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Together Apart: Influences and Barriers to Engagement Among Remote Workers

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Together Apart: Influences and Barriers to Engagement Among Remote Workers

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the
Weissman School of Arts and Sciences
Baruch College, The City University of New York
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Corporate Communications

By

Stacey-Robin Johnson

May 29, 2019

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approved by all its members, this thesis [has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Corporate Communication. A Colloquium for the above named Graduate Student will be held at:

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Professor Stephen K. Dishart, Advisor, May 29, 2019

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Glossary

High-Intensity Remote Work(er)	**HIRW**	Remote working 4 – 5 (or more) days per week
Hybrid Remote Work(er)	**HRW**	Remote working 2-3 days per week
Low-Intensity Remote Work(er)	**LIRW**	Remote working 1-2 days per week

Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to determine the influences and barriers to engagement among remote workers. The focus will be on specific areas that are contributors to role success and engagement among traditional employees and may even have a more pronounced impact on remote workers: the onboarding experience, socialization, technology, perceptions of support, career growth, and development.

There is an expanding body of research investigating how modern workers globally interact with their work environment and form connections. Organizations recognize the importance of having employees who do more than 'show up' for work. Rather, the goal is to have employees who will adapt to, embody, and promote the values, agenda, and strategic purposes of the organization beyond their work life. In the efforts around engagement, there are key influences in the organizational lifespan of an employee that can inspire or discourage engagement attitudes and behaviors.

Remote workers (defined here as those who work outside of a central, collective work setting) present unique challenges, the most pressing being maintaining a sense of connection and inclusion among the group in the absence of tangible signifiers such as an office setting.

At the other end of the equation, maintaining that same sense of connection and inclusion is also a hurdle faced by remote workers. Despite the much-touted benefits of remote working, remote workers confront isolation and are primarily reliant on technology to forge and maintain relationships with colleagues and clients. Socialization—which is a foundational element of building trust and cultivating engagement—may happen differently for remote workers compared to traditional workers and require more planning and initiative on the part of the worker. Additionally, support from managers and team members is essential to a remote workers' success. Access to development resources and opportunities for advancement may also be impacted by the remote work arrangement. Each of these challenges can increase in severity depending upon the intensity of the remote work arrangement, with High-Intensity workers (those who rarely work in a centralized setting) experiencing the greater burden.

Engagement among remote workers can differ from that of traditional workers and is worthy of an analysis that considers the varying intensities and limitations of remote work arrangements.

Justification

Although there is a wealth of thought and theories around employee engagement, the research here is relevant because the conversation around engagement continues despite the available research, and organizations are constantly seeking ways to increase engagement.

Gone are the days of the lifelong employee. On average, an adult will change jobs about 10 to 15 times (with an average of 12) over the course of their work career (Doyle). This can be attributed to several causes.

The economic predictability of Generation X and prior generations no longer exists for Millennials and later generations (Generations Z). The domestic economic instability of recent years in the US and a tightly knit global economy have prompted organizations to unravel the financial safety net offered to previous generations (a pension is all but unheard of now). A 'gig' economy has emerged in which employees are less likely to remain at a company for a long period of time. Instead, they pursue job opportunities that offer better pay and benefits and offer a sense of fulfillment, with closer alignment to personal values (Alton). Flexibility, mobility, autonomy, organization integrity, and clear career pathing are just some of the criteria that attract talent in the new economy. These attributes are also some of what makes up the engagement and retention equation as well.

Home is where the job is

Advancements in technology have also changed how we work. Employees can now work remotely from anywhere in the world. In many cases, they may never see a physical collective office setting. Remote work arrangements are commonplace and make an organization appealing to the skilled talent market and may be viewed as an acknowledgment of the worker's challenge to strike a balance between the demands of work and home. Achieving this balance has become less elusive thanks to advancements in digital technology, the rising cost of business real estate, and the competition among organizations to recruit and retain qualified talent—the workforce of the future will not be bound in a cubicle. Economics and technology have brought two concepts into greater focus for employers: employee engagement and the related concept of organizational commitment.

