

Does remote working influence employee engagement?

**An analysis of how the COVID-19 enforced move to remote working
impacted employee engagement in the public sector in Malta.**

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study aims at providing a better understanding of employee engagement, and how it has been affected by the enforced move to remote working due to the COVID-19 pandemic, within the public sector in Malta.

This research examines some of the main factors that contribute to an employee's level of engagement. These include an insight into how the impact of remote working affected employees within the public sector, the role of digitalisation, communication within teams, job performance, challenges related to working remotely, and working patterns in a post-COVID setting. A qualitative research method was used to gather data from sixteen participants. With the aim to provide in-depth analysis and understanding of employee engagement, semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore the subjective experience of each participant. Interviews were split in two: four interviews were conducted with the HR of four different organisations, while the remaining twelve participants were interviewed on their perspective as an employee within these organisations.

There were six main findings:

1. Remote working affected the employee's personal and professional life in a positive way, allowing them to balance both personal commitments and work. This proved to have heightened their level of employee engagement.

2. COVID-19 accelerated the process of implementing remote working within the public sector for all employees - an HR practice that employers proved to have held back from pursuing.
3. Technology proved to be the means to make the transition to remote working possible, through digitalisation. Employees were introduced to virtual workspaces, which improved current work strategies, making employees more efficient and engaged.
4. Job performance, employee motivation and job satisfaction were shown to have a direct impact on employee engagement. Implementing remote working patterns within the public sector proved to be a prominent factor that heightened engagement for employees.
5. Challenges related to remote working centered around decreased communication with members of different teams. Furthermore, the co-location of working and leisure spaces due to remote working prompted a negative effect on employee wellbeing while working remotely.
6. In a post-COVID setting, all participants maintained that a shift towards hybrid working patterns should be implemented, providing a balance between remote working and working at the office.

These findings confirm that remote working within the public sector did impact employee engagement and proved beneficial for both the employee and employer. The findings concluded that remote working promotes business continuity, sustainable organisational growth, and work-life balance.

Keywords: Remote Working, HRM, HR Practices, Employee Engagement, Public Sector, Employee, HR, COVID-19.



DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my research to my grandfathers, George Abela and Joseph Farrugia, both of whom passed away during the course of my dissertation. I would like to express my sincere gratitude towards them, for giving me the courage and strength to persevere, especially in trying times. I owe this to them, and I am eternally grateful.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HR: Human Resource

RW: Remote Working

KPIs: Key Performance Indicators

HRMP: Human Resource Management Practices

HRM: Human Resource Management

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Organisations continuously need to adapt to change. Human Resource (HR) managers of numerous organisations needed to envision new HR policies for the development and management of employees in view of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In order to remain competitive in today's dynamic market, investing in human capital has been given high significance. Employee engagement is a crucial element when analysing productivity and efficiency within an organisation, and is principal in order to remain sustainable within the global market (Muhammad and Yazdani Fard, 2013). The focus of organisations is on improving the level of efficiency and quality of work processes, namely by investing in the workforce (Czarnecka and Daróczy, 2017).

COVID-19 has elicited a transition to Remote Working (RW). This transition has stipulated HR managers across numerous organisations to rethink the way of traditional business operations. This entails HR managers to provoke current systems and instigate improved HR practices, such as RW (Risley, 2020). Such changes require the HR department to have a strategy rethink on how to incorporate RW - one which still includes employee engagement and business continuity. Nowadays, RW policies have become more widespread, and are being regarded as new ways of working (European Parliament, 2021). This includes online training programmes, virtually monitoring employee well being, flexible working hours, online team meetings aimed at sustaining relationships, and more (Chanana, and Sangeeta, 2020). Therefore, this research was chosen as it will look into how organisations in the public sector changed and adapted traditional HR practices in light of COVID-19. Furthermore, this research problem explores whether these organisations intend to retain RW, or whether they plan to return to traditional ways of work post the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1 Exploration of the research topic

Employee engagement is fundamental to assure a company's objectives are met (Haski-Leventhal, Roza, and Brammer, 2020). The HR personnel who participated in this research aimed to provide ways of investing in employee skills and knowledge, that will in return improve how employees perform their duties and allow them to reach company targets and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Sustainable policies needed to be administered in relation to RW, that can benefit both the employee and employer while ensuring business continuity (Jose and Mampilly, 2021).

The research is aimed at providing an understanding of the enforced move to RW due to COVID-19, and how it impacted employee engagement. The unexpected shift of HR practices to accommodate RW provided the employer with a means to sustain organizational growth from any location, and an understanding of how these HR strategies were implemented and sustained is an important contribution to current literature. Insights into how these four organisations within the public sector have adapted to such changes will be examined and presented. The research will look into the current state of affairs and provide a practical way forward on Human Resource Management Practices (HRMP) related to RW for these organisations within the public sector, practices that will have positive ramifications on employee engagement.

Employee engagement revolves around job satisfaction, enthusiasm and employee involvement (Edwar et al, 2021). When analysing the impact of COVID-19 on employee engagement within organisations, strategic HR policies related to skills development, employee motivation, management schemes, employee retention, and work mobility are assessed. This research will contribute to the academic issues of employee development and the organisational context of Human Resource Management (HRM), by providing a clear understanding of HRMP, the implementation

of RW, and the impact it posed on employee engagement within the public sector organisations.

1.2 Research Objectives

The following literature and research design are aimed to answer the following question:

- How, if at all, does the shift to remote working prompted by Covid-19 impact employee engagement within the public sector?

In order to understand the shift of working patterns, and the impact of RW on employee engagement, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were set up with sixteen employees working within the public sector. The interview questions were based on the literature presented in Chapter 2 and were aimed to explore the impact RW has had on the participant's professional and personal life. Therefore, the design of the interview questions will provide an answer to the research question. Through this, RW was discussed from both an employee and employer point of view, and how it has been welcomed within the public sector. Together with this, the role it played on employee engagement, how it affected the employee's job performance, and the feelings associated with the shift in their working patterns will be assessed.

1.3 Research Structure

The following chapter will provide further insight into existing literature about RW, employee engagement, the global pandemic, and the public sector. These topics will be viewed both singularly and in conjunction with one another. Various HRM theories and

studies were used to formulate the questions asked throughout the interviews relating to their subjective experiences. Chapter 3 will further explain the research design adopted for this study, and why it is the most suited. This is followed by the Results and Analysis, Chapter 4, through which the data collected through the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Lastly, the concluding chapter will present the summary of findings, research question, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of extensive literature about the HRM practices related to employee engagement and RW. It incorporates how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted traditional ways of work and how organisations have had to envision new strategies for the management and development of employees in light of COVID-19. The first section will provide an insight into various theories and research relating to HRM. A better understanding of HR practices, HR planning, employee training and development, and digitalization will be discussed. This is followed by exploring the relationship between HR practices and employee engagement, together with its impact on employee motivation. The third section is focused on how COVID-19 impacted HRM, yielding the impact on both the employee and employer. As a result of COVID-19, RW has been introduced within the public sector, and literature related to RW will be explored in the final section. This research will shed light on how organisations are responding to unprecedented change, as it is happening now. The literature referred to in this chapter will be used as a platform to introduce the research question being explored in this dissertation. Following this chapter, the Methodology, which includes the research method and design used to administer this study, will be discussed.

2.1 Understanding Human Resource Management

HRM and its functions are complex. What does it consist of? Who does it apply to? What are its limitations? As a very generic concept, HRM is focused on the individuals who form part of an organisation. It is concerned with how people are managed and employed within numerous companies. Storey (1995) perceives HRM as employee management within an organisation, one that aims to gain a strategic advantage in today's competitive market. Armstrong (2016) perceives HRM as being a strategic and coherent approach focused on recruitment, employee well-being, and employee development. On the other hand, Boxall and Purcell (2015) view HRM as a method for management to increase employee performance in order to ensure that the organisation's needs are met. HRM, according to Guest (1997) is defined by four goals: high commitment, flexibility, high quality, and strategic integration. This research study will delve into the four goals established by Guest (1997), together with how the strategic HRM policies implemented impacted the employee, as stated by Armstrong (2016).

HRM is a continuous cycle that involves recruitment, training employees, ensuring they are well compensated for their job, generating policies for personnel management, and instigating the right strategies to ensure employee development and retainment. The most cherished aspect within an organisation is its employees, as they are the human resources that make an organisation a valuable asset (Coyle-Shapiro et al, 2013). Understanding the role of HRM is vital for this research, as, in order to recognize if RW has impacted employee engagement within the public sector, an insight into strategic HRM policies and their impact on the organisation as a whole must be gained.

2.1.2 Employee Training and Development

HR managers focus on reaching both long term and short term organisational goals, in order to ensure business continuity (Osibanjo and Adeniji, 2012).

Organisations that are competitive within the dynamic market strive for optimum employee return on investment, which is maintained with strategic policies related to employee training and development (Aikaterini, 2014). HRM practices are central to an organization's success. Human capital is perceived as an investment, through which its level of dexterity is defined by employee training and development (Seemiller and Rosch, 2019). Forming part of a competitive, turbulent market, productive employees together with employee motivation, skills, and knowledge are essential to endure sustainability within the market (Muhammad and Yazdani Fard, 2013). Therefore, training and development are perceived as the building blocks of organisations, which determine the success and growth of the organisation itself. Moreover, importance is given to providing appropriate training and development HR practices in order to ensure employee engagement is maintained, especially when transitioning to RW.

Employee training and development is defined as overcoming the variation between an employee's prevailing performance and the organisation's desired performance. It is a continuous process that involves enhancing current skill sets, increasing employee knowledge, increasing employee performance, and introducing new concepts (Noe, 2017). Employee training and development is a pursuit that is aimed at acquiring specific skills and knowledge intended to carry out a specific role or task (Cole et al, 2012). An employee's performance impacts their level of job satisfaction and ensuring that HRM practices provide proper training to employees, not only benefits them but also improves the performance of the organisation (Oluwaseun, 2018). The goal for HR managers is to yield talent that is pertinent to the needs of the company, which is also fitting for the human resource and knowledge that is occupying that position. Therefore, this reinforces the idea of having the right person within the

right occupation and providing the necessary training and development to nourish this. This coincides with having engaged employees which deliver optimum results within organizations. Employee training and development will be assessed to understand whether employees are engaged in their positions, and what are the established HR practices aimed at ensuring this.

2.1.3 Employee perception and attitudes of HR Practices

HRM is perceived from two different viewpoints: one involves HR managers creating HRMP that ensure organisational growth, and the other involves the employee's perception of such HR practices. Academic research on strategic HRM, with a specific focus on employee perception and attitudes of HR practices, has increased over the last decade (Beurden et al, 2021). Employee perceptions play a vital role in determining whether HR practices are successful. HR practices from an individual perspective are perceived as regulating the connection between current policies and the employees' behaviour. From an organisational level, employee perceptions are viewed as a predecessor of unit-level performance (Wang et al, 2020).

Employee behaviours and work outcomes are highly determined by HR practices. According to Storey et al (2010), the focus should be placed on differentiating the actual HR practices that are implemented, and the intended HR practices. Furthermore, Cafferkey et al (2018) argue that it is important to investigate the employees' points of view, and succeeding reaction to such HR practices. Pombo and Gomes (2019) state that an employee's perception of HR practices reflects their level of commitment and job satisfaction. Together with this, factors such as work-life balance, the opportunity for growth, pay, promotion and work recognition all influence employee engagement and perception. The perception of employees is a vital aspect that will be discussed by the participants in this research. The goal is to understand how new HR

practices since COVID-19, such as RW, have been perceived and embraced by the employees within the public sector.

2.1.4 HR Practices and their impact on organisational performance

The human resources within an organisation are considered as one of the company's strongest assets. Empirical research provides an understanding as to whether new HR practices have had a positive impact on organisational performance (Rees and Branine, 2019). From a conceptual point of view, sustained competitive advantage is gained through the use of HR practices that ultimately increase organisational performance through a variety of human resources (Ampomah, 2016). According to Pfeffer (1998), HRM practices that have a direct impact on firm performance revolve around recruitment, employee security, decentralisation of decision making, compensating for high organisational performance, training, reduction of status barriers, open communication, and wage differentiation between roles.

The role of HRM is to yield HR practices, systems, and policies that affect the employees' overall performance, work attitude, and behaviour (Vlachos, 2008). In order to measure organisational performance, an assessment of the organisation's effectiveness, efficiency, employee engagement, and quality of service must occur (Absar et al, 2010). If the organisation's HR are in line with the organisation's strategy, uniform expectations are set between the employer and employee. This coincides with the mutual investment model, which states that if the employer takes care of its employees, the employees will take care of the employer (Lambooi et al, 2006). Therefore, the aim of HRM practices is to increase organisational performance which subsequently increases the sustainable growth of the organisation (Ralevic et al, 2015). The investment in employees, and the impact of organisational performance, will be used as elements to understand whether employees within the public sector remain

engaged while working remotely. Organisational performance is considered a key indicator of the impact of RW on employee engagement.

2.1.5 Effective HR Planning

The role of the HR department is to provide a strategic plan by forecasting, controlling, and developing the human resources within an organization. Continuous monitoring and assessment of both external and internal factors within the organisation should be carried out to ensure organisational objectives are met. Once this is complete, an HR plan is formed which is then implemented. Typically, the HR plan will include tasks related to recruitment and retention, training and development, employee productivity, career planning, compensation and incentive schemes, succession planning and talent management (Binod, 2020).

