

Remote Leadership and Work Engagement: A Critical Review and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic shook the entire world. All sectors, industries, organisations, and more importantly, people were affected by multiple restrictions implemented by their respective governing bodies. Federal lockdowns and all the emerging laws and regulations associated with them have forced organisations worldwide to transition their operations to remote environments. The implications from the organisations' perspective vary from leadership to management, structure to operations, and training and development to policy making. However, from the employees' perspective, the implications vary from general well-being to work engagement, satisfaction to motivation, and followership to trust. Nonetheless, remote work has other implications, such as productivity, the impact of social distancing, work-life balance, and isolation concerns. Therefore, this article aims to present critical thinking and comprehensively analyse the existing literature on remote working, transformational leadership, and work engagement contexts. Theoretical and practical gaps are discussed, and recommendations for future research could contribute to our better understanding of remote leadership and its practical elements. Remote working environments are believed to be permanent working arrangements for many organisations and employees; hence, scholars and practitioners must explore them to further depths.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Remote Work, Transformational Leadership, Work Engagement.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In modern society, leadership means bringing out the best qualities in people so they can work together in the direction the leader gives (Safonov *et al.*, 2018). However, due to the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, many organisations were forced to change their strategies and shift to remote working environments (Bartsch *et al.*, 2020). The obscure phenomena of this transition affected people and organisations in most sectors and industries worldwide. On the one hand, leaders have had to adopt new styles, behaviours, and perceptions (Liao, 2017). On the other hand, employees have had to learn to work differently in a way that no previous generation has done (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021).

Despite the global challenges in the work environment related to COVID-19, current research shows that even in the post-pandemic world, more than half (51%) of employees have flexible working arrangements, and the numbers are constantly growing (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2022). However, multiple issues exist when implementing flexible working arrangements, such as remote work (also called virtual working). The major issues involve leadership and work engagement. In other words, how do organisations and leaders direct and support their employees without constant supervision and physical presence while sustaining or enhancing employees' work engagement levels in remote environments?

To highlight the significance of work engagement, reports suggest that engaged organisations could improve their

performance by 20 per cent while reducing staff turnover by 87 per cent. Moreover, the engaged personalized has the potential to grow its profits three times faster than its competitors (Edwards, 2018). The State of Employee Engagement report (HR.com, 2019) shows that 81 per cent of employees believe engagement is linked to trust in leadership, and 79 per cent believe it is linked to the relationship with the immediate supervisor.

In the next section, this review aims to provide critical thinking and analyse the existing literature on remote working, leadership, and work engagement contexts. In addition, theoretical and practical gaps are discussed with recommendations for future research.

II. REMOTE WORKING: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

For this article, the conceptual definition of remote working is where an individual works either partially or entirely at an alternative worksite outside their traditional work office. Distinguishing between remote working and teleworking, the author follows Vartiainen's (2021) definition where: "(...) a teleworker uses personal electronic devices in addition to working physically remotely from a place other than an office or company premises, whereas remote work does not require visits to the main workplace or the use of electronic personal devices".

Remote working is not a recent development. This form of working was established and implemented in the early 1990s.

Therefore, organisations that had already practiced remote working to some extents were better prepared and more adaptive to the transition to full-time remote working and operations (Kirkman & Stoverink, 2021; Maynard & Gilson, 2021). Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed how various companies operate, especially those inexperienced with remote work. The outbreak of COVID-19 has shaken the entire world. In some cases, it took countries a day or less to impose multiple restrictions on our day-to-day lives. The business world was no exception to that (Toscano & Zappala, 2020). For this reason, many companies around the globe decided to switch to remote working, either fully or partially. Months of working from home resulted in many new supporters of such a working environment – both among employers and employees. However, not everyone is excited about that rapid transition. For example, in India, the absence of colleagues and various distractions at home caused employees to dislike remote working (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2022).

The recent CIPD report (2022) shows that for employers to successfully implement flexible or hybrid working practices, they should allow their employees to request to work remotely from the start of their employment. Moreover, employers should discuss flexible working practices with their employees while providing support and training to managers. The findings indicate that much emphasis should be placed on employee health and well-being, which would help avoid job burnout and overworking.

