *data saturation*. They note that the aim is not to collect *all* the ideas or themes, but to collect the most important ones – in other words to identify salient themes through the frequency and order in which ideas are expressed across a sample. They note that, in qualitative interviews, saturation can be achieved with a sample size of 75, whereas salience can be achieved with a sample size as small as 10. We can conclude that the qualitative nature of this study will

enable us to produce a reliable overview of key themes. A summary of the 74 participants and their relevant demographics are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic Data of Survey Participants

Gender	Male = 27%	Female = 73%	
Age	15-24 = 22%	35-49 = 36%	> 50 = 42%
Tenure	Full-time = 77%	Part-time = 22%	Fixed term = 1%
Length of Service	< 1 year = 18%	1-5 years = 32%	> 5 years = 50%
Role	Non-managerial = 60%	Team leader/supervisor = 15%	Senior manager = 19%
Organisation Size	Small (< 20) = 20%	Medium (20-99) = 37%	Large (100+) = 43%
Type of Business	Private enterprise = 48%	Government funded = 34%	Non-profit/other = 18%
Usual Work Location	Workplace only = 16%	Individual choice = 39%	Set remote location = 34%
Started Remote Work	< 2 years = 59%	> 3 years = 27%	Not applicable = 14%
Structured/unstructured	Structured day/time = 35%	Personal choice = 51%	Not applicable = 14%

Of note in the demographics is that 100% of male participants work full-time, compared to 70% of female participants. Eighty-two percent of participants have been employed in their current role for at least a year, and 50% have worked in their current role for at least five years, so participants are well-placed to identify impacts on organisational culture. There is a spread of participants across roles, organisation sizes and types. Small organisations were defined as having fewer than 20 employees, medium-size organisations 20- 99 employees and large organisations 100+. Thornton (2019) notes that these definitions are applicable to the Aotearoa New Zealand context. A small number of participants (14%) note that, whilst they do not work remotely, members of their team do, which provides an additional perspective. The majority of participants (59%) started working remotely in the last two years, presumably as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and over half have an unstructured approach to remote working, with both temporal and operational flexibility.

Focus Group

A one-hour focus group meeting was held with four participants digitally via Microsoft Teams Video-link on Tuesday 7 December 2021. Focus groups rely on the interaction between group members with a facilitator prompting responses on areas of interest (Morgan, 1997). The benefit of this approach is to gain insight from these group interactions and in this instance the information was used to supplement the survey data previously collected (Morgan, 1997). Three participants were from large organisations in the Waikato and Bay of Plenty with 300+ employees, and one was from a small business in the Bay of Plenty with 20 employees. All participants had more than eight years tenure, two were first-line managers and two were non-managerial employees. Participants were invited to describe their organisational culture and any changes they had noticed to it because of remote working, specific questions included: How would you describe your team culture? Is this

the same across your organisation? Has your team culture changed as a consequence of remote working? If so, how? Are there positive and negative consequences? they were also asked to explore any personal impacts remote working had on themselves.

Thematic Analysis

Survey responses were downloaded into a spreadsheet and collated into initial codes by the second author using common words and concepts. This was then shared with the research team who individually checked and confirmed the accuracy of the initial coding. This created an opportunity for intercoder reliability, which according to O'Connor and Joffe (2020) increases transparency and encourages dialogue within qualitative research teams. Once coding was completed, the individual members of the research team each analysed the data to identify salient themes by "searching across a data set... to find repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2013 p. 86). Finally, a focus group was formed from survey participants who had expressed an interest to provide further detailed information to explore, challenge and/or expand on the initial concepts identified.

Clarke and Braun (2017) describe thematic analysis as a way of identifying and analysing patterns of meaning from qualitative data; they recommend its use due the flexibility of this approach across a wide range of different data sets. Busetto et al. (2020) highlight the advantages of qualitative methods in providing a deeper understanding of human experience. They note that qualitative research, "characterised by flexibility, openness and responsiveness to context" (p. 2) enables researchers to look beyond patterns, or *what is happening* to investigate reasons for patterns – *what is happening to whom, when, how, and why*. Organisational culture is a human construct that is made up of collective employees' beliefs and behaviours, therefore qualitative methods are well suited to explore those beliefs and behaviours directly from those that influence and make the culture.

RESULTS

Whilst a very small number of participants found no positive or negative impacts from working remotely, the vast majority of participants within the survey and focus group described its impact on themselves and their organisational culture, and from this we developed six distinct themes that are discussed in more detail below. Three themes relate to *personal impacts* which were emotions, performance, and flexibility. Another three themes relate to impacts on *organisational culture*: these were trust, social connection, and communication satisfaction.