HR Planning consists of having a strategic plan that attracts individuals, motivates staff, develops new skills, rewards and retains the right individuals - all of which are aimed to meet the organisation's objectives and ensure employee engagement. Successful HR planning includes having the right skilled workforce, a good business strategy, long term strategic planning, and also short term operational planning (Reilley, 1996). The HR Plan implemented within these four organisations will be looked into, aimed at understanding what strategies were executed to cater for employee engagement.

2.1.6 The impact of Digitalisation on HR practices

HR departments need to constantly adapt to change. An organisation needs to adapt to the needs of society, which might mean drastic changes to 'business as usual.'

The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 is a clear example of this. Together with the world being in crisis because of a pandemic, organisations across the globe needed to figure out new ways of working, ways that did not involve meeting other employees at the office (Prakash, Krishna, and Mores, 2019). This involved drastic changes in numerous HR practices, most of which were made possible through the use of technological development and digitalisation. The use of information technology has impacted multiple areas within HR, namely training and development, the recruitment process, organisational performance, work flexibility, job design, career development, and employee rewards (Lumi, 2020).

Digitalisation means a shift of traditional HR practices to managing all HRMP via applications, soft technologies and the internet. This requires innovative HR practices that attract the right employees and ensure employee retention (Halid, Yusoff, and Somu, 2020). An example of this can be seen in recruitment and selection. It is not possible for every individual to attend an interview, especially due to geographical reasons. The use of numerous social platforms has allowed the continuation of organisational recruitment. This can also be seen for training and development. The use of online training programmes, virtual classes, and remote locations are all beneficial tools to improve HR practices within organisations when working remotely.

Traditional ways have been replaced by digital schemes. Everyday work is embedded in the use of technology to monitor work activity and management functions. This change brought about new business prospects, a way of facilitating work through the use of technology (Samson and Agrawal, 2020). Some of the main advantages of digitalisation include that it is an easy method of communication, reduces company costs, and makes companies more productive, whilst putting an organisation at a competitive advantage. Some of the disadvantages that are associated with digitalisation include power outages, people from an older generation may lack skills to successfully perform the job due to a lack of experience with the use of technology, not

having sufficient equipment for RW, less opportunity to express thoughts, and the fear related to losing human relationships within the social sphere (Lumi, 2020).

Digitalisation is the means through which RW has been made possible, and the way it has impacted an employee's professional and personal life will be reviewed.

2.2 The relationship between Employee Engagement and HRM

This academic research will look at the relationship between HRM and employee engagement. Initially, employee engagement was a concept that came about through the studies of Khan (1990), which was defined as engaging employees by encouraging them and giving them greater responsibilities to increase their level of commitment and productivity within an organisation (cited in Fayad and Easa, 2020). According to Gonzalez-Roma et al (2006) employee engagement is a positive state of mind towards work, which is distinguished by employee dedication and vigour. Employee engagement is closely associated with HRMP, and HRMP also affect job performance and employee engagement. Good HRMP is affiliated with creativity, strategic employee engagement, increased employee performance, innovation, employee motivation, and organisational growth. Together with good HRMP, a good working environment illustrates the positive effects of increased employee engagement.

Successful employee engagement reaps competitive advantage for organisations through low employee turnover and higher productivity. This research will see how HRMP on RW have impacted employee retention, turnover, performance and job satisfaction, and thus will look at the impact on engagement. Organizations aim to employ individuals who go over and above their day to day job responsibilities, and recruit engaged employees who go the extra mile (Alzyoud, 2018). According to Guest (1997), the role of HRM is to align the goals and objectives of an organization with employee involvement and commitment in a unitary way. Sharman and Khander (2006) state that the aim of HRMP is to increase both the employees' work abilities and their level of engagement. For their research, training and development, rewards, employee communication and recognition were used to understand the positive impact of good HR practices on employee engagement.

Organisations invest in designing suitable HR practices and strategic policies that promote commitment and employee engagement in their workforce (Raya, 2018). While there are various organisations that interpret employee engagement differently, there are some main themes that are generally agreed upon when it comes to defining employee engagement; these include employee job satisfaction, pride with working within an organisation, enjoying work, and feeling valued by the employer (Vance, 2006). As has been made clear, employee engagement translates to positive organisational results. Engaged employees are seen as being attached to the organisation they work for, which results in not only an investment in their role but also the company as a whole.

Another aspect that is closely related to employee engagement is psychological factors. When looking at employee engagement, three psychological factors are also considered (Bustasar, Sumarsih and Nugroho, 2019). Firstly, psychological meaningfulness - the feeling of being valued, appreciated and worthwhile, as job responsibilities are creative and challenging. The second factor is safety, that is, the individual does not feel that being employed with the company will have any negative repercussions. Lastly, there is availability; this involves the individuals having the right emotional, physical, and psychological resources to be able to contribute to the role and maintain their performance (Surma et al, 2021).

The role an individual holds within a company makes an impact on the level of engagement. Individuals who hold a more senior role are more likely to be engaged, as the employee considers their responsibilities as worth investing in. Together with this, employee engagement is elicited by the nature of an employee's work, transparent means of communication, career progression, employee recognition and rewards, sustaining work relationships, and having two-way communication with management (Robertson-Smith and Markwick, 2009). Overall, the literature above shows how employee engagement has a direct impact on employee and organisational

performance. Whether employees are working remotely or from the office, the importance of maintaining engaged employees is essential for business continuity, and this can be done through the implementation of strategic HRMP.

2.2.1 Employee engagement and work motivation

Work motivation is sustained through employee engagement, as engaged employees are perceived as being more invested in their roles and exhibit job satisfaction. There are various types of work motivation that aim to increase employee efficiency through their level of engagement. Employee engagement is used as a strategic tool within organisations to keep employees motivated for the company to remain competitive. In a study by Bustasar, Sumarsih and Nugroho (2019), they conclude that employees are mostly inclined to respond to material motivation. Other ways to motivate employees are through recognition, achievements, greater responsibilities, opportunities for promotion, and the possibility to grow personally. Organisational performance is strongly related to such motivational factors. Work conditions and the individual's personal motivation to work, all contribute to a company's success. Some employees view work not only as a means to get paid but as a place where they get to learn and further develop their skill set. Such motivated employees are more innovative in their roles and contribute to the growth of the organisation (Mohanani, Sequeira, and Kumar, 2012).

Management plays a vital role in employee motivation and employee engagement. This depends on whether management policies are based on positive or negative reinforcement. The goal is to create a dynamic work environment that fulfils employees. Employee motivation is considered to be the driving force of employee engagement. However, it is important to note that the concept of motivation is complex. It is a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that are influenced by an

individual's expectations and personality (Endigaw, 2021). Intrinsic motivation refers to performing an activity for internal satisfaction, whilst extrinsic motivation revolves around earning rewards for performing. Studies show that intrinsic motivation is more likely to heighten employee engagement and job performance (Singh, 2016).

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Singh, 2016), motivation should be split into five categories. The first three categories are physiological, safety and existence, and these can be catered for through extrinsic factors such as wages. The other two categories, namely esteem and belongingness, are only to be addressed through intrinsic motivational factors, such as career progression, opportunities for growth, and autonomy. Vroom (1964) argues through the theory of motivation that an individual's motivation is a result of people choosing to behave in a specific way, and expecting what the result of their selected behaviour will be. More recent studies on motivation by Thomas and Holley (2012) shows that effective communication, employee incentives, respecting employees, and enriching the work experience of the workforce are all means to increase employee motivation. The level of motivation of the participants in this research will be examined, together with the way this has impacted their level of engagement. The goal is to have motivated employees, who willingly take initiative, produce high-quality work, and are productive.

2.2.2 Employee engagement within the public sector

Employee engagement means that individuals engage and participate cognitively, physically and emotionally with their job role. Engagement is associated with employee retention, job satisfaction, job performance, innovation, and organisation success (Jones and Sambrook, 2016).

Apart from the organisation's strategic plan, government entities have a great impact on the HR practices that are implemented within an organisation. Factors such as government elections, budget allocations, and leaves of absence, all impact the level of control an organisation can have within the public sector on employee engagement. Within the corporate sector, employee engagement is solely in the control of the organisation, whilst in the public sector, it is more limited (Jin and McDonald, 2017). As a result, it can be more difficult for employers within the public sector to motivate employees. Financial incentives are limited due to budget constraints making it hard to objectively reward employees for their performance. Together with this comes a frequent change in leadership and short tenures, due to having newly appointed politically affiliated individuals. Also, job protection and security is much stronger within the public sector, making it harder for HR managers to control poor performance outcomes. As a result, this makes it more challenging for government entities to pursue sustained employee engagement (Lavigna, 2015).

The public sector holds a substantial area and is a significant employer within a country. Government entities aim to provide high-quality service, despite any budget-cutting measure. The goal is to achieve more with less. Motivation is maintained more with intrinsic rewards, that is through job satisfaction, rather than compensated extrinsically for their performance. According to a report of the 2010 Best Places to Work in the U.S. Federal Government Rankings Offer, there are three factors that contribute to employee engagement within the public sector. These include the opportunity for career progression, effective leadership, and having employee skills that are analogous with the organisation's mission (Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot, 2013). Therefore, even though the public sector faces a number of challenges when it comes to employee engagement, it is important for HR personnel to acknowledge, recognize and reward employees' contribution and significance, in order to maintain employee engagement. An analysis of the HR practices related to RW within the public sector will

be deliberated, together with the impact it posed on the employee's level of engagement.

2.3 COVID-19 related challenges within HRM

Employee engagement has a direct impact on an organisation, and its ability to reach business goals (Singh, 2016). Good communication channels, rewards, effective feedback and transparency are key factors that ensure employee engagement during difficult times. As a result of COVID-19, HR managers have prioritised employee engagement (Chanana and Sangeeta, 2020). Employee engagement results in better job performance which leads to business success, and is viewed as a result of job demands and job resources. According to the research of Jose and Mampilly (2021) on customized HR practices related to employee engagement, the effectiveness of HRM practices on employee engagement is dependent on psychological safety. Findings show that the workers had a positive perception of employee engagement, psychological safety, and HRM practices. Good HRM practices are being implemented at their place of work, which is reciprocated with heightened engagement. They state that HR managers should customise practices according to the needs of their employees.

The goal for employee engagement is to keep employees motivated, which will provide direct investment to the organisation (Risley, 2020). At the start of COVID-19, people across the globe were faced with a situation of discouragement. This resulted in a corporate crisis, one that caused the shutdown of numerous businesses, pausing productions, lockdown, huge financial losses, delayed salaries, furloughs, reduction of staff, and resignations. As a result, HR managers have had to envision new employee engagement HR-related strategies from a different perspective. Since the start of COVID-19 in the year 2020, the world is now living in a new normal.

According to a study by Kumar (2021), employee engagement during, and post the COVID-19 crisis, is dependent on five main constituents which he refers to as the V5 model: voice, value, virtue, variety and vision. The first two elements, voice and

value, are perceived from an employee point of view, while virtue, variety and vision are related to the organisation. The element value is characterized by optimism at work, a respectful workforce, and a feeling of belonging. Voice refers to the recognition, feedback and open communication towards employees for their job performance and hard work, without the fear of consequence. On the other hand, variety, being dependent on the employer, constitutes autonomy at work, the significance of job responsibilities, task and skill variety, and a challenging role. The factor of virtue entails having an organisational culture that is welcoming, trustworthy, acts fairly, and prevents unethical behaviour. The last characteristic is vision, having organisations making clear goals for employees. Goals must be challenging and flexible, in order to inspire the workforce. The use of the V5 model does not require materialistic commitment, but the time and attention of HR personnel to increase employee engagement during these unprecedented times. These constituents will be viewed in parallel with the participants' perceptions on the shift of HR practices since the rise of COVID.

2.3.1 COVID-19: Impact on employers and employees

COVID-19 has disrupted the place of work for employees around the globe. A study carried out by Quantum Workplace in the United States of America (Kumar, 2020), shows that there was meaningful growth overall in relation to employee engagement. While companies forming part of the entertainment industry showed a decrease of seven per-cent, non-profit organizations showed a hefty increase of fifteen per-cent in employee engagement during the pandemic. A study by Prudent Brokers (Kumar, 2020) in India stated that even though they had some employees let go during COVID-19, those who remained employed with the company exhibited a complete change of attitudes towards their role, one which had a heavy and positive impact on operating procedures and HR standards. Prudent Brokers also stated that the biggest pitfall was shown in companies within transport, construction, manufacturing, and

logistics, where the new situation of COVID and RW did not positively impact employees and their level of work productivity.

2.3.2 New ways of working due to COVID-19

The labour market was highly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has affected employees negatively, due to the constant uncertainty and psychological pressure that this pandemic has brought about. Not only has this been difficult for organisations, but it has created a challenge for HRM. During times of uncertainty, the focus of HR practices shifted specifically on incorporating open communication, incentives to maintain employee engagement and motivation, providing opportunities for skill development, and implementing more flexible measures such as RW (De-la-Calle-Duran and Rodriguez-Sanchez, 2021). These factors all contribute to restoring the company's performance and level of employee engagement.

