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THE MITIGATING CONSEQUENCES OF PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT ON THE INFLUENCE OF WORKER MORALE IN A DISTRIBUTED WORK LANDSCAPE

The object of this research is the influence of a distributed work methodology on worker morale in the milieu of perceived organizational support. This paper aims to explore the influence of a distributed work methodology on worker morale in the milieu of perceived organizational support. One of the most challenging aspects of distributed work methodology is recognized and adapting to an unanticipated and novel work approach which is uncharted territory for many. During this research, a mixed methodology is used with a hypothetico-deductive approach, which enabled the testing of a working hypothesis through a sample in the administrative cadre in the public health sector, Cape Town, South Africa. As a result of the research, it is shown that mental health with continued well-being was confirmed as primarily well supported and mitigated by numerous organizational support incentives and therefore, work outcomes are found to be positively related to the influence of worker morale. As worker morale influences worker commitment and engagement levels, which has organizational behavior and productivity implications, it is clear from the findings that conceptualizing multi-dimensional well-being at work is vital to an in-depth comprehension of the relationship between living meaningfully and being content at work. Consequently, in terms of application, it befits management cadres to look at the evidence and ponder the best approach for the future of work. The supposition of a shifted and adapted management-subordinate control that relies primarily on the monitoring of remote outputs is supported, and therefore a proposed approach for future research should be focused on the role of organizational control in flexible work practices. More diverse sampling, representative of various corporate entities and inclusive of private entities, is recommended.

Keywords: COVID-19, distributed work, flexible work practices, morale, perceived organizational support, remote work.

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1. Introduction

Without reservation, COVID-19 has rendered unprecedented work-related trials when flexible work practices (FWP), also termed distributed work or smart work, were employed to confine the spread of COVID-19 according to [1]. Consequently, most white-collar workers were requested to work from home, and this unanticipated transfer was uncharted territory for many. As of 14 October 2023, there have been 771,151,224 confirmed cases of COVID-19 globally, including a staggering total of 6,960,783 deaths [2]. Subsequently, it is to be expected that this pandemic has affected workforces globally [3–5] and triggered organizational behavioral and human resource issues [6]. It befits the management cadres to look at the evidence and ponder the best approach for the future of work [7]. In the Western Cape (WC), South Africa, the

increasing number of COVID-19 confirmed cases placed a colossal burden on public service health institutions. Accordingly, public sector supply chain management (SCM) units faced uncharted territory when they faced various challenges, including offering support to the frontline clinical staff and public service patients in terms of the provision of personal protective equipment as well as ensuring the continuation of essential services during this period. Generally, the critical aspects of SCM include purchasing and planning, but there was practically no time to prepare the SCM workers under study for the effects of such a vast organizational work shift, while they were concurrently expected to be key in navigating the spread of COVID-19 in WC public health facilities. The aforementioned issues contributed to a transformed work landscape in which the usual norm for working hours, productivity metrics, output expectations and employee morale shifted. Against this

backdrop of a transitioned work methodology, it was observed that staff morale was influenced.

This study explores the influence of FWP or distributed work methodology on worker morale against perceived organizational support (POS). As workers transition to a minimally supervised home-work arena, it will be crucial to understand how they perceive transitioned work arrangements, and this study will play a meaningful part in the present debate of continuing work practices post-pandemic. *This study aims* to fill a relevant and current research gap by providing a deeper understanding of the effect of staff morale on novel remote workers and the mitigating role of POS.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Theoretical underpinnings. Worker morale directly influences worker engagement, which in turn influences organizational behavior. Fisher’s model of Conceptualizing and measuring well-being at work [8] recognizes that well-being at work is multi-dimensional and includes well-being in the workplace. In this model, there is also a notable integration of social, financial and career elements, thus signifying a relationship between well-being and a fulfilled career and the relationship between living meaningfully and being content and fulfilled in a career.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the workers under study faced augmented job demands as they had to supply the front-line healthcare workers and patients at the WC health institutions with products, services, and consumables. In contrast with this theory, the PCMT model of organizational support [9] depicts four distinctive forms of organizational support, namely Personalized, Collectivistic, Monistic and Teleological, which theorizes organizational support as comprising four forms that vary in perceived focus and ascribed cause. Additionally, theoretically, authors of [9] demonstrate that the individualities related to the