Undoubtedly, the global shift towards remote environments has created opportunities and challenges for organisations (Al-Habaibeh *et al.*, 2021). On the positive side, opportunities to work at home have contributed to greater empathy for team members and changed managers' and employees' perceptions of remote work (Aczel *et al.*, 2021). Scholars also suggest that working remotely increases employees' work satisfaction, which leads to higher engagement and productivity levels (Sandoval-Reyes *et al.*, 2021). Research points out that those positive outcomes are achieved not only by the work format but also by the opportunities for flexible working hours (Willcocks, 2020; Morgan, 2014). Hence, many potential employees favour organisations that provide opportunities for remote working. Because of that, more research has emerged with the initiative that organisations should afford remote working opportunities, even during the post-COVID-19 pandemic (Torres & Orhan, 2022).

On the negative side, however, remote work can lead to longer working hours, be more exhausting and lead to the loss of personal contacts. Furthermore, not all leaders are experienced and familiar with leading a team remotely (Paravano & Whittaker, 2017). All remote workers need organisational support through training and health and well-being programmes, as many struggle with physical and mental well-being (Bromfield, 2022). Unfortunately, many organisations lack the appropriate work-family balance policies (Žnidaršič & Bernik, 2021) and support structures (Adisa *et al.*, 2021) which often result in higher staff disengagement and staff turnover, increased stress and uncertainty (Bartsch *et al.*, 2020). As scholars suggest, specific work arrangements, such as developing a healthy balance between office presence and working from home,

should be implemented with appropriate organisational support and leadership (De Klerk *et al.*, 2021).

Even though high work independence and clarity of job criteria are considered positive factors for remote working transition, research also indicates that less happy staff may become less effective and have greater difficulties adjusting to remote work (Zoonen & Sivunen, 2021). In other words, social dynamics considerably influence adjustments in distant work formats. Fear, anxiety, and isolation exist in the employees' minds having to work in remote environments. Therefore, organisations should implement mindfulness techniques and practices to support their staff in dealing with challenges in the new working environments (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020).

Remote work is, without a doubt, an emerging trend in our society and will shape the future of work (Morgan, 2014). New collaborative technologies will also help shape remote work trends and workplace behaviours. The new workplace behaviours will then shape the new priorities for organisations, leaders, and employees – such as growing attention to well-being, finding a compromise in remote working, tracking remote workers' engagement, and developing culture and collaboration in remote environments (Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends, 2021). Despite the earlier-mentioned challenges and issues associated with remote working, the model is predicted to remain permanently applied in organisations worldwide beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and the current economic crisis (Lund *et al.*, 2020). We can see examples from multinational giants such as Facebook, Google, Uber, and Twitter maintaining their remote operations and transitioning even further in the coming years (Taylor *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, much is still unknown about how remote working will function with the emerging trends of progressive ageing of the global population, decreased number of working people in western countries, and changing demographic dynamics (Imperatori, 2017).

III. REMOTE TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP DILEMMAS

Over the years, academics have recognised that leadership is too complex to focus only on a single aspect or dimension of leadership (Van Seters and Field, 1990). With the development of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), the concept of a 'new leadership era' developed on the foundations of transformational and charismatic leadership theories (House, 1976). From the 1990s onwards, the world became more complex and challenging – leading to the need for effective leadership in a rapidly changing environment, technological advancements, and increasing globalisation (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). It was at this time that transformational leadership became so popular. The purpose was to adjust to society's current situation and break the barriers between leaders and followers. The focus was to incorporate complex interactions between them and the situation, system, and external environment, along with multiple factors that impact the relationship between leaders and followers (Bass, 1990).

The current change in our societies requires leadership that can adjust to various barriers and challenges. As mentioned,

the rapid transition to remote environments challenged organisations and leaders worldwide. Some of these challenges include limited knowledge of which leadership styles or behaviours are, in fact, effective in remote working environments (Bartsch *et al.*, 2020). Managers must ensure that the most basic needs of their workers are accommodated to allow smooth operations. Unfortunately, in many cases, those basic needs and resources are not provided or are unevenly distributed (Bapuji *et al.*, 2020). Managers often fail to recognise their workers' working conditions, geographic locations, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, due to ever-growing socio-economic disparities between different regions and countries, failing to provide adequate resources to conduct work may create more devastating results, challenges, and complex situations for organisations and managers (Torres & Orhan, 2022). From access to education to high-speed broadband, health care to the transport system, time zone differences to language barriers, and war escalations in certain regions, any inequality may cause a barrier in the relations between leaders and followers.