The remote worker cohort has emerged as a difficulty in the engagement equation. Tethered to the organization by technology rather than willing captives of cubicle culture, their opportunities to socialize, build professional networks, and operate within the day-to-

day company culture are subject to a unique set of conditions and must be negotiated in other non-conventional ways. What occurs in a collective office setting, does not happen as easily in relative isolation; things like informal and random socialization and access to basic resources. *How should an organization prepare an employee to work remotely? And where does that preparation begin for the new joiner and the transitioning remote worker? Can onboarding, socialization, and access to resources influence the success and engagement behavior of this group?*

A Historical View

The dictionary contains several definitions for the word "engagement," such as a "pledged, obligation or agreement" and "an encounter, conflict or battle." Engagement, as it pertains to a group or person within a group, is as old as human history.

Consider early man and the cooperation needed from individual clan or tribe members to ensure the survival of the collective. That could only happen if each member took part in the efforts to survive elemental, animal, and human adversarial forces. The innate drive for survival prompted corresponding action for the good of the individual and the group.

The concept of engagement can also be found in the book of Genesis in the story of the Tower of Babel, where people came together with the common goal of building a tower that would reach heaven. As the story goes, God became aware of this colossal effort and man's hubris and responded by confusing their speech so that they could no longer communicate, and hence, no longer act in agreement towards achieving their goal. Applying secular thinking to this story, a point emerges — communication, understanding, and agreement are necessary to achieve engagement. Engagement isn't a new idea, but its value in the modern workforce has come to the forefront only in the last century.

Even before the evolution of disciplines such as human resources, employment relations, industrial management, and organizational behavior, the presence of the employee voice was demonstrated individually and collectively in both organized and unorganized forms. Employee engagement is its evolution, expanding the idea of hearing and responding to the needs of the worker to foster a mutually beneficial relationship between the employee and management. If successful, potential outcomes can be that the employee embraces, adapts to, and promotes the culture, mission, and objectives of the organization, acting on these ideals above their prescribed function in the organization. This exchange of sentiment, resources, and appropriate responses is the nucleus of effective employee engagement.

In his paper, *Employee voice before Hirschman: It's early history, conceptualization, and practice* (Wilkinson et al., 2014), Bruce E. Kaufman asserts, ". . . the idea of employee voice goes back more than two centuries to the start of the industrial revolution." The acknowledgment of and response to the voices below and behind contribute to the success or failure of the group and the endeavor, as well as help to define the efficacy and legacy of the leadership.

In an article entitled *Understanding Employee Engagement – Definition and its Origin* (managementstudy-guide.com), it is argued that the concept of employee engagement has been operative since antiquity. The authors offer the legendary battlefield successes of Alexander the Great (356 BC – 323 BC) as an example of what collective victories can be achieved when leadership identifies with the masses as he did. Alexander the Great was said to have spent time listening to his soldiers, addressing concerns and grievances, and fighting alongside them in the heat of battle. The article goes on further to define employee engagement to join the multitudes of those already proposed:

"An engaged workforce produces better business results, does not hop jobs and more importantly, is an ambassador of the organization at all points of time. This engagement is achieved when people consider their organization respects their work, their work contributes to the organization's goals, and more importantly, their personal aspirations of growth, rewards, and pay are met."

Why did employee engagement become important? The industrial revolution is the short answer. As the world transitioned from an agrarian society to an industrial one, factories required a large number of workers to operate. Along with a large workforce came issues of safety, productivity, and working conditions (e.g., child labor and wages). Factory owners eventually realized that not regarding the employee voice, did not exactly silence it. Instead, workers found ways to be heard, such as factory floor walkouts, which rendered factories unproductive and delivered, sometimes, debilitating blows to the bottom line. The need for constructive bilateral communication with the workforce was evident; not doing so spawned volatile work environments and fiscal instability for owners. Employee voice was a forbearer of laws governing labor as well as, the start of organized labor organizations such as trade unions and guilds served to harness the shared power of the employee voice to ensure the fair treatment of workers.