differing prescriptions of organizational support are crucial contemplations connecting the type of organizational support observed and the well-being consequences [10]. The job demands-resources (JD-R) theory propositions that work and personal resources mediate negative influences of work demands and that work demands then upsurge the motivational effects of resources [11]. Fig. 1 is an illustration of the JD-R model, where it is noted that «according to the boost hypothesis in JD-R theory, job demands amplify the impact of job resources on work engagement» [12]. Fig. 1 correspondingly demonstrates that work-related engagement is equally a predictor and consequence of pre-emptive behavior, work, and personal resources.

Hence, this study assumes that a novel work approach requires the amalgamation of work and life balance (work and personal resources), which in turn influence work engagement, work life balance and general morale. The above reasoning leads to the following hypothesis: *Remote work outcomes are negatively related to the effect of worker morale and well-being.*

The theoretical framing for this article encompasses the following themes: the effect of staff morale on FWP, the mitigating consequences of POS, distributed teams’ culture and organizational control.

2.2. Identification of influencing factors. FWP or distributed work has universally developed into a progressively accepted work practice [14]. This section scrutinizes evidence from literature into the implications of employee behavior in FWP framework and the mitigating consequences or organizational support. It should be noted that factors such as worker morale, organizational behavior and management support connect thoroughly with the occurrence under study and influences how organizations can react to the significance of worker morale on FWP.

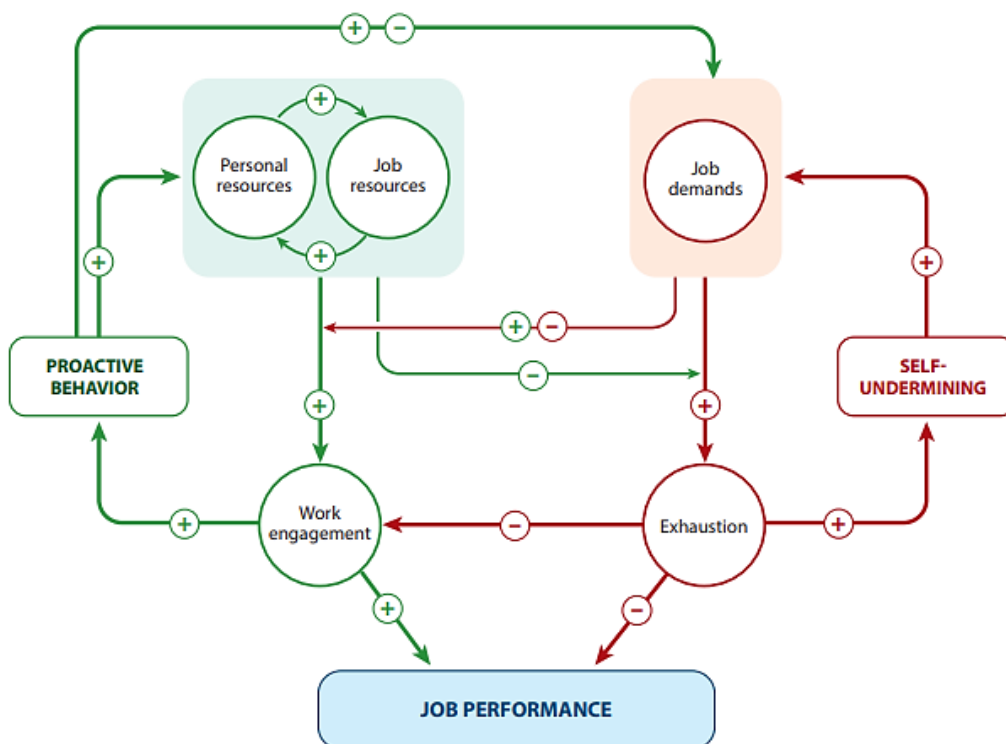


Fig. 1. The job demands-resources model [12, 13]

2.2.1. The effect of staff morale on flexible work practices.

«Esprit de corps» is the capability of a group or individuals to preserve credence in an establishment or goal, predominantly in the face of antagonism or adversity. Worker morale is described as workers' attitude and total viewpoint throughout their association with an organization. If the organizational culture is deficient, it could lead to an adverse influence on worker output. Several studies are noted in existing literature relating to countless features of work flexibility [15, 16] and it is noted that remote work has provided for a grounded work-life balance which greatly enhanced worker morale [17].