HR personnel shifted the organisation's dynamic from working at the office to RW. New HR practices related to workplace procedures and policies had to be implemented to limit contact between employees. The ramification of this on employees will be assessed in this research. These include RW allowances, new work regimes, and technological advancements. RW provides employees with the flexibility to be able to maintain a work-life balance, whilst benefiting the company with more engaged and motivated employees. According to a study by Randstad (2020), RW was possible prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, however was not an option for most employees within numerous companies. Their research shows that forty-eight per-cent of Spanish companies made use of RW during the pandemic, and shows that now as COVID-19 measures are more relaxed, the use of technology will continue being utilised by employees and employers.

RW enables efficiency and is an effective resource. According to De-la-Calle-Duran and Rodriguez-Sanchez (2020), RW is characterized by seven elements: technical, remuneration, timeframe, location, contractual relationship and value chain. RW does not necessarily mean working from home, but allows working from places other than the office, reaping economical benefits, sustainable gains, and a decrease in financial costs for organisations. This is a clear win-win situation for both the employee and employer, and has shown to have increased employee engagement through the use of a regulatory framework, training and development, establishing targets and KPIs, and introducing a work roster to ensure a work-life balance for employees (De-la-Calle-Duran and Rodriguez-Sanchez, 2020).

2.3.3 COVID-19 and the virtual workspace

Employee engagement may be influenced through the use of RW, namely due to the shift from office to virtual relationships. Organizations have had to adapt to a 'new normal', requiring a more holistic approach towards virtual employee management (Jose and Mampilly, 2021). Employee flexibility is at the forefront of virtual employee management, as COVID-19 has created a broader context to the physical workplace environment. This has brought about an ecosystem of virtual and physical workspaces, surrounded by an urban realm (Surma et al, 2021). Work is now characterized by RW regimes as a result of the pandemic, one that promotes human mobility and shifts towards hybrid working patterns. Through this research, the level of effectiveness of RW will be assessed, together with whether organisations will be considering hybrid working patterns moving forward. The workplace is no longer a single office space, but a virtual network of a connected ecosystem consisting of the office, home, and third places. A flexible approach that is functional, convenient and supports well-being, providing a fluid virtual workspace to employees.

2.4 HRM and Remote Working policies in Malta

RW was not common in Malta prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of such unprecedented change, coupled with various technological advancements, the public sector is adopting solutions such as RW that encourages a work-life balance for employees. According to the Policy and Guidelines on its implementation of RW (2021), it is a means of working with more flexibility from any location on a regular basis. The use of RW is being offered to public sector employees who, due to the nature of their job, can perform their work from places other than the office.

2.4.1 Remote working and COVID-19

The use and importance of implementing RW have become more apparent since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. RW has been given a worldwide focus as being an essential tool for efficiently and effectively providing the continuation of work in both the public and private sectors. While helping employees balance personal and work responsibilities, RW can also provide heightened performance and employee engagement while increasing the organisation's productivity (United States of Personnel Management, 2021). During such unprecedented times, organisations had to rethink their current HR policies and provide employees with an alternative to usual work practices to adjust to change.

HR managers had to introduce new HR policies related to employee management that are holistic, innovative, and ensure business continuity. From occasionally making use of RW, employees shifted to making use of RW as a new normal. Being able to perform job responsibilities from the office was not viable, and employees needed to fulfil their responsibilities in a remote location. This means that globally, HR teams provided a shift in RW policies in order to be aligned in terms of

salary, compensation schemes, organisation productivity, payroll, benefits, and employee engagement (Deloitte and Worldwide ERC, 2020). The shift to RW policies is beneficial for both employers and employees. The employed labour force is adapting to flexible employment measures, being an organisational response to the changing demographics trends. While RW has shown to provide higher levels of organisational commitments, greater job satisfaction and a more positive outlook to employee well being, it is also noted that employees struggle to switch off from their work responsibilities together with having a higher work intensification of their duties (Felstead, 2017). The pros and cons of RW on the employee will be determined in this research.

2.4.2 Workplace Flexibility and Hybrid Working

Technology has provided the opportunity for employees to work outside of the office and in a remote location. This trend, even post the COVID-19 pandemic, is envisioned to continue growing. According to a study by Ermek (2020) for the Work at Home Vintage Experts, flexible RW practices provide numerous benefits for both the employee and employer. These include a decrease in employee turnover, sick days, environmental costs, and an increase in productivity, attracting talent, and job satisfaction. HR policies have experienced a shift from the usual work arrangements, and are now accommodating to the needs of their employees.

Hybrid working is expected to rise in the future. According to a study by the European Parliament on the impact of teleworking and digital work on workers and society (2021), once COVID transpires, RW is expected to continue, with a high probability of organisations making use of hybrid forms, combining office and RW. The pandemic has brought about new ways of work that challenge traditional work policies and has imposed a strategy re-think on how work is performed, regulated and

coordinated. This is also in line with the work of Grzegorzczuk et al (2021) who stated that COVID has unlocked new working processes that have had a direct increase in organisational productivity, one which promotes career progression and protection of the workforce.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided some insight into how HR managers across multiple organisations have had to envision new strategies for the management and development of employees in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, an introduction of HRM, HR practices and HR planning was established. Through this, the main constituents of HR practices have been divulged, which will be used to answer the research question. Then, employee engagement with RW was explored, along with how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted it. The main factors that exert influence on employee engagement, such as training and development, communication, well-being, job satisfaction and performance, will be the main topics of discussion during the interviews with participants in this research. Through the participant's experiences on the above topics of discussion, a comparison with current literature and further insight into each topic will be provided.

The ramification of implementing RW on the employees and employers since COVID-19 have been discussed in section 2.3, in order to understand how the labour market has been affected. Moreover, various strategies used by multiple organizations worldwide were explored, to better apprehend the impact of RW within the public sector. There is limited research on the impact of RW on employee engagement within the public sector in Malta, as such a state of affairs is occurring in the present. This research will provide valuable insight to public sector organisations in Malta, as it will contribute to the studies related to the importance of HRMP, RW patterns, and the

impact of employee engagement. It will contribute by aiming to bridge the gap between literature and practice. Through this, a more clear understanding of whether employees are engaged while working remotely will be provided, together with a coherent direction on the intended way forward of such HRMP within the public sector. The following chapter will provide an outline of the research design used to administer the study, and why it is most suited.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, an outline of the research method and design used to administer this study are presented. This study focused on how the enforced move to RW due to COVID-19 affected employee engagement within organisations in the public sector in Malta. The goal of this study was to explore how HR managers were reacting to unprecedented change, as it is happening now. This research goes a step further in examining whether these organisations intend to retain RW practices in a post-COVID setting. The main aim of this research study is explained in section 3.2, together with the methodological approach which was used in section 3.3. The target population and the sampling procedure will then be discussed in sections 3.4 and 3.5. Following this, section 3.6 delves into the research technique that was opted for, and the interview questions that were asked to the participants. In the subsequent sections, a review of how the data collected through the interviews is analysed, together with the ethical considerations that were meticulously adhered to throughout the research process. Therefore, this chapter links the theoretical frameworks referred to in the previous chapter and provides direction for the following chapter, the results and analysis section.

3.2 Aim of the Study

This study is aimed at exploring and analysing the impact that RW has had on employee engagement. Employee engagement incorporates various aspects related to HRM and employment, such as employee motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, and performance management. According to Emmot (2006), the term employee engagement is considered as a management mantra, as having an organisation with engaged employees results in better job performance and reflects positively on the employer (Bailey, 2014).

Through this research, an exploration of the employees' experiences and their level of employee engagement were reviewed in light of the new shift to RW as a result of a global pandemic. Together with the employees, the HR personnel of every organisation were also interviewed, to see whether new measures and HR practices related to employee engagement were implemented. The objective was to provide an understanding of how RW impacted the level of employee engagement within organisations, if at all. Also, based on the results and analysis chapter, the intention was to understand the appropriate HR strategies used to ensure that employee engagement was maintained. The data gathered was driven by the following research question:

- How, if at all, does the shift to remote working prompted by Covid-19 impact employee engagement?

This research reflected on current affairs, as it highlighted the way organisations are currently adapting to the unexpected change in workplace dynamics. In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Maltese Islands; since then, organizations within the public sector have been significantly impacted in their day-to-day operations. HR managers needed to implement new HR practices such as RW, in order to ensure business continuity without needing to work directly from the office. This research aims

to explore the implementation of such HR practices, and whether they impacted the employee's level of engagement within the organisation. The goal is to shed light on various under-researched topics, as they are happening in the present. Therefore, this research question will contribute to the existing literature on employee engagement, with a specific focus on how newly introduced HR practices on RW have incorporated employee engagement within these organisations. This research will provide deeper knowledge on the impact of COVID-19 on such HR practices, and will also contribute to academic issues of employee development and the organisational context of HRM.

3.3 Data Collection: The Methodological Approach

A fundamental aspect of all social science research is the research approach. Following the research topic, adopting a suitable research design is crucial. The choice of methods used will account for the knowledge of the research topic, together with being a means to explain it (Sawsan and Raed, 2018). This was achieved through an interpretivist position, an approach rooted in a relativist ontological perspective, focusing on what is real and true as perceived by the participants (Paul, 2017). The study will take a qualitative methodological approach, aimed at providing a detailed account of the participant's experiences.

The goal of this research was to construct theoretical concepts that are based on empirical data. (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). While positivist research focuses on testing a hypothesis, the use of an interpretivist position provided a more comprehensive understanding of the employees' experiences, as what was needed in this research (Moglia, Alexander, and Perez, 2011). Together with the interpretivist approach, a qualitative research technique was used. The use of qualitative methodology provided a means to describe, interpret and generate theories from the data collected (O'Brien et al, 2014).

Therefore, through the use of a flexible research design, gaining a holistic insight of each organisation, cross-examining facts with different organisations, and an insight into the meaningful experiences of individuals, an understanding of the research topic was established. (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault, 2015). However, the use of qualitative methodology also implied that results could not be generalized to suit a wider population, and the research may reflect sample bias, can also be subjective, and is a very time-consuming method that is used to collect data (Skinner, Tagg, and Holloway, 2000). Moreover, the use of qualitative research provides a lack of transparency, as it is difficult to establish how the analysis was carried out and how the researcher arrived at the study's conclusions (Bryman, 2012). Once the data collection method had been determined, the next phase involved defining the population and the sample.

3.4 Defining the population

According to Neuman (2013), the target population consists of seeing what the participants represent and drawing a sample upon it. From De Langen's (2009) perspective, the target population incorporates all the characteristics needed to carry out the research study. This was done by matching potential participants to a set of eligibility criteria in order to establish that they should form part of the target population and sample.

The target population consisted of a total of sixteen individuals, having a mixture of different age groups, gender, and parental status. A total of four organisations were chosen from the public sector; organisations which, as a result of COVID-19, shifted from working at the office to working remotely. The organisations which were approached are representative of the topic of research, as the goal was to investigate the transition to RW for public sector organisations and the intended way forward in a

post-COVID setting. Both the organisations and participants chosen provided an important perspective on the phenomenon being researched.

From each organisation, a total of four participants were chosen: one who forms part of HR, and another three employees who have been impacted by having had to shift to RW. The target population was used to create the basis of the sample. The research makes use of purposive sampling, where the researcher chooses which individuals are chosen to participate in a strategic way, according to their relevance to this research study (Bryman, 2012). However, the use of purposive sampling is prone to researcher bias, where the researcher's subjectivity can influence the sample chosen which may result in a lack of representativeness (Seawright and Gerring, 2018).

3.4.1 Table 1 - The Participants Profile

Organisation	Participant Name (Pseudonym)	Category	Gender
<i>Organisation A</i>	Mandy	Employee	Female
	Roberta	Employee	Female
	Lindsey	Employee	Female
	Antoinette	HR	Female
<i>Organisation B</i>	Damien	Employee	Male
	Audrey	Employee	Female
	Yosef	Employee	Male
	Natalie	HR	Female
<i>Organisation C</i>	Alexia	Employee	Female
	Nick	Employee	Male
	Lauren	Employee	Female
	Eric	HR	Male
<i>Organisation D</i>	Steph	Employee	Female
	Norbert	Employee	Male
	Elisa	Employee	Female
	Elizabeth	HR	Female

3.5 The Sampling Procedure

Through the use of non-probability samples, the researcher is able to gather in-depth, descriptive accounts of the sample, and is also cost and time effective. According to Khan (2014), what matters in non-probability sampling is the participants' relevance rather than their representativeness to the wider population. For this research, the focus is placed on how these organisations implemented new HR practices to adapt to the global pandemic. Therefore, the organisations chosen must have made a shift in HR practices to RW in order to be relevant to participate, and their representativeness to other organizations within the public sector is not needed for this research study.

The HR personnel of multiple organisations within the public sector were contacted via phone and informed about this research and asked if they would like to participate. The HR of the organisation was asked both to participate and to act as a gatekeeper for the remaining participants. If the interest was shown, an email was sent to HR directly which included a brief relating to this research, the aim of this research, the access letter (refer to Appendix 4), the consent form (refer to Appendix 3) and interview questions (refer to Appendix 1 and 2). Once the HR consented to participate, the research summary was circulated internally within these organisations, in order to gain access to the remaining three participants. After three people were identified, the HR Manager introduced the researcher to these employees via email, following which an introduction of this research, together with a consent form, was sent accordingly. Once consent was given from all four participants, then the organisation was deemed eligible to participate in this research. This process was repeated for four organisations within the public sector.

With the use of this sampling method, it was the participants who decided to form part of this research study. In this scenario, the researcher shows interest in the organisation, and then it is the participant who approaches the researcher to take part. Therefore, the research will be only representative of individuals who showed interest, whilst being unrepresentative of organisations and participants who were unresponsive. Once the sample was identified, the research technique and interview schedule were established.