After COVID-19, many academics and practitioners gave remote leaders a list of tips for identifying and recognising employees' work preferences (Mitchell & Brewer, 2022). This occurred due to the national restrictions which forced many employees during the COVID-19 pandemic to work remotely; however, in many cases, they were away from their co-workers, friends, and even families (Miglioretti *et al.*, 2021). Naturally, workers in such instances faced isolation. Unfortunately, remote leaders, in addition to that, do not show the required competencies, such as giving constant feedback, defining straightforward tasks, and trusting their workers, leading to poorer staff performance (Maduka *et al.*, 2018).

Mitchell and Brewer (2022) suggest that leaders must first understand their follower's needs and wants to achieve effective communication through a remote work setting. Thus, managers should be supportive and connected with their followers to form a unified team. However, aside from effective communication, remote leaders must also form relationships with followers and develop and pursue organisational goals (Maduka *et al.*, 2018). These attributes link with transformational leadership; hence a transformational leadership style seems an excellent fit for the new working environments. Bass and Riggio (2006) mention that transformational leaders can help their followers to experience a sense of purpose and a feeling of commitment, and a family-like aura.

Nowadays, companies and employees, including management, have practised remote working format more often due to restrictions surrounding the pandemic and social distancing (Sinclair *et al.* 2021). Research suggests that being managed in a face-to-face environment, even while using a transformational leadership style, differs significantly from being managed remotely (Kelley & Kelloway, 2012). Given this great need for adequate and effective leadership, remote leaders should practice cooperative and proactive behaviours to promote work engagement, adequate communication, and healthy relationships with followers (Rabiul & Yean, 2021).

Unfortunately, leaders with charisma and influence who use their above-average abilities to inspire followers often achieve their selfish and destructive goals. This darker side is often called 'pseudo-transformational leadership' (Bass,

1998). Pseudo-transformational leadership is considered personalised leadership due to the significant emphasis on the leaders' interests as opposed to the interests of others. These leaders possess many transformational leadership attributes other than charisma; however, they ignore the welfare of their followers, in extreme cases leading to havoc, death, and destruction (Bass & Riggio, 2005). Pseudo-transformational leadership is no exception in remote working environments. Leaders with enough power to influence and schemes that reward only themselves and no one else are uncommon in our societies. Some examples may include dark personas such as Adolf Hitler, Osama Bin Laden, and Vladimir Putin. The business world examples might be less extreme; however, they are still memorable and painful. Past operations of Nike, Pedigree, and Volkswagen are a few examples of companies and their leadership that almost ruined the multinational giants due to their selfish leadership and motives.

IV. BARRIERS TO WORK ENGAGEMENT

In a new environment, such as the remote, a significant part of the company's success will depend on employees' work engagement (Palumbo, 2020). Work engagement is strongly associated with energy, involvement, and efficacy (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). In short, engaged employees are energetic and willing to contribute to the organisations' successes from their intrinsic motivation and drive for self-accomplishment (Imperatori, 2017). Moreover, a highly engaged workforce provides a competitive advantage over its competitors (Edwards, 2018).

It is crucial to mention that engagement is not always a good thing either from the employees' or the company's perspective. When an employee is engaged in their work for a long time with no possibility to recharge, it can also lead to adverse effects (George, 2011). With that in mind, work-life balance is a major challenge for remote working environments (Saks, 2022; Sandoval-Reyes *et al.*, 2021; Tanpipat *et al.*, 2021). Remote work causes remote workers to suffer greater work-related fatigue, thus reducing their work engagement (Palumbo, 2020). For instance, many remote employees are overwhelmed with family responsibilities and new technological and working methods. Thus, remote work can potentially increase employees' stress levels and uncertainty, negatively impacting engagement levels (Adisa *et al.*, 2021). However, workaholism is another engagement problem which is driven by obsessive passion (Imperatori, 2017). Such a state increases stress, creates work conflicts, decreases job satisfaction, and harms physiological and psychological well-being (Mudrack, 2004). Hence, there is a need for work-life balance and other managerial policies to support workers (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020). Nevertheless, more research is needed to determine the effects of social distance on employees in organisations (Lauring & Jonasson, 2022).

On the one hand, transformational leadership and HRM practices, such as managing and adjusting appropriate work-life balance, participation in decision-making, and health and wellness programmes, effectively correlate with higher work engagement and improved relationships between leaders and their followers (Saks, 2022; Walsh & Arnold, 2020; Bass &

Avolio, 2006). Studies indicate that such a correlation might occur due to employees receiving more support from their leaders and co-workers, especially in remote environments. (Miglioretti *et al.*, 2021). Scholars also suggest that remote workers have better job control due to better flexibility, job autonomy, and improved responsibility for their actions and judgements (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2021; Ge, 2020). Interestingly, employees with higher salaries, a closer relationship with top management, regular mental health check-ups, access to proper virtual tools, adequate virtual training and development, and online entertainment activities tend to have a higher engagement score (Chaudhary *et al.*, 2021).