Furthermore, authors of [18] agree that organizational culture should sustain work-life balance [17]. As remote work in the public sector is a novel approach, not much evidence is found in the literature to predict the implications of work on the aptitude of distributed workers to succeed with work-life interplay [3]. Literature indicates an overlapping between work and personal life, which causes several stressors. Author of [3] conducted a study in a public sector context and found that FWP negatively influenced the balance between work and life. Further to daily workplace stressors, individuals may not have the capacity to competently manage a combination of work issues, personal life responsibilities and other individual problems, and this could lead to an insalubrious quantity of stress and disproportion amid personal and work life [19, 20].

2.2.2. The mitigating consequence of perceived organizational support.

To protect workers and adhere to national legislation, the public health sector implemented remote work as a mitigating factor to the further spread of COVID-19. Globally, many employers implemented several measures, such as the closure of operations and social distancing [21, 22]. Authors of [23] noted that numerous organizations have also implemented hybrid and distance work measures [24–26]. Then, because of the ambiguous and complicated circumstances initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, authors of [20] noted that the responses of management necessitated a collective endeavor to reconsider the value of work and the influence of management decision-making in this context [27]. This novel work context shaped by the pandemic presented «new routines and habits and, as a result, new challenges to human resource managers – essentially, the need to introduce more support mechanisms for employees' wellbeing» [20].

Several research studies have studied factors related to POS and organizational support overall [28, 29]. In early literature, authors of [30] conceptualized POS as a worker's total feeling of how much the organization values him or her for the individual contribution and the extent of organizational caring relating to the worker's welfare. However, it is also noted that POS substantially affects work commitment. Efficacious organizations present their workers with a supportive work milieu and prospects for psychological growth [31], which leads to elevated worker engagement. A worker's psychological capital, such as hope, resilience, self-efficacy, and optimism, appears to be valuable individual resources that contribute to positive psychological performance [32] whilst work engagement plays a key role in the relationship between role overload and distal outcomes of performance [33].

2.2.3. Distributed teams' culture and organizational control.

Distributed teams propose an inimitable context for probing organizational control [34]. Moreover, «organizational control

is a fundamental element of organizing, whose importance is well rehearsed in the literature» [34, 35]. However, numerous best practices for controlling and supervising teams in a brick-and-mortar office setting do not necessarily translate into controlling distributed work teams. As authors of [34] reiterate, supervising in distributed teams will undoubtedly transform as supervisors and subordinates in distributed teams do not share the same physical workspace. Therefore, private, and public sector entities are exploring the consequences of continued remote work and «redefining the organizational culture which has been impacted by a distributed workforce» during COVID-19 [36].

Preserving and upholding a functional and strengthened organizational FWP culture should be on the agenda of each organization during and post-COVID-19. Work culture can also be defined as a philosophy and understanding of life as merits that develop into organizational habits [37, 38]. In simplified terms, organizational culture is an employee's perspective in giving meaning to their work [39]. The findings in a study conducted by [40] propose that the likelihood is higher for business entities to have revenue and profit margin advancement if they nurture a culture fixated on flexibility and trust. The finding further makes known that «well-established trust in management positively correlates with increases in productivity and quality of outcomes, with work flexibility serving as a mediator in this relationship» [40].