Participants also highlighted some practical strategies that had facilitated a smooth transition to remote working – such as the provision of technology and resources for home offices; however, the focus of this study is organisational culture. According to Schein (2010) organisational culture is derived from how people behave and what they believe. These perceptions therefore highlight that remote work inevitably had an impact on different organisations' cultures. The following section explores each of these impacts in more detail.

Personal Impacts of Remote Working

Survey participants identified a range of impacts of remote working with three clear themes identified - influence on employee emotions, influence on performance and influence on flexibility (both personally and professionally). All focus group participants confirmed these survey findings and reinforced personal benefits such as increased flexibility and work-life balance resulting from being able to work remotely.

Overwhelmingly, survey participants described *positive emotions* towards the organisation created by the flexibility and perceived freedom accompanying the option to working remotely. Salient points included enhanced happiness, satisfaction, motivation, and empowerment. This was reinforced by all members of the focus group. Specifically, one of the focus group participants stated that:

Personally, I think it is great to work from home, I have no negative feedback about it at all – such a positive thing, more flexibility, options for people with young families, it gives people options.

Participants also highlighted a range of positive impacts remote working had on *performance* – both individual and organisational – with two thirds of survey participants reporting a positive impact on their own performance and productivity. Other salient points related to performance were increased creativity, problem-solving and agility, characterised by an openness to new ideas and willingness to adapt to other changes as they arise. Others comment on the increased productivity facilitated by the removal of distractions in the office environment.

*“Personally, my productivity increases [...] when I work at home, I do work that requires quiet time and space, e.g., reading, writing reports” and
“I learn further myself without having someone nearby to ask a question”.*

The *flexibility* that is facilitated by remote working was also identified as increasing participants’ resilience through the uncertainty of subsequent COVID-19 lockdowns. Reduced stress levels, improved work/life balance, and a positive impact on ideation were also notable in the responses. Two participants highlighted the benefit of remote working being increased emotional safety as they were removed from office drama, politics and bullying.

Impacts of remote working on organisational culture

In describing both the positive and negative impacts of remote work on organisation culture, three clear themes were identified. Participants clearly described how trust, social connection, and communication satisfaction were key considerations in how remote working has influenced the organisational culture of their organisations. Each of these themes is explored in more detail below. Both survey and focus group participants felt that remote working had impacted the organisational culture via the trust that was either given or withheld in this type of work environment. Participants identified feelings of increased trust as:

*“Being free to complete work at a time and pace that suits me” and
“I feel trusted more”.*

Contrastingly, challenges to trust arose with survey comments such as:

*“Some employees take advantage of working remotely” and
“[I have] a perceived lack of trust that those working remotely are working the hours they should be”.*

This idea was reinforced where micro-management, through on-line surveillance and other forms of monitoring, had also destroyed the sense of trust and eroded workplace relationships for participants, with this quote illustrative of such situations:

“I see on social media that they [team members] are out walking their dogs and so forth while I’m sitting at my desk- that has brought my trust levels down a bit”.

Negative reactions were also conveyed by those that felt their working hours were being monitored:

“A lot of micromanaging is happening here –for example an email was sent asking for a weekly schedule of what each team member was doing.”

The mixed perceptions of the level of trust in the remote working environment – specifically relating to the measurement of performance - were noted as pivotal in terms of either a positive or negative impact on organisational culture. Employees who perceived high levels of trust identified

that this was manifested in strong managerial and team relationships. Approaches to the monitoring and measurement of performance were central to the experience of trust, with participants indicating an intensely negative response to perceptions of managerial surveillance.

Socialising, social support, and belonging were identified as impacting the organisational culture of participants in this study. The vast majority of survey and all focus group participants lamented the loss of informal, casual conversations, limits on social interaction, missed opportunities to connect and create bonds both within teams and the wider organisation with resulting feelings of isolation. These quotes are representative of the sentiments here:

“I need people to work around, because relationships are important to me-so it is very hard within the team that I’m in, to maintain those relationships, so I feel a distance, I feel an isolation from them,” and,

“We are missing out on normal bonding time”.

There were, however, some contrasting experiences relating to connection and relationship maintenance. For a few, this is positive with increased online connections and team members meeting regularly online and face-to-face, although some commented on missing the impromptu conversations which happen spontaneously in a traditional office environment:

“We used to solve world problems in a huddle round a desk... now I don’t know what they’re doing any more.”