3.6 The Research Technique and Interview Schedule

The research technique used for this study was semi-structured interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews provided the researcher with a level of flexibility and a lack of interview structure. According to Edwards and Holland (2013), semi-structured interviews provide a narrative, thematic, and topic-centred approach towards collecting data in a fluid way. The objective was for the participants to freely express themselves through two-way communication, while also providing an in-depth understanding of the research topic.

The research consisted of two different interview types. The first interview type was targeted towards HR personnel and was used for the four different HRs of the organisations (refer to Appendix 1). The interview consisted of twenty-one questions. The second interview type was targeted towards the remaining twelve participants, who formed part of the respective organisations. This interview consisted of sixteen questions (refer to Appendix 2). Both interview types acted as a guideline of the main themes and topics that were to be discussed throughout the course of the interview. The main topics of interest included their perspective on RW, change of HR practices, the impact of COVID-19, its influence on job performance, motivation, employee engagement, virtual work life, and career development and progression. The objective

of the interview questions was to gather a clear understanding of what HR practices have been implemented since the rise of COVID-19, to understand the impact it left on an employee's level of engagement, and whether both the employer and employee want HR practices related to RW to continue, or if they prefer to return to working traditionally from the office.

The interview dates and times were confirmed by email correspondence with the participants directly. During the time that the interviews were being set, Malta had reached the third and highest wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a huge influx in COVID cases. As a result, to ensure the health and safety of both the participants and the researcher, all interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and the discussions involved a detailed and descriptive account of their subjective experience and perspective of the main research topics. The setting of interviews with the participants was an easy-going process, as when carrying out interviews online, people were more flexible and mostly available during the day. Once all interviews were conducted, the next step was to analyse the data.

3.7 Results and Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involved classifying and interpreting the descriptive accounts of participants, which were used to generate statements from the explicit and implicit detail gathered throughout the interviews. According to Flick (2013), the researcher gives meaning to the data and what it represents. The objective of using qualitative data analysis was to yield a descriptive account of this research phenomenon. This was done through the use of semi-structured interviews, where the participant's point of view was recorded and then transcribed. For the data analysis, thematic analysis was used, as it is a flexible approach to examining raw data and establishing the similarities and differences between them. The main themes that

emerged from the interview were on the perspective of RW within public entities, the office transition to digitalisation, job performance, employee well-being, and work-related challenges.

The data analysis process began by becoming conversant with the raw data of the interview transcripts. The data was examined and analytical observations were noted. Numerous themes were first established and labelled accordingly. The labels were created in order to code the data, thus establishing the data's relevance. Following this, themes were classified through the evaluation of any coherent patterns that are valuable in order to answer the research question. Following this, any recurring themes were identified and consolidated. A total of twenty-three themes were identified through the interview transcripts, through which the five main themes were established. Each theme goes into various sub-themes, which provide further detail on the topic being discussed. Here, the scope of the research was articulated as the themes were linked to the research question and existing literature. Finally, after a thorough analysis, the main findings for research were presented (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

The use of thematic analysis is very common with qualitative research and proves to be a good means to analyse data. However, just like any other method, it shares its limitations. The main critique revolves around researcher control. The researcher has control over which themes to identify and deem relevant, which can consequently question how the knowledge on the research is generated and presented (Saunders et al, 2017). Once all the research mechanisms used to administer the study were established, the researcher identified any ethical considerations that should be carefully assessed.

3.8 Ethical Consideration

Ethics in a research study should be carefully considered, in order to ensure an integral piece of work and to avoid any unforeseen risks. Qualitative research involves an in-depth account of the participants' experiences and safeguarding them and their identity is imperative (Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden, 2001). In order to do so, the researcher must be aware of any problems that could have arisen by participating in this research study, as to be circumvented accordingly.

One of the first considerations that was taken into account was the feasibility and practicality of conducting this research study (Meurman, 2016). To ensure this, organisations within the public sector were contacted at the early stages of this research process, in order to understand the ethical considerations involved in gaining access to the organisation and participants. This was done so that any barriers related to accessing the gatekeepers of these organisations were mitigated accordingly. Moreover, once the research study was identified, an application for ethical approval to the University of Leicester was submitted. The application process required a detailed account of the methodology, the sample, the participants, any permission required and supporting evidence, informed consent, the discussion of main topics, and of matters relating to the confidentiality and privacy of participants. Once reviewed by the University Ethics Sub-Committee of the School of Business, ethical approval was granted accordingly subject to the conditions set out in the Ethics Approval Letter (refer to Appendix 5).

Access was granted by contacting the HR personnel, gaining their consent, and the HR circulating the research study internally for the participation of another three employees. It was ensured that these people participated voluntarily and through informed consent. (Rhodes, 2018). Participants were provided with a consent form and access letter prior to the interview, as a means to ensure free and informed consent. At

this stage, the participants were aware of what their role as a research participant was, what level of commitment was required, how the data collected through the interview session was going to be used, and what consequences or risks (should they have arisen) might have emerged from this research. They were also notified of their right to access the data collected, and request any further information at any point in time during the research process (Flemming and Zegwaard, 2018). This was done in order to ensure that the participants were well informed about the purpose of this research and their role as a participant.

Following this, in order to ensure the protection of both the organisation and the identity of the participants, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. This was done by making use of pseudonyms (Roth and Unger, 2018) and changing the speed of voice recordings. This process ensured that from the data collected, one would not be able to link individual responses with the participants' identity or the organisation they form part of. Also, this research can be considered as involving sensitive data, since the participants refer to their working experience within an organisation. Therefore, it was made certain that there was no harm associated with them communicating truthful accounts of their experiences.

Finally, ethical considerations related to conflict of interest were addressed. The issue of conflict of interest could have arisen since I, the researcher, also work as an HR Manager within a public sector organisation. The research participants were informed about my work and my position at the start of my communication with them. When contacting the HR personnel, my working position within a public organisation was discussed, so that they would have had room to express their concern should it make them feel uncomfortable participating in this research because of it. The other three employees of each organisation who showed interest were also notified about my role, together with being provided with a briefing that stated my direct involvement within the industry. As a researcher, it was ensured that the dual status as an HR and a researcher were clear to all participants, as it may be considered competitive by nature

(Mecca et al, 2015). Through this, open communication with all participants was certified, and it was the participants' choice on whether they had any objection to participating on that basis.

Overall, the aim of this research study was to ensure that the participation of individuals was carefully assessed and ethically considered. This was essential due to the qualitative nature of this research. Overall, throughout this research study, participants were continuously reminded and made aware that they had the freedom to choose whether they would like to participate in this research out of their free will, and if they agreed, they still had the right to withdraw their participation at any point in time throughout this research study.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research methodology administered in this research study. In the beginning, an explanation of the aims of this research study, together with the methodological approach that was opted for was provided. Following this, the sampling procedure was discussed in conjunction with how the target population was selected. An explanation of why this research technique was used, together with the interview questions that were asked to the participants were also put forward. Succeeding this, insights as to how the data was analysed was also provided, with a thorough explanation of all the ethical considerations that were reflected for this research. Moving forward, the data collected through the interviews and the main themes that emerged from this research will be meticulously analysed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on an in-depth analysis of sixteen semi-structured interviews together with the main findings. The scope of these interviews was to understand the impact of the enforced move to RW, due to COVID-19, on employee engagement within the public sector. A total of four public entities were chosen. From each entity, interviews took place with the HR personnel and three employees from different departments. The goal was to gather a holistic understanding of how employee engagement was managed, and the way it impacted employees. The themes in this chapter were identified through the use of thematic analysis, as outlined in the Methodology Chapter. This chapter is divided into five main sections, one focusing on each of the main themes: remote working within public entities, office transition, job performance, employee well-being, and work-related challenges. Each theme consists of various sub-themes that delve further into topics relating to work-life balance, communication, job performance, commitment and training. Research findings show that, overall, RW has had a positive impact on both the employee and employer, suggesting that a flexible hybrid working arrangement is implemented moving forward. Also, the data concludes that the benefits associated with RW outweigh the challenges it incorporates. Therefore, in order to understand the themes and key findings presented in this chapter, the findings will also make links to relevant academic themes and debates that aim to highlight the contribution that this research makes to the existing academic literature.

4.2 Remote Working within Public entities

Entities within the public sector are more constrained, as factors like budget allocations and government policies impact organisational control (Jin and McDonald, 2017). An interpretive approach was used in this study, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the employees' experiences within public sector entities (Moglia, Alexander, and Perez, 2011). The first theme will look into the participant's perspective on RW and its ramification on their professional and personal life. The reason why participants were asked to provide their perspective on RW was to gather a good understanding of whether RW provided flexibility and work-life balance. Through the exploration of this theme, the research will exhibit how RW has impacted the personal life of participants and working parents and will provide insight into the transition prompted by the enforced move to RW. Also, it will illustrate if participants and the organisation experienced a sense of shock. Participants explained that RW in the public sector was only offered to employees as a 'family-friendly' measure prior to COVID-19. This means that only employees who had children, or those who looked after their elderly parents had the right to apply for a RW concession. According to a study by Randstad (2020), even though RW was possible prior to COVID, not many employees had the option to utilize it. This has proven to be the case with three of the organizations.

Participants expressed that RW was the exception rather than the rule, as not everyone had the opportunity to experience it. Upon the rise of COVID-19, all four government entities transitioned to RW.

4.2.1 Employee perspective on Remote Working

From an organisational perspective, an employee's outlook is viewed as a predecessor of unit-level performance (Wang et al, 2020). The participants spoke about the effect RW had in their everyday lives, both professionally and personally. Commencing with organisation A, the employees advised how they have been working remotely for the past two years. Antoinette, the HR personnel within that organisation, stated that being able to offer RW to all employees has proved to be fruitful for both the employee and employer. Nowadays, they have employees who are either RW, teleworking, or hot-desking. Organisations C and D are currently working on a hybrid rotation, three days remotely and two days from the office. On the contrary, organisation B has transitioned back to the office, and only provides RW as a 'family-friendly' measure.

Employees expressed how RW has affected them favourably. Participants who formed part of organisation A spoke about the climate-positive impact of RW. In a study carried out by Emrek (2020), the benefits of RW are present for both the employee and employer. These include reduction of employee turnover, environmental cost, decrease in sick days, and increased job performance. Organisation C stated:

“Providing RW to employees does not only pose environmental gain but is also a tool of employee retention.” (Eric, HR, organisation C).

Employees within organisation C spoke about the fruition of maintaining work-life balance and insisted that flexibility is key. Norbert, working with organisation D, and Damien, working with organisation B, expressed the importance of RW as their wives do not have flexible working conditions, and one of them needs to be present with their children. Overall, RW is considered a flexible approach that is functional, convenient, and supports employee well-being, being a fluid virtual workspace to employees (Surma

et al, 2021). However, like anything else, it shared its disadvantages. Participants discussed drawbacks related to RW:

“RW is not the same as working at the office and having human interaction.” (Nick, employee, organisation C).

“The fact that you are bringing the office to home makes it harder to switch off.” (Lauren, employee, organisation C).

“People who do not like to communicate were being cut off.” (Steph, employee, organisation D)

This was also the case with Norbert who mentioned there are no working hours when working remotely. This coincides with the work of Felstead (2017), who in his research stated that employees struggle to switch off and noted a higher work intensification. Lauren also stated that her biggest struggle was keeping close to team members who are more reserved, making it hard to help them overcome any challenges they might be facing. Overall, the participants have shown that RW has been a beneficial HR practice and their perspective is overall positive, however, they still explained that it has its fair share of drawbacks.

4.2.2 Impact on Personal Life

Preceding COVID, RW was a contingency plan intended for people who needed ‘family-friendly’ measures. Elizabeth, from organisation D, explained how they carried out a SWOT analysis post implementing RW in their organisation. She mentioned how management implemented a strategic planning technique to ensure business continuity while having employees work in the right kind of environment. Interruptions were

minimalized and work quantity increased. Employees were able to juggle personal commitments without compromising their work responsibilities. As Guest (1997) stated in his research, proper HRM is characterised through four goals: flexibility, high quality, high commitment, and strategic integration. The data presented in this research, and as manifested in organisation D, coincides with the four goals proposed by Guest (1997) and is indeed the case.

From a total of sixteen participants, only one participant mentioned how her experience with RW has impacted her negatively. All participants spoke about how RW has had numerous advantages in both their personal and professional life, however, Alexia's experience of RW differed as it affected her role, job responsibilities, and mentioned that her team was not supportive. Also, she stated that:

“Speaking to people over a laptop and not being able to physically meet them and change my environment really put me down.” (Alexia, employee, organisation C).

She added that at home, between herself, her husband, and the children, they were constantly overstepping each other. The situation became frustrating for her, and she became de-motivated and expressed feelings of low spirits. Alexia's experience differed from the other participants and she explained how the enforced move to RW impacted her personal life negatively. Consequently, this also posed negative repercussions on her level of engagement within the organisation. This suggests that RW affects employees differently and that the impact it has on the individuals depends also on their personality and personal situation.