2.2.4. Remote work: opportunities and challenges.

FWP may impact the development of business-related policies, and entities should acclimatize [41] and invest in strata-gems that support and enable remote work arrangements «such as information and technology systems, as they have become crucial to both staff and workplace viability» [41]. Where FWP has been associated with benefits in terms of work-life balance and empowering workers to adjust working schedules in sync with personal responsibility [42], recent evidence was found to the contrary [43]. Factors proposed to influence the working conditions of staff in an FWP framework include work-life balance issues, the escalation of work, irregular working time patterns, related health issues and worker performance [42]. Unaddressed, these challenges may become detrimental to this novel method of working. In contrast to the challenges mentioned, the literature also mentions many opportunities. Distributed work productivity outputs were, for instance, positively linked to autonomy [44]; increased supervisory communication was noted, which established greater bonds with subordinates [45] and more effective levels of engagement was observed because of decreased levels of fatigue [20, 46].

2.3. Methodology. A hypothetico-deductive approach through mixed methods was utilized to accomplish the research intention. Mixed methods research integrates dissimilar methods and data sets [47], and the critical attribute of mixed methods is noted as the integration of quantitative and qualitative data [48], which is primarily applied to explore multifaceted topics [49]. The target population was white-collar SCM employees in a unit in a public health sector entity in the WC, South Africa.

From a selected sample of sixty, thirty-four respondents participated in the study because of a range of COVID-19-related challenges, as this study was conducted at the height of the pandemic. As data was gathered throughout

the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, participant communication was by means of chosen and preferred communication channels, with the option of in-person or virtual methods. Such challenges encompassed adhering to mandatory social distancing protocols, home office ICT setups, load shedding, and network instability.

The authors' good base knowledge of the issue under study enabled the formulation of a meaningful hypothesis. «The working hypothesis as a flexible conceptual framework and a useful tool for exploratory studies» is proposed by [50]. Likewise, a working hypothesis can create soundness transversely across the research process stages [50].

This study was conducted in a phased approach, namely, the interview phase as phase one, followed by the survey phase as phase two. Extensive interviews were held with mid-management, and then employees of fluctuating ranks contributed through a survey. The sample populace was chosen to be representative across the various sub-directorates and was chosen due to exposure to both remote work as well as organizational brick-and-mortar office-based work.

Non-probability purposive and convenience sampling methods were chosen, and a pilot test was concluded to test the strength, dependability and user-friendliness of the interview and survey questionnaire tool. Findings were scrutinized by incorporating both quantitative and qualitative input, and data was coded and organized to associate themes and concepts.

3. Results and Discussion

The results found that remote work commonly positively influenced staff wellbeing and morale, facilitating a balance between work and personal lives. Eighty-three per cent of participants perceived that they had appropriate organizational support for their mental health and general well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Granting there is an indication of seclusion, confirmation of good morale would propose that workers could adjust to this novel work approach and maintain work-related associations in the virtual domain.

3.1. Issues affecting staff morale during flexible work.

To understand the influence of FWP, the authors probed further into which COVID-19 work-related concerns were perceived to influence work-life and work relationships. Qualitative input was received, and following a thematic analysis, the results are displayed in Table 1, with one being the least common theme and 5 being the most common theme identified.

The most common theme identified is increased productivity and the occurrence of resource and time efficacies. Respondents perceived the saving of personal resources as an advantage, and this primarily included resources such as time spent travelling to and from the workplace, savings in terms of fuel output, etc.

This ties in with increased productivity as time-saving is positively related to more time spent on quality work-related activities. Maintaining work relationships through virtual and in-person communication sessions was of value to the respondents, as there were numerous mentions relating to increased connect sessions and the preservation of such communication activities.

Professional relationships seem to be valued, and this unit's «esprit de corps» is good. This is in keeping with the third most common theme, namely professional isolation, where respondents mention that they miss their colleagues and would like to spend more time connecting. There are also clear indications that professional isolation was more intense at the commencement of FWP than during later stages.

Consistent with this notion, it was noted by [51] that the ICT utilization during the pandemic could have assisted workers and organizations to reduce feelings of isolation, but that the concurrent upsurges in remote work facilitated an increase of isolation among workers [6].

Work autonomy and longer feedback timelines was the two least common themes, and this is in line with the finding that workers have adapted well to work life at home. Had this not been the case, the freedom work autonomy offers would have been selected as one of the most common themes. Consistent with these issues mentioned, a respondent noted the following.