The loss of ad-hoc conversations and the learning that evolves from this was identified as an impact. A lack of emotional support and a feeling of isolation was raised as a feature of remote working and therefore the need for both managers and colleagues to be aware of this and focus on meeting this need becomes pertinent. One example provided was when a participant had returned to work in the office following lock-down and commented on the feeling of isolation working in a big space surrounded by the empty desks of their colleagues who remained working remotely. Participants highlighted the importance of scheduling social meetings online to share personal as well as professional information, and regularly touching base to check in with team members on their wellbeing. Others noted the importance of scheduled in-person whole-team activities for relationship building.

Communication satisfaction was identified as a key theme that impacts on organisation culture. Participants explained how remote working had facilitated an increased focus on communication, both internally amongst teams and externally between organisations and their wider stakeholders. Focus group participants identified that remote working arrangements had impacted their team’s communication culture, confirming the survey results. Participants highlighted issues with the flow of information within teams and the wider organisation, with assumptions and misinformation causing confusion:

“It’s not as easy to get a response when you need it urgently because you don’t know what they are currently doing,” and,

“face to face is always more efficient.”

Participants noted the importance of clear communication regarding expectations and deadlines, flexible (rather than overly prescriptive) work-plans, and co-ordinated face to face contact which introduces structure into remote working arrangements.

DISCUSSION

The creation and continuation of an organisation’s culture is reliant on how the connection between people at a workplace (remote or otherwise) develops into shared behaviours, beliefs and assumptions (Schein, 2010, 2017). What is evident from this study is that organisations need to be

proactive regarding their strategic approach to managing organisational culture effectively in this new work context.

The results of this study support the literature regarding the positive emotional impacts of remote working for many individuals. Positive emotions arise from the flexibility and associated autonomy the remote working environment provides (Bloom et al., 2015; Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Irawanto et al., 2021). Participants in the study speak positively about the choice this gives them to organise their work and lives in their own unique ways and most associate improved performance with their newfound freedom. Improved performance included an increased capacity for ideation and openness to change. However, the findings suggest that these positive effects are dependent on an organisational culture which fosters trust amongst socially connected teams who have well-developed communication processes to support both relational cohesion and task completion.

All three components of social connectedness (Frieling et al., 2018) - socialising, social support and belonging— were found to be affected negatively by a remote working environment, confirming Van Zoonen and Sivunen's (2021) findings that remote working increases isolation. The implication here is that the organisational culture shifts via a reduction in connections that would otherwise occur naturally and spontaneously between people within a traditional organisational setting. Zajac et al. (2022) emphasise the need for teams to create opportunities for spontaneous connection.

The findings suggest that employee experiences with a variety of managerial approaches to both temporal and operational monitoring have a profound effect on perceptions of trust or distrust resulting in either a positive or negative impact on organisational culture respectively. The study highlights a lack of policy and leadership training with associated inconsistencies in the management of remote working. Maurer (2020) confirms that flexibility is paramount in the remote working context, and that policies must be outcome oriented. Participants highlight the importance of clear deadlines, work-plans, and expectations for flexible working hours. The contrasting responses to surveillance, or a lack of it, indicate that the management of work performance must meet the needs of both the individual and the organisation – an adaptive, situational approach already supported by a great deal of research, and highlighted by Ramalingam et al. (2020) as vital in the uncertain and evolving global business climate.

For some, a lack of monitoring increased their feelings of distrust within the team – the concept of trust has, for some, become a euphemism for a lack of accountability and/or a lack of support which is detrimental to organisational culture. For others the feeling of constant managerial surveillance had the same result, increasing feelings of distrust in their leader-follower relationships, supporting the findings of the European Parliament Report (Samek Lodovici et al., 2021). A strategic, transparent approach considering the appropriate situational variables is needed, but the study suggests that managing the dimension of trust is pivotal to managing the impact of remote working on organisational culture, and this can be done directly with effective leaders who are open, honest, and vulnerable (Hungerford & Cleary, 2021).

Connected to the dimension of trust, the measurement of performance is an issue that needs addressing with a comprehensive organisational strategy. It was notable that one focus group participant worked in a large organisation with a clear policy on remote working which included a structure of days/times, support for remote working from senior management, as well as an effective performance measurement process. This was the exception in the focus group, who all noted a lack of policy and structure together with poor performance measurement processes – which were at best meaningless and at worst intensely de-motivating – as having a negative impact on organisational culture in the remote working context.

The data suggests that communication satisfaction is at the heart of effective management of organisational culture in the remote working setting, and this is a gap in the existing literature. Responses identify that an intentional approach to communication is vital, with regular work meetings to enhance task achievement and social meetings to maintain relationships, either online or face-to-face. The use of technology for regular, scheduled online meetings for both formal and social purposes was a clear need amongst responses, with participants noting that increasing the

frequency of compulsory formal online meetings needed to offset the loss of the informal, casual interactions in the face-to-face office environment. Participants who experienced co-ordinated in-office days found that these were positive and enabled teams to experience the benefits of regular face-to-face contact with colleagues.