4.2.3 Working Parents

A total of seven female and two male participants had children, and RW for them was different. Lindsey and Mandy spoke about their experience on the enforced move to RW and the country being on partial lockdown. Children were introduced to home-schooling due to the health hazards related to COVID-19, therefore all family members were at home. This affected the participant's experience of working remotely, as they needed to handle both work responsibilities and cater for their children's needs. Participants stated:

“Schooling consists of mainly two things: education and child care. In home-schooling, the child care aspect was completely lost.” (Mandy, employee, organisation A)

“RW in COVID and homeschooling had its fair share of burdens.” (Lindsey, employee, organisation A)

“It took a couple of weeks to adjust between home responsibilities, children, and work. They didn't go very well together, but management was very flexible and understood the situation.” (Norbert, employee, organisation D)

Furthermore, Norbert spoke about how RW was more beneficial when his child returned back to school, as both the work quality and quantity was much better since working remotely. Steph, who also works with Norbert, experienced the same situation as him and stated that her working hours increased since working remotely. Lauren, who worked for organisation C, feared mismanaging her team, and when bringing the work office home, she feared that her child would disrupt the workflow. On the contrary, Damien and Audrey, who formed part of organisation B, had different experiences with

RW and parenting concurrently. They explained that they both had their children being looked after while working remotely which allowed them to work freely.

4.2.4 The Enforced move to Remote Working

Over the span of a weekend, all employees within these four public organisations were enforced to transition to RW in early 2020. Public sector entities have traditionally worked from the office, and not many employees experienced RW patterns. The shift to RW was prompted by COVID-19, which forced a change in traditional HR practices.

The shift to RW was not an HR practice that the public sector organisation chose to implement themselves, as organisations needed to find an alternative to working from the office due to COVID, one which ensures business continuity. A study by Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) showed that HR managers prioritised the importance of having engaged employees during this unprecedented change. The HR personnel of these organisations displayed that this was the case. As mentioned by HR Manager Elizabeth, the transition left a big impact on the HR unit. She explained that there were a number of factors taken into consideration:

“The nature of the job makes a big difference. Working on payroll is one thing, but if you are in a managerial position, the impact is different”.

(Elizabeth, HR, organisation D)

This meant that HR practices needed to be carefully assessed. Robertson-Smith and Markwick (2009) stated that those employees in a managerial position are more likely to be engaged, as such employees perceive their responsibilities as worth investing in. The data proved this to be the case:

“Those in a managerial position showed more commitment, while people in lower grades were more resilient in their cooperation at times.”
(Elizabeth, HR, organisation D).

Moreover, HR Manager Antoinette mentioned that the enforced move to RW instilled a sense of shock and adjustments to usual day-to-day business. She insists that now, two years since shifting remotely, employees have embraced working from anywhere. An employee survey carried out by them at the end of 2021 showed that:

“RW has been welcomed positively amongst our employees, with only a handful mentioning that they would like to switch back to working from the office every day.” (Antoinette, HR, organisation A).

Eric, the HR personnel of organisation C, mentioned a very valid point in relation to the enforced move to RW, namely that:

“COVID accelerated the pace of many HR practices that before were either a taboo or else employers held back from pursuing. RW is a perfect example of this.” (Eric, HR, organisation C).

Therefore, all organisations adapted to new practices which portray how employee engagement is a result of job demands and job resources (Jose and Mampilly, 2021). The use of RW had been in discussions for numerous years prior to it being enforced on organisations, and the main reason why organisations were hesitant with implementing it was due to not knowing whether people are capable of performing their duties remotely. This data shows that the enforced move to RW has provided business continuity, and has been a means for both the employers to sustain organisational growth, and for the employees to benefit from a work-life balance.

Moreover, the HR personnel of all organisations spoke about how imposing the shift to RW was the right thing to do:

“People felt that it was the only option, and it was done in a spirit that the whole nation was making an effort to stay home.” (Eric, HR organisation C).

Eric displays how his organisation took three psychological factors into consideration that impact the level of employee engagement. Aspects relating to psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability, illustrate the meaningful decisions taken by management (Bustasar, Sumarsih, and Nugroho, 2019). In order to assist with this transition, organisation C started by having skeleton staff at the office, to ensure that those working remotely were well supported. This way, if there were any processes that were overlooked during the enforced move to RW, they would automatically mitigate it by having someone at the office.

4.3 Office Transition to Digitalisation

The transition from working at the office to RW occurred promptly (Prakash et al, 2019). For organisation A, having employees transition from the office to RW only required employees to take their laptops home. The only change that was implemented by HR was an online punching system for time and attendance. This allowed all employees to punch in from any location. Lumi (2020) demonstrated how this was made possible through the use of technological development and has made an impact on traditional HR practices, as illustrated above. Organisation D also had the system in place, and implemented VPN access on all employee laptops as, without it, they were unable to access their company p-drive. Once implemented, they experienced no limitations with RW. This is a clear example of how technology has brought about a new business prospectus that facilitates working and puts organisations at a competitive advantage (Samson and Agrawal, 2020).

Digitalisation involved a shift in HR practices, one which included soft technologies, applications, and the internet (Halid et al, 2020). This proved to be present within all organisations. Conversely, the HR personnel of organisation D discussed how the transition brought about a number of challenges to workflow. Natalie explained how nearly all employees work on physical files that were found at the office, therefore when transitioning remotely, day-to-day operations were slowed down. Employees had to carry files home, which was quite challenging. Apart from this, in order to ensure that all health and safety regulations were being followed, each file was being quarantined for two weeks before it was sent to the next employee responsible for working on it. As a result, work productivity declined, and responsibilities that usually took two hours to complete were taking over two weeks. Due to this, and it being COVID permitting, employees transitioned back to the office. Therefore, this research shows that there were aspects to work that still required a physical presence, and RW could not fulfil this. RW was considered as a barrier to work productivity for organisation

D, and unless they transition their physical files online, RW would not be a viable option for them.

4.3.1 Relationship and Communication with the team

Participants spoke about their relationship with their co-workers, and how shifting remotely affected this. According to Lumi (2020), one of the main disadvantages related to RW is the fear of losing human relationships within the social sphere. This proved to be the case amongst the participants. Mandy from organisation A said that communication with team members is possible through the use of technology; either through Microsoft teams, mobile calls, or different chatting platforms. She explained how her unit manager used to chat with the team three times a week, so everyone knew what their colleagues were working on:

“We were given the tools to communicate, so we just needed to make use of them. The conversation was still personal and we managed to communicate pleasantly with one another. The main drawback is that people can disturb you more easily when working from home, as people don’t know what you would be doing at the time.” (Mandy, employee, organisation A).

Moving on, Norbert discussed his experience managing two teams remotely. He used to have weekly recurring meetings with both teams, one meeting relating to work planning, and the other meeting had no agenda. With more reserved team members, he set up meetings more frequently to ensure good employee well-being. Lauren from organisation C made use of similar techniques with her team. She had weekly meetings with her manager to ensure deadlines are being met and had another weekly meeting with the whole team:

“The scope was to understand how people were feeling and for them to know they could talk about anything.” (Norbert, employee, organisation D).

“Thirty minutes would be us just talking casually and speaking openly, then the other thirty minutes would be all about work.” (Lauren, employee, organisation C).

Lauren expressed that it was harder to assist people who were passing through a difficult time when working remotely, as it is hard to have a casual conversation. She continued by remarking how everything is official because you have to set a meeting on teams to discuss the situation. Lauren also wanted to ensure that her team always felt supported, so she reserved two hours every Wednesday and Friday for her team members to speak to her about any difficulty they were encountering.

HR Natalie mentioned how she also set weekly meetings to maintain good relations. However, Natalie expressed how it was difficult to retain communication with employees in other units. The HR personnel from organisation C also encountered this problem, however provided the means to mitigate this barrier. Eric stated that importance was put on taking care of the employee:

“We would organise HR catch-ups with all employees. We used to mix and match employees from different teams so that they wouldn’t lose contact between them. We ensured that being close to employees and managers was one of our top priorities.” (Eric, HR, organisation C).

Eric’s goal was clear: to incorporate open communication, maintain engaged and motivated employees, and implement flexible working measures (De-la-Calle-Duran and Roderiguez-Sanchez, 2021). Further to this, Alexia, who works with Eric, explained how

the HR department was extremely supportive and understanding. However, Alexia spoke about the struggle she felt communicating with her team, as her manager was an introvert and barely communicated with her. This had affected her level of motivation and job performance. Management plays a vital role in employee motivation and engagement (Endigaw, 2021), and in Alexia's case, this situation with her manager decreased her level of engagement. Furthermore, the issue with management not being trained to properly manage and communicate with their team was also expressed by Lindsey. She spoke about the result of an employee survey their organisation carried out:

"It was evident that the connection was lost. We tried to push managers to call their colleagues as much as we could and still to no avail." (Lindsey, employee, organisation A).

As opposed to this, Roberta who also works for organisation C mentioned:

"If you are interested, you find ways to ensure communication is not lost. I am an output-driven person, but it doesn't mean that I do not give importance to work relationships." (Roberta, employee, organisation C).

She continued speaking about how the communication with her team improved since working remotely due to missing your colleagues more. In fact, she spoke about how her team used to meet up after working hours which inevitably made them closer. Communication proved to be a major factor that contributed to the level of employee engagement since working remotely. Participants shared mixed views on the topic, however, most spoke about the importance of ensuring communication between the team is maintained. Managers spoke about using customized approaches with different team members depending on their character and went out of their way to ensure that members of their team could always speak to them. This had positive ramifications on

their level of engagement and job performance. On the contrary, employees who lacked communication within the team showed lower levels of engagement. On that account, communication has proved to be a key consideration when understanding the impact the enforced move to RW has had on employee engagement.

4.3.2 Change in HR Practices

There are two sides to HRM: one involves having proper strategic HR practices in place, while the other takes into account employees' perceptions of such HR practices (Beurden, 2021). Eric spoke about HR practices related to training and development. In order to cater for the transition to RW, all employees in managerial positions were given remote leadership training. The use of proper training and development is a continuous process that aids in overcoming the variation between the employee's prevailing performance and the desired performance (Noe, 2017). Eric mentioned:

“As an HR team we gave managers the tools needed to execute their role well, then the managers needed to adopt those tools in accordance to the needs of their units.” (Eric, HR, organisation C).

Eric added that any gaps that were present pre-pandemic, were still present nowadays; this required different HR practices to be implemented. Eric made a differentiation between the actual HR practices that have been implemented with those practices he intended to implement, which according to Storey et al (Rees and Branine, 2019), is crucial within organisations. Moreover, Elizabeth from organisation D mentioned how they had to change HR practices in relation to overtime:

“We experience a spike and difficulty in managing overtime. HR and senior management needed to step in and regulate the situation.”
(Elizabeth, HR, organisation D).

They specified the number of parameters relating to overtime and successfully managed to regularise it. The data shows that RW was an implementation of new HR practices, however, the shift itself did not require much change to day to day business. HR mentioned that these new HR practices required an adaptation of current practices to accommodate the new parameters of working remotely.

4.4 Job Performance

Most of the participants expressed how their work output and job performance increased since working remotely. HRM is a method that aims to increase an employee's job performance and ensures that business goals are met (Boxall and Purcel, 2015). Participants mentioned that distractions were minimised while working remotely. Interestingly, participants expressed an increase in job responsibilities, as they felt gratitude towards working remotely, and ultimately made them feel more engaged towards their work. HR Manager Antoinette discussed how a discrepancy between units is present and should be evaluated separately. In the meetings held with the managers and directors, feedback was that work output remained the same or increased, and the overall performance was good. This coincides with the feedback from other participants:

“We had a performance management system and made use of end of year reviews, and job performance showed to remain consistent.” (Mandy, employee, organisation A).

“Our work output was higher in COVID without a doubt.” (Lauren, employee, organisation C).

On the other hand, Alexia mentioned how her duties changed due to the industry being shut down because of COVID, which consequently affected her job performance. The HR team had to provide her with alternative duties which do not fall under her remit, therefore impacting both her job performance and level of engagement. Elizabeth spoke about how organisation D maintained a great level of work output and job performance, stating how employees were engaged in their roles. She stated:

“RW did not affect KPIs - employees knew they had objectives they needed to reach, irrelevant if they are working from the office or remotely.” (Elizabeth, HR, organisation D).

In order to ensure this, the HR Unit would set up meetings every two weeks with the different units to discuss any pending tasks. Norbert, Steph, and Elisa, who work for organisation C, confirmed the techniques prompted by HR and were satisfied with the process. Norbert and Steph stated that their performance remained relatively consistent, while Elisa mentioned that she felt she inputted more toward her role.

Lastly, as opposed to the above, participants forming part of organisation C mentioned that job performance was challenging to maintain. HR Natalie spoke about how it was hard to manage people and their performance while working remotely. The fact that they were not paperless had a big impact on this. She mentioned how job performance is also dependent on the employee's character:

“If I know a person is reliable, then we encounter no problems. However, it is clear that people who aren't productive at the office weren't productive at home either.” (Natalie, HR, organisation C).

Audrey and Damien both mentioned how their job performance was not affected by working remotely, as their roles did not involve physical files and could be done from any location. Yosef, on the other hand, explained that this was a struggle at times, as not having access to files interrupted his level of productivity. Overall, the data shows that job performance was maintained throughout the transition to RW, and left a positive impact on employee engagement. Only one of the organisations showed to have struggled with the transition, both in terms of job performance and engagement, as they didn't have the tools in place to accommodate this. Therefore, this shows that RW has had a positive impact on job performance for roles that could be carried out from any

location, however, proved to be a barrier for organisations that are restrained from carrying out their roles from a specific location.