The beginning of the pandemic was extremely hectic, as it was an unexpected event. Therefore, we were not prepared for it, so communication with colleagues was affected which led to delayed tasks and non-availability of officials. Things started to get better when time went by. Work life wise I have adapted to the new way of living and working from home, and to learn to make sure of online platforms like MS Teams to communicate with my colleagues.

3.2. Distributed teams' culture and organizational control.

The organizational control nexus connecting worker morale and productivity was perceived during the literature review stage, and it was acknowledged that worker engagement directly affects productivity metrics. To understand the issues influencing worker performance and productivity during remote work periods, respondents were questioned on factors that could hypothetically influence this.

The thematic analysis for this question allowed for ratio ranking using a percentage indicator, and Fig. 2 displays the applicable results.

In Fig. 2 it is evident that twenty-one per cent of respondents provided replies linked to the general attitude of the remote worker towards work-related issues, and this encompassed issues such as motivation, positivity, work ethic, friendliness, a caring attitude, and the importance of taking the time to connect virtually with colleagues to combat professional isolation. Sixteen per cent perceived that worker time management capacity was crucial, and equally, sixteen per cent offered responses interrelated with the worker's self-discipline to separate work and home life. The fourth highest option was the correct ICT setup at home and remote access to work systems, which scored thirteen per cent. Respondents also noted the feasibility of the homework environment, which was equally important as having task clarity provided and certainty regarding workload expectations, each scoring seven per cent respectively.

Table 1

COVID-19 work life and work relationship issues (research findings)

Issues influencing work-life and work relationships				
Longer feedback timelines	Work autonomy	Professional isolation	Maintaining work relationships through virtual and in person communication	Increased productivity with resource and time efficacies
1	2	3	4	5

FACTORS INFLUENCING REMOTE WORKER PRODUCTIVITY AND PERFORMANCE

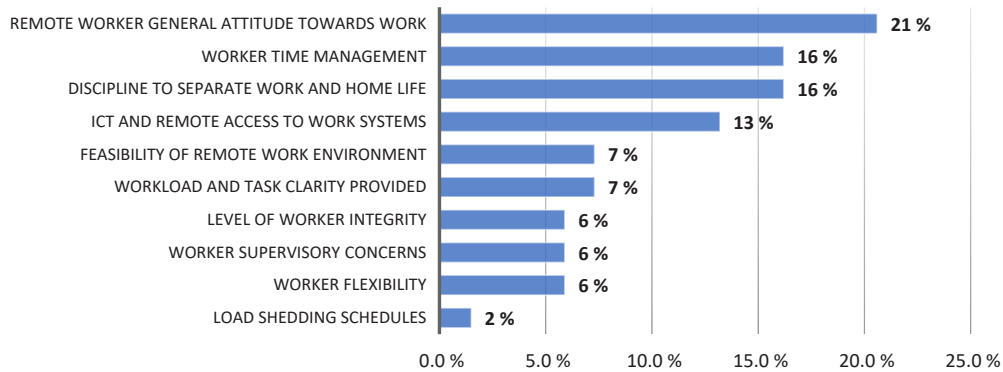


Fig. 2. Influencing factors on remote worker performance and productivity (research findings)

Issues related to remote worker integrity, appropriate supervisor-subordinate arrangements and autonomy, also referred to as worker flexibility, scored six per cent respectively. Load-shedding schedules scored the lowest at two per cent, proving that these workers have found a technique to work around or deal with load-shedding issues. From these findings, it was clear that respondents accepted responsibility for their roles in the subordinate-employer relationship and recognized that their attitude played a significant and valuable role in how efficiently FWP could work to the organization’s benefit. Similarly, the sample tested appeared sufficiently accountable to recognize that the management of their work time and individual levels of discipline to detach home life from work life could be regarded as influencing factors related to individual performance and productivity metrics.