Since the industrial revolution, workers and their employers have had divergent interest with the voice of the worker being all but ignored until it was vigorously expressed in the form of actions such as profit-decimating protests such as strikes and work stoppages.

Kaufman (2014) cites Karl Marx, stating, "Marx adds the idea that the worker and employer are in a bargaining contest over the terms and conditions of employment and the worker deliberately holds back effort (labor power) as a bargaining chip and protective response.".

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Employee Engagement: An evolving concept

There are more than 50 operative definitions of employee engagement (Schuck and Wollard). An early definition by Saks (2006), captures the essence of a concept that is a moving target:

> "*A distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance.*"

Research thus far has shown that a major issue in the study of employee engagement is simply coming to a consensus as to its definition. Verčič & Vokić (2017) assert that the absence of a universal definition and method of measurement makes it "nearly impossible to manage." The researchers cite Khan's (1990) definition as the germinating source for later definitions:

> *"The harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances." (119, p. 694).*

In later research, Ruck et al. (2017) argue that the evolution of employee engagement theory is segmented into three "waves," beginning with Khan's research in 1990 through 2010, along with research by Saks (2006) expanding the concept to organization and work engagement. Ruck et al. define employee engagement that feels more relevant for the times because it speaks to specific actions and outcomes related to engagement:

> *"The state in which individuals are emotionally and intellectually committed to the organization or group, as measurable by three primary behaviors: Say. Stay. Strive. (Hewitt Associates)."*

Actions and attitudes that can be measured would ideally lessen the confusion around the concept of employee engagement.

Ruck et al. also speak about the concept of *employee voice,* which is a facet of employee engagement. The opposite of employee voice is *employee silence*, the intentional withholding of work-related ideas, information, and opinions. Both of these terms are different ways of describing employee engagement and disengagement. They posit that

these concepts pre-date employee engagement by about two centuries, citing works by Kaufman (2014) and Hirshman (1970).

The evolution of employee engagement theory has grown in complexity in step with developments in social and organizational psychology. The science of how people participate in and negotiate their environments is constantly changing. So, it's unlikely that there will ever be a definition of employee engagement that transcends time, which makes the field of study receptive to new ideas. It is, however, this ambiguity that casts a shadow over related concepts such as organizational commitment and organization socialization discussed later in this review. It begs the question: *aren't we talking about the same thing here?*

Drivers and Outcomes

Although defining employee engagement as a concept is a moving target, some aspects drive engagement with measurable outcomes.

Onboarding

With new joiners, organizations have the first and only such opportunity to inform and indoctrinate colleagues to company culture and convey role expectations. Onboarding can be formal or informal in nature, but Bauer (2010), states that organizations that institute formal onboarding tend to be more effective. Strategic onboarding can achieve the goals mentioned above *and* help initiate the socialization process that is a foundational element of engagement.

Onboarding can occur at four levels, or the "Four Cs": *Compliance, Clarification, Culture,* and *Connection,* according to Bauer (2010). However, it is at the *Culture* and *Connection* levels where "organizational norms, vital interpersonal relationships, and informational networks are established." It is at these levels where employees learn of their role and its significance in the overall scheme of things. In answering the proverbial question *Why am I here?,* according to Morris (2016)**,** "New employees have a better chance of being engaged from day one if there is a clear understanding of the reason why upfront."