4.4.1 Motivation

Sustainability within the business market is maintained by having productive employees who are motivated and have the right skill set and knowledge (Muhammad and Yazdani Fard, 2013). The participant's level of motivation manifested their level of engagement. Participants stated:

“Motivation used to come by thinking about how I could better my performance. Also, motivation depends on earning respect from your team and managers. You must be a good communicator, understanding, and value the person to ensure that employees are motivated and engaged.” (Mandy, employee, organisation A).

“I know what working conditions work best for me, in total quiet where I can concentrate. I could definitely see an increase in my motivation since working remotely.” (Roberta, employee, organisation A).

These participants illustrate motivation through intrinsic factors. Research by Mohanan et al (2012) shows how employees respond to intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivation. In these cases, working relationships, flexibility, job responsibilities, and recognition were the main aspects that kept them motivated and engaged.

In addition, Roberta mentions how the possibility of transitioning back to the office is demotivating for her, as she now knows how RW has impacted her work output positively, and a shift back would discourage her. Roberta also mentioned how

financially, she knows she could earn more within other organisations, however chooses to remain with this organisation because of these flexible working conditions. Maslow's hierarchy of needs shows that intrinsic motivation is more likely to retain employees and heighten their level of engagement as opposed to extrinsic motivation such as financial gain (Singh, 2016). Moreover, Norbert's motivation was more impacted on a personal level. He explains that:

“RW did not impact my attitude towards work, however, waking up and not having to change clothes and location demotivated me sometimes.”
(Norbert, employee, organisation D).

Participants from organisation B all mentioned how RW did not affect their level of motivation:

“I feel the same, working remotely and working from the office is just a matter of adapting to the environment you are in. My motivation was simply ensuring I was doing my job right.” (Yosef, employee, organisation B).

The HR personnel of the organisations mentioned how motivation is not simple to tackle, with Antoinette insisting that it is the little things that make a big difference. Elizabeth mentioned how they fixed a problem of motivation for some employees by providing RW, as it motivated them more. She further mentioned how the main struggle was to ensure new recruits were motivated. Certain initiatives such as job shadowing were not possible during RW, which ultimately impacted employee motivation. The level of motivation of employees proved to contribute to their level of engagement with their roles. Some participants expressed how working remotely was a motivating factor for them to perform better, whilst others felt that RW was demotivating at times due to being

isolated. Overall, motivation proved to play a part on the level of engagement of employees, having employees being motivated differently.

4.4.2 Impact on Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is characterised by an employee's level of commitment, job performance, motivation, and organisational growth (Khan, 1990). The survey carried out by organisation A revealed that employees who were not motivated were less engaged. Lindsey mentioned how this was a result of employees choosing not to communicate work-related challenges which resulted in decreased job performance. On the other hand, Mandy spoke about her reflection on employee engagement:

“I feel valued and I give all that I have towards my role. Our team constantly kept finding out-of-the-box solutions, keeping me engaged, productive and motivated.” (Mandy, employee, organisation A).

This is an example of how good HRM practices have positive effects on employee engagement (Surma et al, 2021). Together with Mandy, other participants mentioned that:

“I have never been so engaged in my role. Working remotely gave me the opportunity to work in the most favourable working conditions.” (Roberta, employee, organisation A)

“RW allows an incredible level of flexibility and now I would not imagine having it any other way.” (Lauren, employee, organisation C).

From organisation C, Lauren explained how through the enforced move to RW, her level of engagement had been heightened. Nick mentions how the HR department ensured employees remained engaged in their roles and stated that:

“HR must have been the most difficult job in the past two years... anything we were feeling, we could speak to HR and they always found a way to help. HR is really doing a great job.” (Nick, employee, organisation C).

The involvement HR provided to organisation C exemplifies an alignment between the goals of employees and the objectives of an organisation in a unitary way (Guest, 1997). Norbert shared different views on employee engagement and stated that:

“RW is not the determining factor of employee engagement.” He added on by saying that “while it did provide more flexible working conditions for some, there are still employees who are not happy with some working conditions, and RW did not change this.” (Norbert, employee, organisation D).

Steph goes on to mention that she feels employee engagement is also dependent on the individual’s position and their level of interest. She mentioned how their organisation has around three hundred employees, and the level of engagement between members differs. Moreover, as a manager herself, Lauren explained how the level of employee engagement within the team also depended on management. She mentioned how:

“Ensuring the commitment and engagement of employees used to take 5% of my time at the office, but remotely, it takes much more effort.

Consequently, there was more stress and pressure on management.”
(Lauren, employee, organisation C).

Lauren mentioned how this was maintained through the use of online events, buying lunch for the team, and setting a call together. Basically, she came up with events that made people feel close and engaged. As a result, Lauren mentioned how there was no turnover in her team in the past two years and is aligned with the postulation that engaged employees are more likely committed to staying with their current employer (Vance, 2006).

Lastly, members of organisation D emphasised their gratitude for being able to work remotely. Since RW was not always possible in their line of work, being given this opportunity made them feel like they should work harder to prove that RW can be made possible. As a result, their level of engagement heightened, they expressed gratitude towards management and took on more responsibility.

4.5 Employee Wellbeing

The HR personnel of all four organisations shed light on matters relating to employee wellbeing, mental health, and the HR strategies used to address this. According to Armstrong (2016), proper HRM includes the integration of strategic management and a coherent approach towards the well-being of employees. Antoinette explained how the HR department stressed the importance of ensuring that matters relating to an employee's mental health and well-being were confronted. She stated that at the start of COVID and RW:

“We did a lot of reach-out calls. All 450 employees were called by three people in a month. We also set up calls with employees who undergo certain situations, such as changing units, giving birth, or going through a tough time.” (Antoinette, HR, organisation A).

Furthermore, Antoinette mentioned how they created a Facebook group with their employees on well-being. Every Wednesday they put up a well-being post, and every two months they would carry out a discussion group with staff members to discuss important topics related to well-being. Similarly, Elizabeth mentioned:

“It is important to organise a few sessions for people who developed anxiety because of RW”. (Elizabeth, HR, organisation D).

She continued speaking about how the enforced move to RW became frustrating for some employees, so addressing concerns related to the mental well-being of employees was of utmost importance. Providing the right HR strategies related to employee well-being is an important factor to consider when working remotely. Different ways of monitoring employee well-being, together with providing appropriate training to management on how to handle well-being is important, as sustaining good employee

well-being will result in having more engaged employees, as shown in the data presented above.

4.5.1 Employee Retention and Turnover

Discussions relating to employee retention strategies and the impact of RW on employee turnover took place with the HR Managers of all organisations. Elizabeth explained how they noticed an increase in applications in lower-level roles. She stated that:

“Prior to COVID we barely received any applications, and during COVID we had more than three hundred applicants. People who worked in tourism and industries that suffered due to COVID started applying. Government roles had the one thing every employee was looking for - job security.” (Elizabeth, HR, organisation D).

Job protection is a major benefit of working within the public sector, which makes it challenging for HR managers to control poor performance as a result (Lavinga, 2015). Elizabeth spoke about how most employees are professionals within their organisation and felt that employees did a lot of self-reflection on their current roles. This, in her opinion, led to a number of resignations because these employees were certain that they would easily find a job elsewhere. Also, she mentioned that:

“We had employees who joined our company because they were made redundant from their previous employer due to COVID. Once the economy got back on its feet, we had a number of people who resigned.” (Elizabeth, HR, organisation D).

Even though the rate of employee turnover remained the same within these organisations, some observations made by the HR Managers were that:

“During the exit interviews, employees mentioned how the reason behind their decision to leave was because they were alone. This was brought about since we implemented RW.” (Antoinette, HR, organisation A).

“Our organisation is known for having nice offices and great company culture, and during exit interviews, employees commented on how that element was lost when working remotely. Employees told me that they would have never thought of changing jobs prior to working remotely because of our premises and team dynamic, but part of it was lost with remote working.” (Eric, HR, organisation C).

The public sector was perceived as a safeguard for individuals, as job security was never at stake. As a result, the data shows that all organisations maintained a good level of employee retention, however, that does not necessarily mean it was because of RW, but rather because the public sector was considered as a stable employer in the midst of a pandemic. RW showed to be a factor for some employees to leave the organisations, as the company and office culture were lost since working remotely. Company culture proved to be a factor contributing to both retention and turnover, which as a result played a part in the employee's level of engagement.

4.5.2 Employee Feedback

Importance should be given to investigating the employees' point of view (Cafferkey et al, 2018). By doing so, the employer can gather whether any implemented HR practices have been successful, and reflect on the employee's level of job

satisfaction and commitment (Pombo and Gomes, 2019). This was the case within two organisations, namely C and D, who carried out employee surveys. Eric, from organisation C, expressed how appreciative their employees were of how close the HR team was to them during COVID-19 and RW. He mentioned how:

“We were preceding the health authorities in the measures we were putting in place. People felt that we cared for them as a person, and that was the prevailing aspect for all of us - personal before professional.”
(Eric, HR, organisation C).

Organisation C manifests the mutual investment model which states that if the employer invests in the needs of the employee, the employee will take care of the employer (Lambooi et al, 2006). Elizabeth mentioned how most employees remarked how they prefer RW working arrangements and would like for it to continue prevailing. Overall, she was happy to say that the impact was definitely a positive one. Through the employee's feedback, the level of engagement of the employees was assessed. Data shows that the enforced move to RW was welcomed positively amongst the employees, affecting employees favourably.

4.6 Work-related challenges

There were a number of challenges that the enforced move to RW brought about. Organisation A spoke about the challenges related to educating the public on online services. They also mentioned how elderly people found it hard to use their laptops and switch their landlines onto their mobile phones. Other challenges included:

“The biggest challenge is that not all unit managers pulled the same rope. Some managers were viewing the situation objectively, while others were purely subjective.” (Mandy, employee, organisation A).

“It was hard for me to switch off. Before you used to change environments when you leave work. Even during my break, I leave my teams open and eat in front of the camera. Meetings are non-stop and people are constantly messaging if not calling.” (Norbert, employee, organisation D).

“The biggest challenge was the relationship between different units, as it was not common to communicate with people from different teams. There even was a new employee who was recruited during COVID, and we had no idea they had onboarded our team. This was a difficulty.” (Elisa, employee, organisation D).

“I was recruited during COVID, and that was the biggest challenge. When we started going back to the office, everyone thought I was new when I had already been working with the organisation for nearly a year. I felt like I knew nobody.” (Lauren, employee, organisation C).

Moreover, employees from organisation B mentioned how their challenge was different for them since, as once COVID permitted, all employees returned to the office. Yosef mentioned how:

“It was very challenging to transition back from working remotely to working at the office. Aspects relating to the time taken to come to work, get dressed, and the never-ending traffic really was challenging to adjust back to.” (Yosef, employee, organisation B).

“It took time until settling back to old routines.” (Damien, employee, organisation B).

Elizabeth mentioned the barrier that emerged in relation to communication between unit managers from an HR perspective. The decision was taken that unit managers return to the office, and gladly, it aided with the communication barrier. She explained that there was resistance from some employees when asked to return to the office, with some even resigning on that basis. However, overall she mentioned that the impact of this HR practice was positive. Antoinette also spoke about the challenge of connecting. Certain initiatives like company events and team-building were not possible during COVID, and employees could feel more distant from one another. She mentioned that:

“Unfortunately, the mix of COVID and RW had hindered a level of communication and connection between employees.” (Elizabeth, HR, organisation D).

Natalie and Eric spoke about challenges from a personal perspective, rather than only professional. Apart from discussing the topics raised above by Elizabeth and

Antoinette, they spoke about the ramifications of RW on an individual's mental health, especially by the Unit Managers. They state that:

“When we were forced to work from home, it wasn’t always a nice situation. Being isolated at home and simply talking to a screen is challenging, and also becomes frustrating.” (Natalie, employee, organisation C).

“Managers should be provided training as to how one ensures that an employee’s mental well being is being managed properly and cared for.” (Eric, HR, organisation C).

While the research data shows that RW has had a positive impact on both employee engagement and the employee's professional and personal life, there are still a number of challenges associated with transitioning remotely. Most of the participants spoke about the frustrations related to the inability to switch off, and how the environment they used to spend leisure time in, is now also their working space. Together with this, aspects related to feeling alone at times were also present, where some participants felt lonely working with simply a laptop. While these are very real challenges that RW poses, they did not seem to have a major impact on the level of employee engagement. Participants were truthful with their accounts and mentioned how any situation has its benefits and drawbacks. The above-mentioned drawbacks were perceived as minor, in relation to the numerous benefits RW has had on the employees' lives.

4.6.1 What would you have done differently?

The HR team in an organisation is considered one of the strongest assets within a company (Vlachos, 2008). Participants were asked what measures they would have taken should they have formed part of the HR team. Participants mentioned that:

“Team-building events would increase the level of engagement... people were alone for a long time, so it makes you feel like you are not connected and loses a big part of your life because of it.” (Lindsey, employee, organisation A).

“I would have kept more close contact with employees, not by HR, but at a director level. As an HR, I would have created a system and made it obligatory to communicate with staff.” (Roberta, employee, organisation A).

“The thing that I would change is the timing of certain decisions. Certain actions should have taken place way before they were actually implemented. For example, it took some time for the management to switch remotely, having quite a number of cases present before being able to make that decision.” (Norbert, employee, organisation D).