3.3. Perceived organizational support as mitigating consequence. The findings are clear that the institution under study received care focused on supporting worker mental health. The support was provided to workers via various channels such as corporate communication, dedicated e-care programs designed to accommodate remote workers, and initiatives directed towards support to management members. In the unit under study, focused initiatives included virtual check-in sessions, department-specific «town hall» meetings and access to the Employee Assistance Program. Respondents were further asked how improved mental health initiatives could be supported for employees working from home in the future. After applying thematic analysis, Table 2 illustrates the findings for this question and is ranked from 1 being the least common and 5 being the most common theme identified.

Table 2

Continued mental health support initiatives (research findings)

Continued mental health support initiatives				
Continued EAP support for workers who struggles with mental health	Motivation and appreciation	Encourage workers to take breaks when working virtually	Continued daily or weekly virtual or in-person touch base sessions	Continued management support
1	2	3	4	5

In Table 2, the most common theme is related to continued management support, with the second most common

theme being continued virtual or in-person connect sessions. The existence of perceived organizational and management support is noted, and respondents requested the continuation of connect and support sessions. The findings revealed that some respondents know the importance of taking breaks when working virtually and that this was imperative for continued worker wellbeing, whilst others disagreed. While it is palpable that «a one-size-fits-all» tactic for worker support should be circumvented [52], continued management support is critical in the current shifted occupational settings with the growing unconventional work-related interfaces, and the significance of maintaining operational effectiveness whilst also contemplating and respecting the impact on worker well-being.

3.4. Research limitations and perspectives. Based on the sector and geographic scope of this research, certain corporate entities could not be examined, which could have complimented and enriched the results through considering the results of a broader and more complex sample. However, a determined effort was made to explore the influence of distributed work on worker morale in the milieu of perceived organizational support in a SCM remote work context. The remote work context is recognized as a work setting wherein the management of workers is applied primarily by means of digital platforms, and it is noted that diverse and unique management styles could influence and challenge the practical application of continued worker support initiatives. The findings from the study infers that although there are indications of appropriate support for distributed worker morale, it is equally vital to target the issue of continued management support, including continued worker connect and communication sessions. While there is evidence of existing wellness initiatives for remote workers, implementing and adjusting existing communication protocols for distributed work mode will be a beneficial adjunct to current human resource policies. Notwithstanding the limitations of this research, these summarized implications may assist the public sector and private sector entities to leverage continued improved remote worker morale.

3.5. Recommendations for future research. The authors agree with [53], who noted that to merge the perspectives of organizations and workers during FWP, the need existed for additional in-depth research into this phenomenon. Consequently, as also noted by [54], additional research should be performed into the role of organizational control in FWP [55]. Likewise, where work teams are not working in a controlled

organizational brick-and-mortar setting, this brings forth the supposition that management-subordinate control has shifted to rely primarily on the monitoring of remote outputs only.

Further research into the nuances of management-subordinate control in this novel work approach context should be undertaken. Future research should further study which elements augment worker well-being and how organizations can create a capable remote working culture. A larger and more diverse sample, that is representative of various corporate entities and inclusive of private entities, is also recommended.

4. Conclusions

This research explored the influence of distributed work on worker morale in the milieu of perceived organizational support. It recognized that adapting to remote novel work was challenging, exacerbated by the numerous intricacies and critical aspects of SCM work methods in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research further strived to comprehend how workers, in such a transformed work landscape, perceives transitioned work arrangements, to provide a deeper understanding of the effect of staff morale on novel remote workers and the mitigating role of POS. As noted in the results, continued well-being was confirmed as primarily well supported and mitigated by numerous organizational support incentives, and consequently work outcomes are found to be positively related to the influence of worker morale. Equally worker morale influences worker commitment and engagement levels, and it is clear from the findings that conceptualizing multi-dimensional well-being at work is vital to an in-depth comprehension of the relationship between living meaningfully and being content at work. Consequently, in terms of application, it befits management cadres to look at the evidence and ponder the best approach for the future of work. The application of continued management support is therefore regarded as significant to maintain operational effectiveness in the current era of shifted occupational settings and increasing unconventional work-related interfaces.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to this study, including financial, personal, authorship, or any other, that could affect the study and its results presented in this article.

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Data availability

The manuscript has no associated data.

Use of artificial intelligence

The authors confirm that they did not use artificial intelligence technologies when creating the current work.

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