A poor onboarding process (e.g., informal, haphazard) can result in employees leaving after a short time, feeling disconnected, and unprepared to perform in their roles. On the other hand, a robust, formal onboarding process can instill confidence in new employees that they're the right fit for the organization and create awareness of the organization's strategies and objectives, laying the foundation needed for socialization. Comprehensive

formal onboarding practices enable faster engagement, greater productivity and result in the formation of the "psychological contract" between employee and employer, with the employee being aware of what is expected to achieve success (Kumar & Pandey, 2017). Gupta et al. (2016) cite Mortvedt's (2009) definition of onboarding experience: "the process of learning, networking, resource allocating, goal-setting and strategizing that ends with new hires quickly reaching maximum productivity." Through the lens of Social Resource Theory (Saks et al., 2012), if employees are given the right resources and support, they are better able to make the necessary adjustments and achieve socialization. Socialization will engender a stronger attachment to the organization. The tangible outcome of this commitment to the organization is reflected in retention rates.

Meeting the initial needs of employees will empower them to become contributors in their roles; this is done through the process of self-evaluation, which is comprised of three core pillars: locus of control, self-efficacy, and emotional stability.

New joiner's successful adjustment has been associated with measurable outcomes that correlate with business' bottom lines: performance, job attitudes, and turnover. With onboarding being the first immersive contact with an organization, the research shows that this encounter is an antecedent to employee success or failure with a financial impact on the organization Bauer et al. (2007). Investment in and attention to onboarding should be considered business-critical.

Socialization and Commitment

In Bauer's model—Culture and Connection, in particular—speak to the concept of organizational socialization. Madlock et al., (2014), citing Van Maanen & Schein (1979), offer a view of organizational socialization as ". . . a process through which an organizational newcomer adapts from being an outsider to being an integrated and effective organizational insider." They go on to cite Van Maanen & Schein (1979) to expand the definition as one in which "an individual acquires the attitudes, behavior, and knowledge required to participate as an organizational member." Organization socialization lies at the heart of employee engagement since engagement — in the organizational context—is communication affirmed by action. Both *Bauer* and *Madlock et al.*, supported by Morris (2016), imply that strategic onboarding practices can encourage the formation of organizational cultural competencies in which active engagement can be included. Applying the definitions provided by Madlock et al., organizational socialization skews external. Bauer et al. asserts, however, that the employee socialization process initiates

internally and includes role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance as indicators of adjustment. This suggests that the nuances of comprehensive onboarding practices have some limitations in their ability to ignite engagement. Rather, engagement initiates internally and is reliant upon the individual needs of the employee being met. Role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance, as put forth by Bauer et al., are the precursors to an employee becoming engaged. In short, assimilation and socialization set the stage for engagement.

A derivative of organization socialization may be organizational commitment. Madlock et al. (2014) note that "organizational socialization has been related to higher levels of organizational commitment." and they characterize organizational commitment as "the comparative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in an organization (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974)." At face value, organization commitment (in this definition) appears very similar to that of employee engagement, especially since the 'fruit' of organizational commitment is "loyalty, involvement and a propensity to stay" (Madlock et al., 2014). While the former is not measurable, the latter is. So, the question is whether "engagement" and "commitment" are interchangeable concepts, with organizational socialization (an ongoing process) as a prerequisite condition of both?

Evolving Remote Work Model

In their research, *How effective is Telecommuting? Assessing the status of our Scientific Findings* (Allen et al. 2015), the genesis of telecommuting was a response to legislative action that required businesses to be proactive in the effort to reduce energy consumption. Instead of workers coming to work, it was more efficient to bring the work to the worker. The researchers go on to say that telecommuting later served as a response to other legislative acts such as the Clean Air Act and the American with disabilities act (ADA). For industry, the latter served to create greater inclusion in the workforce by ensuring reasonable accommodations to workers with disabilities. Later on, telecommuting became a solution for workers seeking a balance between work and home lives. The term dates back to the 1970s, the earliest known beginnings of the telecommuting work construct (Allen et al., 2015). Allen et al. also attribute the rise of telecommuting as a mode of work brought on by the growth of an information economy (versus manufacturing) reliant on knowledge workers.