The main objective of any HRM practice is to create HR systems and policies that impact an employee's work attitude, behaviour, and performance (Asbar et al, 2010). Norbert mentioned how he felt that management should have asked for employee feedback prior to the decision being taken, as employees felt that there were times when their feedback was not being heard. Employees of organisation C also sympathise with Norbert's perspective:

“I feel that employees should have been heard more, what their concerns are, what they wish to improve on, and eventually take it on board. Also, after implementing something, I expected more of a follow up to actually see that things have been implemented and are changing.” (Alexia, employee, organisation C).

Her colleagues, Lauren and Nick, felt that the HR team did an excellent job with handling this unexpected change. The only feedback Lauren added was that:

“In hindsight, I would have thought more outside of the box in terms of resources to ensure employees are happy and engaged. We would create a budget for events and split it between units, making sure we have the right resources.” (Lauren, employee, organisation C).

This question prompted employees to reflect on their transition to RW, and think of what HR practices could have been implemented in order to aid with the transition. Most of the participants felt very pleased with the processes HR implemented. Some of the main feedback related to team building events is not directly related to RW, but rather as being a drawback of the COVID-19 regulations. Therefore, such events are to be made available to employees when working remotely in a post-covid setting, which would mitigate the issue. Moreover, the points raised in relation to listening to employee feedback prior to implementing new practices is vital and could result in greater employee engagement as it would make employees feel like their opinion matters and is considered.

4.6.2 Post-COVID Setting

The employees were asked how they envision the situation to pan out in a post-COVID setting, while the HR personnel spoke about how management intended to move forward. Organisation A is currently working hybrid, meaning that they work two days from the office and three days remotely. Organisation C also has the same working pattern. The HR of organisation A mentioned that they are currently in this working situation because of COVID; however, according to management, they aim to retain the same working schedule and increase another day from the office. Only one of the employees, Roberta, mentioned how she believes they should remain working five days remotely and not return to the office at all. This contrasts with the study carried out by the European Parliament (2021) which stated that moving forward, hybrid working patterns will prevail with a mix of office and RW. Most of the participants felt that moving forward, RW should be available for them according to one's preference. They mentioned that:

“Either extreme is wrong in my opinion. I think we should value both times at the office and time working from home.” (Lauren, employee, organisation C).

“The best way forward is a hybrid solution, where the organisation gives employees the level of flexibility for a work-life balance while giving employees the responsibility to carry out their duties.” (Steph, employee, organisation D)

“Currently we are working on a roster basis, and we feel that this is the best balance; definitely, the right way to go moving forward.” (Elisa, employee, organisation D).

“The use of a roster impacted the organisation positively. Not meeting team members at all isn’t great, but neither is not having the right ambience to work without distractions. Therefore, hybrid will be our way moving forward.” (Elizabeth, HR, organisation D).

As opposed to the above working patterns of these three organisations, organisation B mentioned how they intend to provide a flexible, hybrid solution for employees once they complete their paperless project. A study by Surma et al (2021) on employee flexibility and employee management shows that COVID has promoted human mobility and is now shifting to hybrid working patterns. Therefore, work is no longer a singular office space but is moving towards a virtual network of connected ecosystems that incorporates the office, home, and third places. This research data shows that the enforced move to RW has been an HR practice that is eagerly sought for by employees. Moreover, the level of employee engagement has been affected positively since transitioning remotely. Therefore, in a post-covid setting, employees want to continue experiencing the fruition of hybrid, RW patterns.

4.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is shown that RW has had a significant impact on these organisations and on employee engagement. The perspective of RW differs between participants; however, common experiences amongst participants also show that RW has impacted the employee's quality of life favourably. Many participants explained how the level of flexibility offered by RW increased their level of employee engagement and felt grateful to work under such beneficial conditions. The data shows how RW, in the midst of a global pandemic, allowed business continuity, sustainable organisational growth, and provided a work-life balance for employees at large.

This research shows the transition to RW has been made possible through digitalization. Moreover, communication between team members in organisations proved to be a key consideration when assessing employee engagement, and how RW affected this. Most of the participants maintained good levels of communication with team members, however, the data shows that communication with members outside of the team decreased significantly, as work did not necessitate the need to contact members outside the team. Overall, having good communication channels proved to have positive ramifications on employees, ensuring a high level of engagement and job performance. Job performance showed to have increased since transitioning remotely, with employees dedicating more hours and having greater work intensification. The overall feedback of employees is that the enforced move to RW was beneficial to the employee. Challenges related to working remotely were also present, however, participants mentioned that challenges will be present with any HR practice that is implemented, and overall they feel that the positive effects of RW definitely outweighed the challenging aspects of it.

Changes in HR practices were present in order to adapt to the changes brought about by COVID. The HR personnel explained how, even though they made numerous

transitions from the traditional ways of work, it was a matter of time until RW was offered to employees within the public sector. Overall, the continuation of RW has been met positively amongst all participants, and they expressed how the best way forward would be to have the opportunity to choose the most sensible working conditions that allow them to carry out their role in the most productive way possible. On the whole, the impact RW has had on employee engagement, and the organisation as a whole, is substantial and overall positive. The similarities and differences, main themes, and the summary of findings will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The main aim of the research study was to explore if RW has impacted the level of employee engagement within organizations in the public sector. Predominantly, the starting point of this research was exploring and understanding the working experience of colleagues and numerous individuals in light of the transition to working remotely. Various literature related to RW was examined, in order to understand how employee engagement was maintained through a virtual workspace. Since RW practices were heightened with the rise of COVID-19 in Malta, not much literature relating to the topic was yet established. This is what prompted the initiation of this research, aiming to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The literature review provided an in-depth understanding of employee engagement and RW. Previous literature showed that employee engagement is a result of employee motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, employee involvement, and job performance (Guest, 1997). Also, the literature showed that RW resulted in higher levels of employee commitment and job satisfaction, greater employee well being, and a greater work-life balance. However, it was shown that RW also posed a struggle relating to switching off from work and an increased workload (Felstead, 2017). This research has verified the existing literature to be true, as RW was greatly appreciated and resulted in heightened engagement for the participants, despite some newly introduced challenges associated with the shift to working remotely.

Moreover, this research made use of open-ended semi-structured interviews. The use of this methodological approach provided a level of flexibility that yielded an in-depth insight into the subjective experience of the participants. This enabled two-way

communication between the participant and researcher and aided when delving deeper into certain topics of discussion. Most of the participants were meticulous in providing descriptive accounts of their experiences, as they were very open to discussing how this affected them both professionally and personally. Although this research comprises four different organizations, and despite the subjectivity of each participant, the data shows that all participants shared similar encounters and experiences with this transition.

5.1 The impact of remote working

RW provided flexible means to carry out work from any location, whether it is the office, home, or any environment (Policy and Guidelines, 2021). The public sector only offered RW to employees as a family friendly measure, so only a few experienced the ramifications of RW prior to COVID. All of the participants explained how RW has affected their personal and professional life, namely for the better. Not only do the participants speak about the environmental benefits related to working remotely, but they also mention the advantages associated with utilising a fluid virtual workspace (Surma et al, 2021). A fluid workspace is no longer a single office workspace but incorporates the office, home, and third places. Participants mentioned numerous benefits of RW, including a positive impact on employee well-being, flexibility, ability to work in the right kind of environment, managing to cope with both personal commitments and work, more work responsibility, made parenting possible with no reduction of working hours, relieved frustrations related to commuting to and from work, improved work quality, and provided a work-life balance.

On the other hand, participants mentioned the drawbacks encountered since working remotely, namely: the difficulty of switching off, longer working hours, barriers in communication, and sometimes feeling alone. Employees also mentioned struggles related to being recruited while working remotely, and that when returning back to the

office, colleagues who they had been communicating with over a year via emails had no idea who they were. With that being said, this research shows that the shift from traditional work at the office to RW has been welcomed positively, and employees have mentioned that they would not imagine a shift back to old working patterns two years later.

5.2 The shift to remote working from an HR perspective

RW has provided the means to continue working effectively and efficiently (Emrek, 2020). Business continuity needed to be ensured, and the HR personnel of all four organizations spoke about how this was made possible through the use of RW. The HR personnel mentioned how interruptions were minimised since employees shifted remotely, which ultimately proved to have an increase in work quantity. One of the main observations made by the HR personnel was that the impact on employee engagement differed according to the employee and the nature of their work. For employees in a managerial position, engagement did not prove to be an issue and RW showed to have increased their level of commitment. For lower-level roles, some employees seemed to have been less resilient, and RW impacted their level of connection with team members.

Moreover, it was highlighted that the enforced move to RW within the public sector was well needed, and a matter of time until it transpired. They mentioned how the process to shift remotely took some time to adjust and implement, but seeing that the transition was done nationwide in a matter of days, employees embraced the transition and responded positively to it. This was also proven to be the case through the employee engagement surveys carried out by these organizations.

5.3 The importance of Digitalisation

A labour market transformation to digitalisation was presented (Lumi, 2020). Technology provided the means to make the transition to RW possible. All organizations empathized with the fact that technology is the way forward, and with the introduction of virtual workspaces, more efficient and improved work strategies have been made possible. Most of the participants described how the transition to RW simply involved taking their laptops, and any other equipment they deemed necessary in order to carry out their role efficiently. The HR personnel mentioned how they implemented new HR practices related to an online punching system for time and attendance, VPN access, and provided access to the organisation's p-drive. Meetings were all held online, and day-to-day business continued functioning normally without any pitfalls. Only one organization spoke about the drawback related to this transition, as most employees work on physical files, which therefore impacted their work output. The HR personnel mentioned that they are currently working on making a transition to have all the data inputted online. Even though this process proved to be very time consuming, the importance of digitalisation and virtualisation was given priority from their end.

5.4 The ramifications of remote working on Communication

The participants spoke about the communication with their team and the organisation as a whole when transitioning remotely. The participants' experiences, together with the literature presented, discussed how RW was a barrier to communication (Mampilly, 2021). Struggles related to communicating with members outside of the participants' units was mentioned by nearly all participants. Only one organisation provided means to mitigate this issue, by creating online team buildings and mixing members of different teams. The other organisations mentioned how this issue persisted and only improved when employees were allowed to return to the office

for some days a week. When it came to communication between team members, all participants mentioned how they had scheduled meetings with their team and managers in order to discuss workflow, alleviate any challenges they were facing, and also to simply speak about how they are feeling. Only one participant spoke about not experiencing good communication with the team, as the respective manager did not give importance to setting weekly team meetings. Most of the participants portrayed a willingness toward ensuring that communication with their team was not lost, and made use of a personalised schedule that worked best for them and their team. The HR personnel proved to be supportive during these times, and employees emphasized the importance HR had on communication. This feedback provided by employees on the communication between the HR personnel and themselves was very encouraging, with most stating how HR played a very important role in facilitating the transition to RW.

5.5 Changes in Job Performance

An emphasis on sustaining organisational performance was observed. As mentioned in the literature review, the focus should be given to implementing proper HRM practices that target an increase in job performance and organisational growth (Ralevic et al, 2015). The transition to RW itself led to an increase in job performance. Through working remotely, employees mentioned how they were less distracted, which ultimately increased their level of concentration at work. Some of the participants mentioned how RW did not affect their level of performance and remained consistent, while others spoke about being grateful to be working remotely which increased their level of engagement and job responsibilities. Through performance management reviews, the HR personnel also noted how organisational performance improved, showing that work output has been higher since the rise of COVID and RW.

5.6 The impact of remote working on Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is characterized by the commitment, performance, and motivation portrayed by an employee (Khan, 1990). Motivation proved to have a great influence on employee engagement. Participants expressed different ways of remaining motivated when transitioning remotely. These included earning respect from team members, valuing employees, communicating with one another, working under the best conditions, and reflecting on work output and job performance. All these aspects proved to be present since RW, which thus increased their level of engagement. Some participants mentioned how the transition to RW itself motivated them more and, as a result, increased their job performance.

Some of the organizations carried out employee surveys to better understand the effect of RW on employee engagement. Results showed that employees felt valued, and the transition brought about new ways of working, which resulted in heightened engagement. Overall, nearly all participants agreed that since experiencing the level of flexibility RW offers, they would not imagine it otherwise. Since this has been a factor in increasing employee engagement, participants mentioned that returning back to traditional ways of work will make them feel less engaged.

Furthermore, participants also discussed that for those employees who had issues related to communication, their level of engagement and job performance decreased. Also, some of the participants mentioned that RW made it more time consuming to ensure that their team members remained engaged and their performance consistent, however, witnessing positive results from their team proved to be worthwhile. The feeling of gratitude for being given the opportunity to work remotely was present amongst all participants, all of whom mentioned that for that reason, their level of employee engagement intensified.

Additionally, employee engagement was ensured by implementing HR practices relating to employee well-being. The HR personnel spoke about how they made it necessary to communicate with staff and discuss any challenges they might be encountering, both personally or professionally. By doing so, whenever the situation arose when the employee was showing to be less engaged, they would understand the root cause and aid in improving the situation. As a result, the HR personnel spoke about maintaining low amounts of employee turnover and having good employee retention. HR personnel showed to have implemented thoughtful HR practices within their organisation and ensured that the health and safety of employees was their top priority, especially due to COVID-19. As a result, employee feedback was very positive and engagement was maintained.