Recommendations

This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of how remote working impacts organisational culture and individuals. The findings support current literature on the benefits of remote working for individuals, including positive emotional impacts, increased flexibility, and improved performance. The study also suggests that remote working has had a positive impact on ideation and organisational agility. However, negative impacts on social connectivity were also highlighted by the study, with some participants experiencing personal isolation and disruption to communication flow. As promoted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the development of organisational culture is a key role in the human resource (HR) management domain and requires proactive efforts from HR professionals (ICS Learn, 2021); these findings are therefore of value to HR practitioners through implementation of the recommended strategies.

The importance of communication satisfaction relating to both relational and task-oriented processes and interactions was a key factor in managing organisational culture in the remote working environment. How HR works with leaders to enhance an organisation's culture through effective communication is captured by ICS Learn (2021) here: "Open, transparent communication is vital here: everyone at every level should have a clear understanding of the part they play in bringing the company culture to life" (para. 5). The role of trust both within teams and in leader-follower relationships was also pivotal to employee experiences of either positive or negative impacts of remote working on organisational culture.

Underlying these findings is the possibility that one of the impacts of the remote working environment is to reveal the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the existing organisational culture: where existing team relationships were cohesive and trusting prior to the shift to remote working, there is a notable intentionality around teams' efforts to maintain these relationships. Where there were pre-existing disconnects, or gaps in communication processes, these have been exposed. The same can be said of leader-follower relationships in the study.

Practical implications

Whilst confirming current research on the myriad benefits remote working offers for individuals and organisations, the results identify three salient issues business leaders and human resources professionals need to consider to effectively manage organisational culture in the remote working environment:

1. **Communication Satisfaction** is fundamental to the management of organisational culture in the remote working environment and therefore needs to be prioritised in human resource strategy. This study suggests that organisations who pro-actively facilitate both relational and informational communication in a regular, well-structured, and intentional manner mitigate the potentially negative impacts of remote working on both social connectivity and performance. This is critical to the effective on-boarding of new employees.
2. **Workplace Monitoring & Performance Measurement**, as parts of the human resource function, are pivotal issues impacting organisational culture in the remote working environment. This study suggests that, if employees feel that managerial surveillance is excessive or intrusive, this will negatively impact organisational culture. Conversely, employees are frustrated by a perceived lack of accountability and/or support if performance expectations are unclear. Organisations therefore need to develop transparent, workable strategies for workplace monitoring and performance measurement.
3. **Trusting Relationships** are at the heart of organisational culture, and the presence, or lack, of trust within teams and between managers and their employees is exposed by the remote

working environment. The development of trusting team dynamics is therefore essential to human resource strategy. This study suggests that trusting relationships are the foundation of an organisational culture which can flourish in the remote working setting, and are interconnected with communication satisfaction, workplace monitoring and performance measurement.

Future research and limitations

Some limitations need to be acknowledged. This was an exploratory study which relied on self-reporting of perceived impacts on organisational culture. The relatively small participant numbers may influence the reliability of the results. Ideally a longitudinal study is needed to confirm specific impacts on organisational culture within a range of organisational settings. For example, a longitudinal case study with pre- and post- data collection would enable in-depth analysis of impacts on a specific organisation, its culture, trust and communication, rather than the broad-brush approach of this study.

A key area for future research is the gap in the literature connecting communication and the development of organisational culture. Communication is fundamental to organisational culture; however, this is implicit and is not addressed explicitly in most of the research on organisational culture. Other areas for future research include exploring HR's role and practice of how on-boarding and leader-follower relationships can be enhanced in a remote working environment. Additionally, research is needed on the development of human resource policies and practices to manage the impact of remote working and create organisational cultures that enable organisations to harness the potential benefits offered by this prevalent shift in how and where we work.

Conclusion

This study joins the conversation on remote working in the current dynamic and uncertain business environment and seeks to respond to some unanswered questions human resource professionals are asking about how remote working is impacting organisational culture and how to manage this work context effectively. It highlights critical issues that need to be considered in developing a business strategy for an unfamiliar and uncertain business environment.

Specifically, communication processes, monitoring and performance measurement, and the dimension of trust are pivotal to managing the impacts of remote working on organisational culture. As time goes on, it will become increasingly evident how these issues will impact the future fabric of an organisation's values and culture, and how the "environmental jolt" (Spicer, 2020, p. 1737) which forced a substantial proportion of the global workforce to work remotely will ultimately unravel and change our values and assumptions about the way we work.

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