Over the decades, the terms used to describe telecommuting have changed. Even now, there doesn't seem to be an agreement of terms, but a core definition remains—it's work that happens apart from a central office setting. That setting could be collective as in the case of satellite work locations or—more often than not—in relative isolation, in a worker's home. The difference in terms isn't due to scholarly debate but rather a proliferation of remote working constructs that continue to expand the concept. In their survey of literature addressing telecommuting, Allen et al. identified several terms attributed to different types of remote working arrangements, including: "telework, flexible work arrangements, remote work, distributed work and virtual teams." They cite a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) in 2013 that found 59% of US employers offered some form of telecommuting.

Allen et al. (2015) offer the following as a definition for telecommuting that I believe is applicable across the various terms used to describe the construct:

> *Telecommuting is a work practice that involves members of an organization substituting a portion of their typical work hours (ranging from a few hours per week to nearly full-time) to work away from a central workplace—typically principally from home—using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work tasks.*

This research focuses on those individuals who perform their job roles in their home at least part of their workweek. The term 'Remote Work(er)'to more aptly denotes the sample used in this study and their work arrangement.

The remote work model, according to Tammy Johnson and Lynda Gratton in their paper, *The Third Wave of Virtual Work* (Harvard Business Review, 2013), has entered into new evolution or a "Third Wave."

Somewhat agreeing with Allen et al., the first "wave" of remote working served to "enable marginalized talent' allowing categories of workers (besides the disabled) to enter the workforce. Remote work was especially appealing to certain lifestyles, such as "stay-at-home parents, caregivers, retirees and students." Remote working provided the type of talent and tasks that did not necessarily need to be performed in a central setting—the authors point to graphic design, transcription, and translations services as examples. This first wave of freelance culture had its drawbacks: the forfeiture of benefits that come with a formal connection to an organization; engagement was not a consideration.

According to Johnson et al., the second wave of virtual work was more inclusive, offering the flexibility and convenience of virtual work to embedded colleagues as well. They cite

the tragedy of September 11, 2001, and the SARS pandemic as a kind of wake-up call for global businesses causing a deeper realization and appreciation for the resilience of ". . . a work approach that could support continuity of operations even when people could not be together in an office." The expansion of a virtual workforce to include the colleague (versus contractors) populations brought with it new challenges such as maintaining engagement and managing productivity among untethered colleagues. Technology innovation, specifically in the area of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), has increasingly made remote working more feasible and, as noted by the authors. The numbers of the highly skilled virtual workforce have increased exponentially, and workers at these higher levels of knowledge work place a high value on work-life balance. So, the availability of remote work arrangements is a stake in attracting and retaining talent. In short, remote working is less of a possibility so much as it is an expectation.

With remote workers comes remote coworkers. As teams get distributed globally, co-working remotely is commonplace. The "third wave" referred to by Johnson et al., presents not only the continued challenge of cultivating and maintaining connection and engagement to the larger organization, but also fostering collaboration and engagement among colleagues and teams. The "serendipitous" opportunities that present themselves in a collective setting require more deliberate intent. Johns et al. identify specific challenges for remote workers as the absence of a sense of community and unstructured (non-deliberate) socialization. Engagement emerges as a complex puzzle with far-flung pieces in this latest evolution of virtual working. ICT becomes essential and connective tissue as a means of expression for community, engagement, and productivity.

Support, job satisfaction, and engagement
In their research, *Why the Availability of Telecommuting Matters: The effects of telecommuting on engagement via goal pursuit*, Masuda et al. (2017)—examining the impact of the availability of remote work arrangements on engagement and goal pursuit—assert that "Employees who telecommute are more likely to be satisfied and committed at work and less likely to experience role-stress and work-family conflict." The team's research found that the availability of remote work arrangements "predicted engagement" and "signaled" perceived support for the employee (including goal support) by the organization and their supervisor. Masuda et al. (2015) found that higher perceived goal support increased the likelihood of the employee meeting their goals. They posit that this goal attainment is expressed in engagement and can account for changes in engagement

over time. They state, "Personal work goals are an insightful construct for better understanding engagement. Specifically, we find that goal attainment prevents a decline in engagement over time."