On the other hand, organisations and leaders must remember that engagement antecedents' impact three well-being segments: meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Imperatori, 2017). Not fulfilling those three basic well-being needs will negatively impact the relationship between employees and their organisations and leaders.

Work engagement drastically decreases when organisational support is lacking (Keating & Heslin, 2015). In less supportive working environments, the employees are more likely to have reduced feelings of commitment and willingness to go into higher revolutions. With that said, remote organisations are now faced with the challenge of assessing employees' work engagement in remote environments when few have developed appropriate practices related to policy-making and effective leadership behaviours (Saks, 2022). A recent case in Slovenia indicates that work-family balance, in turn, enhances work engagement (Žnidaršič & Bernik, 2021). Unfortunately, not all organisations adhere to work-life policies and practices (Eldor *et al.*, 2020; Bandekar & Pandita, 2014; Bandekar & Krishna, 2014).

A critical problem of employee disengagement exists, as data from a Gallup survey of 155 countries show that only 15% of employees were engaged at work (Gallup, 2017). In 2020, the statistics went slightly higher, 20% worldwide (Harter, 2021). However, this still means that only one in five employees remains engaged at work. In comparison, research studies over a decade ago estimated that 70% of the global workforce is disengaged (Czarnowsky, 2008; Gebauer *et al.*, 2008). In the coming years, therefore, the statistics show that the disengagement among the workforce is slowly increasing.

The shocking employee disengagement numbers may not appeal to everyone due to the unawareness of the consequences for their companies. In practice, workplace disengagement may lead to a higher staff turnover and unethical and counterproductive behaviour (Moore & Gino, 2015). Work disengagement may influence work attitudes and behaviours on organisational, team, and individual levels. Unfortunately, in many cases, punishment at work and workplace harassment take place within disengaged organisations (Ogunfowora *et al.*, 2019). Researchers and practitioners argue that work disengagement increases due to unfairness, management's involvement in politics, work overload, distrust, and lack of opportunities for growth and development (Aslam *et al.*, 2018).

V. KEY GAPS IN THE LITERATURE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several gaps exist in the current literature and practice related to remote working, leadership, and work engagement. The remaining points examine and provide recommendations on which areas academics and practitioners should focus on when conducting future research and establishing policies and regulations. Key gaps include a need for the following:

- Gaining theoretical knowledge on the relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement in remote working environments.
- Understanding and providing practical enforcements, including leadership behaviours and policymaking in the organisations to enhance work engagement (Saks, 2022; Miglioretti *et al.*, 2021; Žnidaršič & Bernik, 2021).
- Examining a real-life phenomenon with a unique corporate view to a more appropriate philosophical and theoretical foundation in leadership and remote work studies (Li *et al.*, 2021; Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Liao, 2017).
- Determining the effects of social distance on employees in organisations (Torres & Orhan, 2022).
- Assessing how remote working will function with the emerging trends of progressive ageing of the global population, decreased number of working people in western countries, and changing demographic dynamics (Imperatori, 2017).

Overall, the relationship between transformational leadership (TL) and work engagement (WE) in a remote setting has not been thoroughly explored. The literature needs to be more extensive, with sufficient data on the methodological stance, context, and approach. Thus, a theoretical gap exists due to the need for more academic research to establish the correlation between TL and WE in remote environments. More research is needed to examine whether TL is effective in remote work formats.

Due to a theoretical gap in the literature, organisations within various sectors and industries, human resource (HR) professionals, leaders, and employees involved in full or partial remote operations suffer from a practical side (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2021). As previously mentioned, a practical gap in knowledge may result in isolation issues surrounding non-superficial human relationships (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020). Isolation, which may often occur in remote working environments, can negatively influence workers' mental well-being and enhance stress factors (Bromfield, 2022; Kniffin *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, remote work does not easily support creativity and group dynamics; hence effective leadership behaviours and practical policymaking are needed to sustain an engaged workforce (Saks, 2022; Miglioretti *et al.*, 2021; Žnidaršič & Bernik, 2021).