5.7 The challenges associated with Remote working

The transition to RW proved to have a number of challenges. One of the main challenges related to RW is the change of environments. Participants lamented that, when working remotely, the same place you work in is the same place you sit down to have a meal in the evening. Moreover, even though distractions were minimized when working remotely, participants expressed the challenge related to not knowing what the other person is doing. Colleagues would call at any time they need assistance, therefore if they would be working on something, they would need to stop to cater for this. Alternatively, when working at the office, it is clear that someone is currently focusing on another task and should not be interrupted. Another challenge for one of the organizations was having to transition back to working at the office all week, having to experience frustrations related to getting ready and commuting to work on a daily basis. Lastly, another challenge that participants shed light on was how the enforced move to remote working could have posed a negative impact on an employee's well-being. They

mentioned how being isolated was challenging at times, and that focus should have been given to training managers to ensure they knew how to handle such situations.

Moreover, the participants provided their suggestions on what they would have improved at the time. Even though COVID did not always permit, participants mentioned how they felt a lack of effort from HR personnel to organise team-building events. Suggestions related to team building events in small groups would have had positive ramifications on communication, job satisfaction, and engagement. Furthermore, some participants felt that decisions were not always taken at the appropriate times and that the feedback from employees was not always being heard.

5.8 Working patterns in a Post-COVID setting

The HR personnel of all four organisations were asked about how the working patterns will be once COVID-19 elapsed. All four organizations mentioned how they intend to instil hybrid working where employees would work around three days from home and two days from the office. From the literature presented, research showed that working patterns are now shifting toward RW regimes, aiming to promote human mobility and shifting towards hybrid work (Surma et al, 2021). The HR personnel spoke about the positive impact RW has had on both the employee and employer and mentioned that revoking RW rights would be unfair on the employees. The employees also mentioned how they envision themselves working remotely in the future, as RW has offered them the work-life balance that is eagerly sought after by all. They mentioned how a balance between RW and working at the office is the best combination, as both meeting team members and working in the right ambience are important.

5.9 Research Question

RW has had a positive effect on employee engagement within the public sector. Through this research, participants have shown that the unexpected shift to RW prompted by COVID-19 has impacted their working lives in numerous ways. Employee engagement was heightened, as the shift to RW itself was highly anticipated by most of the participants; therefore, for that reason only, employees took on more responsibility and felt more engaged within their roles. Challenges and limitations, such as decreased communication with members outside of the team, working alone, the inability to switch off and work intensification were present. These issues, however, had minimal effect on the participant's experience of RW and employee engagement as a whole.

The participants stated that they feel that COVID 19 accelerated HR practices that were previously unheard of in the public sector, and RW is a clear example of this. Presently, the participants are experiencing the fruition of the shift from traditional work practices to RW, and consider hybrid working patterns as the ideal way moving forward. Despite the negative consequences brought about by COVID-19, the enforced move to RW proved to be one of the most beneficial HR practices to be implemented in the public sector. The participants stated that they felt that the public sector in Malta was not prepared to make such a shift if not enforced by COVID-19. Being provided with a fluid virtual workspace, employees shared greater job satisfaction and motivation. Therefore, this research has shown that RW poses numerous benefits for both the employee and employer, and has shown that employee engagement has been heightened since working remotely. This research suggests that moving forward, a flexible hybrid working arrangement that ensures organisational growth and employee engagement is ideal, and also desired by both employees and the employer.

5.10 The Limitations of the Research

This research study provided a detailed account of the transition to RW and the impact of employee engagement, in the context of four organisations within the public sector. Through the use of a non-probability sampling method, the research is restricted as to how many organisations can participate. The use of this method shares a number of challenges and limitations. Since qualitative research requires a detailed and in-depth account of the participants' working experience, the sample size was limited to a small amount. The in-depth analysis of data collected is qualitative, which means that the researcher is unable to carry out numerous interviews and include multiple organisations. As a result of this, the data provided could not be generalized to fit the larger population.

5.11 Future Research Agenda

This research can be further supplemented by conducting more extensive research on RW. This can be done by incorporating an additional methodological approach such as quantitative interviews, which would be circulated amongst all of the employees working within the organisation. This would provide extensive feedback on how RW and employee engagement were perceived. The use of quantitative interviews, together with the in-depth accounts of the employees and HR personnel provided in this research, would provide a fully comprehensive account of the ramifications of RW and employee engagement. Furthermore, interesting insights can be gained if similar research is done to explore how RW impacted employee engagement within the private sector. This would allow a comparative study about the difference between the implementation of HR practices in private and public entities, and provide a means to analyse the way different entities impact the level of employee engagement.

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Appendix 1: Interview Type 1 (HR)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research on the impact of the enforced move to remote working due to COVID-19 on employee engagement. As a participant, you have been chosen because you meet the criteria set for this research question. Questions relating to your experiences since working remotely, and how it impacted your personal and professional life will be asked to you.

The discussion and your answers pertaining to this interview will be confidential, and there will be no link to your personal identity. The goal is to gather an in-depth understanding of your experiences and to have an open, two-way discussion throughout the interview. Should you feel that there are any questions you would not like to discuss, we will move on to the next question. The interview shall last approximately 1 hour.

The main themes that will be discussed during the interview are:

- Background questions about your perspective on remote working.
- Questions relating to the transition to remote working from an organisational perspective.
- The impact of remote working on the employee's overall job performance, well-being, motivation, career progression and level of engagement.
- Work-related challenges pertaining to Remote Working.
- Your perspective on working patterns in a post-COVID setting

Section 1: General Overview

- Tell me about your perspective on remote working.
- Tell me about your current position with the organisation.

Section 2: The Transition to Remote Working

- How was the transition handled by the organisation from working at the office to remote working?
- Was there a change in HR practices? If so, what policies and strategies were implemented in relation to remote working?
- Did the company experience a sense of shock in light of the transition to remote working?
- How did you feel that the enforced move to remote working due to COVID-19 impacted the organization?
- Did you implement the use of online meetings and online training? What was the outcome?
- Is remote working feasible and practical?

Section 3: The ramifications of Remote Working (an employers perspective)

- What kind of strategies were implemented to monitor job performance while working from home?
- Did the company make use of any employee retention strategies?
- What HR practices were implemented to monitor employee well-being while working remotely?
- Did remote working impact your level of motivation?
- Have career development opportunities been made available to employees while working remotely?
- Are business goals, targets, and KPI's being reached while working from home?
- Do you feel that remote working impacted the level of employee engagement within the organisation?
- Did the company dynamic and culture change since working remotely? If so, how did it change?

Section 4: Work-related challenges

- Do you feel that working from home has restricted the company in any way?

- What do you think is the biggest challenge related to remote working?

Section 5: Post-COVID setting

- What feedback did you receive from employees on remote working?
- Do you intend to retain remote working in a post-Covid setting or do you plan to go back to traditional ways of work?
- In a post-Covid setting, do you feel that remote working should be implemented?

Appendix 2: Interview Type 2 (Employee)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research on the impact of the enforced moved to remote working due to COVID-19 on employee engagement. As a participant, you have been chosen because you meet the criteria set for this research question. Questions relating to your experiences since working remotely, and how it impacted your personal and professional life will be asked to you.

The discussion and your answers pertaining to this interview will be confidential, and there will be no link to your personal identity. The goal is to gather an in depth understanding of your experiences, and to have an open, two-way discussion throughout the interview. Should you feel that there are any questions you would not like to discuss, we will move on to the next question. The interview shall last approximately 1 hour.

The main themes that will be discussed during the interview are:

- Background questions about your perspective on remote working.
- Questions relating to the transition to remote working.
- The impact of remote working on your job performance, well-being, motivation, career progression and level of engagement.
- Work-related challenges pertaining to remote working.
- Your perspective on working patterns in a post-COVID setting.

Section 1: General Overview

- Tell me about your perspective on remote working
- Tell me about your current position with the organisation.

Section 2: The Transition to Remote Working

- How was the transition handled by your organisation from working at the office to remote working?
- How was the office transition? Were you provided with all the necessary equipment?
- Have you experienced any changes in your day-to-day job since you started working from home?

Section 3: The ramifications of Remote Working (an employees perspective)

- Was communication between staff members maintained?
- Do you feel motivated when working remotely?
- Has remote working affected your job performance?
- Did the relationship with your co-workers change since working remotely?
- Do you feel that remote working has impacted employee engagement?
- What effects did remote working have on your personal life?

Section 4: Work-related challenges

- What work-related challenges have you faced since working from home?
- Do you feel that working from home has restricted you or held you back in any way?

Section 5: Post-COVID setting

- In a post-Covid setting, do you feel that remote working should be implemented?
- What would you have done differently if you formed part of the Human Resource Management team?
- What do you think is the biggest challenge related to remote working?

Appendix 3: Consent Form

Title of Study: Does remote working influence employee engagement? An analysis of how the COVID-19 enforced move to remote working impacted employee engagement in the public sector in Malta.

Name: Yanika Abela

Contact: ya96@student.le.ac.uk

My signature below indicates that I have read and understood the information provided in the Access Letter and the conditions listed below, and I have decided to participate as a subject in this research.

PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY.

I agree to take part in the study	YES / NO
I understand that I am free to decline to participate in this research study, or I may withdraw my participation at any point without penalty. My decision whether or not to participate in this research study will have no negative impacts on me either personally or professionally.	YES / NO
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask any questions I have.	YES / NO

I understand that my data will be anonymized for this research and that the anonymized data will be maintained for future research.	YES / NO
I agree with the interview being audio recorded. At the end of the study, the audio recordings will be destroyed.	YES / NO

Please retain a copy of this consent form.

Participant name: _____

Signature: _____ Date _____

Interviewer name: _____

Signature: _____ Date _____

For information please contact **Yanika Abela** at ya96@student.le.ac.uk

Appendix 4: Access Letter

To whom it may concern,

I am a Master's student reading for a postgraduate degree at the University of Leicester, within the School of Business. My Master's Degree requires a dissertation which I will be carrying out under the supervision of Dr. Eimer Sparham. You are kindly being asked to participate in a research study that aims to understand how Human Resource personnel have had to challenge current systems and introduce new ways of work, such as remote working, as a result of COVID-19.

The aim of this research is to understand if, and if so how, the enforced move to remote working due to COVID-19 impacted employee engagement in the public sector, and how it has been maintained. This research question sheds light on how organizations are responding to unprecedented change, as it is happening now. To analyze the impact of COVID-19 on employee engagement within organizations, strategic human resource policies related to skills development, employee motivation, management schemes, employee retention, and work mobility are assessed. Employees of the participating organizations will also be interviewed for this research study in order to see whether the use of the above-mentioned strategies has been successful.

There are no foreseeable risks related to participating in this research. Throughout the research, I will make sure that participants are aware of their right to withdraw from the research process without any repercussions. This study is anonymous. I will not be collecting information about the participant's personal identity. The study and data will be kept strictly confidential, and can only be accessed by me and my supervisor. I will not include any information in any work I may publish that

would make it possible to identify participants. The decision to participate in the study is entirely up to you. Participants may choose to dismiss any of the interview questions, to stop the audio recorder at any time they please and are free to cease continuation in the research without any consequence. Also, the participant has the right to ask any research-related question to me or my supervisor at any part during the research process.

If your organisation is willing to participate in the research, I kindly ask that a manager within the authority that will give authorization and consent to sign under the statement below with their name, position, and email address. I would like to conduct empirical research interviews on four employees within your organization during November 2021 and January 2022.

“I hereby give my authorization and consent to allow the above-mentioned student from the University of Leicester to conduct the research specified and will gladly help her organize the interviews to the best of our ability. We also agree that all data collected must be kept confidential and anonymized”

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours truly,
Yanika Abela

Name	
Date	
Position	
Email Address	

Signature: _____

Appendix 5: Ethical Approval



School of Business Research Ethics Committee

06/01/2022

Ethics Reference: 33201-ya96-ss/bu:work,emp,m'ment&org,dept

TO:

Name of Researcher Applicant: Yanika Abela

Department: Labour Market Studies

Research Project Title: Does remote working influence employee engagement? An analysis of how the COVID-19 enforced move to remote working impacted employee engagement in the public sector in Malta.

Module Name or Course: Msc in Human Resource Management and Training

Supervisor's or Module Leader's Name: Eimer Sparham

Dear Yanika Abela,

RE: Ethics review of Research Study application

The School of Business Research Ethics Committee has reviewed and discussed the above application.

1. Ethical opinion

The Committee grants ethical approval to the above research project on the basis described in the application form and supporting documentation, subject to the conditions specified below.

2. Summary of ethics review discussion

The Committee noted the following issues:

Your ethics has been approved. You are now able to collect your data. Please ensure that you send your supervisor a copy of your final research interview questions/research instrument prior to collecting your data.

3. General conditions of the ethical approval

The ethics approval is subject to the following general conditions being met prior to the start of the project:

As the Principal Investigator, you are expected to deliver the research project in accordance with the University's policies and procedures, which includes the University's Research Code of Conduct and the University's Research Ethics Policy.

If relevant, management permission or approval (gate keeper role) must be obtained from host organisation prior to the start of the study at the site concerned.

4. Reporting requirements after ethical approval

You are expected to notify the Committee about:

- Significant amendments to the project
- Serious breaches of the protocol
- Annual progress reports
- Notifying the end of the study

5. Use of application information

Details from your ethics application will be stored on the University Ethics Online System. With your permission, the Committee may wish to use parts of the application in an anonymised format for training or sharing best practice. Please let me know if you do not want the application details to be used in this manner.

Best wishes for the success of this research project.

Yours sincerely,

Aris Boukouras
Chair