Leadership studies should aim and conduct research with a larger sample size for their data collection (Li *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, previous studies failed to use valid measures to investigate leadership. Alvesson and Einola (2019, p.1) criticise recent leadership studies due to: 'shaky philosophical and theoretical foundation, tautological reasoning, weak empirical studies, nonsensical measurement tools, unsupported knowledge claims and a generally simplistic and out-of-date view of corporate life'. The researchers claim that

the recent leadership studies are not reliable. Similarly, Liao (2017) also argues that the current research on remote working consists of validity issues due to its laboratory setting contexts. Therefore, it is recommended to utilise field research designs to examine real-life phenomena and practical solutions to establish practical knowledge with a more appropriate philosophical and theoretical foundation and measurement tools with a unique view of corporate life.

With the COVID-19 pandemic's emergence, the remote working theme has been investigated like never before by academics and practitioners (Torres & Orhan, 2022). This push has led to new theories and practice development. Nevertheless, our understanding still needs to be improved in determining the effects on remote workers in the long term. This article has discussed some of the positive and negative aspects of working remotely; however, there is a need for longitudinal studies to determine broader and richer findings. Moreover, it would be unwise to argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Unfortunately, the virus still manages to break out in various parts of the world. For this reason, organisations and researchers must not relax and find more in-depth solutions for the current problems associated with remote working and, more importantly, determine the long-term effects of social distance working on the employees.

The current predictions and analysis show that global ageing, decreased number of working people in western countries, and changing demographic dynamics will influence the future of work (Imperator, 2017). For instance, whatever methods and approaches work with current generations like X and Y, may not necessarily work with the upcoming generation Z and beyond. Hence, more research is needed to indicate the working behaviours, attitudes, needs and wants of this new highly sophisticated social media and technological people born after 2000. More importantly, how will long-term remote working influence their leadership, followership, work engagement, and well-being? When those concerns combine with other upcoming paradoxes, such as global ageing, where the statistics indicate that by 2050, the world's population of people above the age of 60 will nearly double, and 80% of them will be living in lower-income countries, then that calls out for immediate responses and actions (World Health Organization, 2022).

VI. CONCLUSION

The essence of this article review was to provide critical thinking and comprehensively analyse the existing literature on the current dilemmas and challenges in remote working, leadership, and work engagement. The article addressed the current literature by discoursing that the COVID-19 pandemic revolutionised our thinking and global operations. National regulations around the world forced organisations to shift to remote working or provide flexible working arrangements, regardless of their industry, sector, or experience.

To keep the organisations alive, many support structures and policies must be enforced to enhance work engagement and promote well-being. One way to achieve that is to provide opportunities for flexible working arrangements. Also, effective HRM practices that increase productivity and work

engagement, such as work-life balance, health and wellness programmes, training and development, and effective leadership behaviours, are needed. Effective leadership plays a vital role in helping with this ever-growing dilemma in a world where work disengagement increases gradually. With that said, more workshops and teaching courses should be available to organisations to educate the importance of work engagement and the consequences of the adverse effects.

Transformational leadership seems like a perfect fit for dynamic and changing working environments. Nevertheless, no leadership style is perfect. Unfortunately, many past controversial public figures and organisations have used their influence and power to seek benefits in exchange for responsibility, justice, and morality. Moreover, organisations nowadays must emphasise training and support of remote managers who must be vigilant in leading remote employees, especially from different cultures and backgrounds. Remote working offers a variety of opportunities for companies, including recruiting talents from various parts of the world. However, remote leaders must find appropriate measures and leadership behaviours to deal with various employee disparities in the ever-changing socio-economic and socio-cultural environments.

This critical article identified and discussed current theoretical and practical gaps in remote leadership and work engagement contexts. New knowledge and practices must emerge from understanding which leadership styles and behaviours are effective in a new working environment like the remote. The new knowledge could then be implemented to reduce work disengagement, provide adequate support structures, and improve the general well-being of remote employees. It would be unwise to think that the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Even if that is the case, the world must be ready for similar or worse scenarios where organisations will have no choice but to provide flexible working arrangements. Hence, more research must determine the long-term effects of working remotely and the countermeasures to avoid negative consequences.

In closing, the current scholars and practitioners must determine the remedy using field research designs for global ageing, decreased number of working people in western countries, and changing demographic dynamics in the future of work. Only by examining real-life phenomena in the future of work and leadership contexts practical solutions to establish practical knowledge emerge. Since multinational companies are increasing their remote operations in the near future, remote working is not temporary but a permanent movement.

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