Citing selected earlier research, they found that telecommuting is associated with increased productivity and employee retention. Yet, the team also note in their literature review implications, and there may be consequence associated with working remotely; specifically, stagnant career advancement.

In their research, *The Role of Organizational Support in Telework Wellbeing: A Socio-technical Systems Approach*, Bentley et al. (2016) assert that remote working is a "time-dependent concept" with the negative effects of the model correlating with the operative intensity of the arrangement. Specifically, in cases where remote work is performed more than a few days a week.

Bentley et al. (2016) also noted in their findings that the availability of remote work arrangements could prove divisive in the workplace where it isn't made available equally. Taking a socio-technical systems view, citing earlier research, they see effective organizational support of remote workers "should address technical, personal and organizational sub-systems elements."

According to the researchers, compatibility between these systems increases the likelihood of favorable outcomes from remote work. Concurring with Masuda et al., they point to "Perceived Organizational Support (POS)"— "the degree to which employees believe that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well being . . ."— as a determinant in remote worker engagement and successful outcomes.

Organizational support appeared to have the most influence on Low-Intensity remote workers, a point the researchers attribute to an existing degree of satisfaction among this group. On the other hand, organizational support was found to have a "reductive effect" on social isolation among remote workers overall. Rather, they attribute the prevalence of social isolation to be a "by-product" of "person-environment mismatch" and "inadequate social interaction, task support, and feelings of isolation." This finding suggests that personality type and the opportunities presented (or not) by the organization to facilitate social interaction may play a strong role in remote work outcomes. Bentley et al. define "Perceived Social Support (PSS)" as the extent to which "employees perceive that they are supported by their coworkers and supervisor." Both POS and PSS are considered critical to success and, ultimately, job satisfaction among remote workers.

Technology and technical support are also drivers of successful outcomes among remote workers. I would say that technical support is a primary factor closely followed by organizational and peer support since technology is how remote work is carried out. Bentley et al. attribute these various support systems to be contributors to job satisfaction with a negative association with job strain.

The growing body of research about remote work arrangements and job satisfaction has not produced a consensus affirming a correlation between job satisfaction and or dissatisfaction. Researchers, Morganson et al. (2010) assert that the high degree of autonomy within remote work arrangements, along with the achievement of work-life balance, are significant drivers of job satisfaction. In their research, *Comparing Telework Locations and Traditional Work Arrangements: Differences in Work-Life Balance Support, Job Satisfaction and Inclusion* (Morganson et al., 2010), the team proposed that employees may view the availability of remote work arrangements as a "gesture" support of organizational support of that work-life balance. Citing Sparrow (2000), the team suggests that the availability of remote work arrangements may be perceived as a merit-based, a type of "privilege" or beneficence which in turn engenders "loyalty and appreciation" on the part of the employee. From an engagement standpoint, these sentiments can translate into retention and a sense of obligation to cultivate employees who adapt to, embody and promote the values, agenda and strategic purpose of the organization beyond their work life. Morganson et al. (2010) further hypothesize that "individuals working from home will report greater perceptions of WLB [work-life balance] support than those working from satellite locations, the main office or a client location." Citing earlier research, Morganson et al. (2010) assert that employees (in pursuit of work-life balance) will part ways with an organization that appears not to be in support of that pursuit.

In examining hindrances to job satisfaction and support perception among remote workers, Morganson et al. (2010) acknowledge that "teleworkers may have inherent communication barriers with their organizations due to temporal and physical distance (Dambrin, 2004; Hinds and Bailey, 2003)." The barriers may result in feelings of exclusion and role confusion, in particular, where their contribution fits in with the overall effort of the team. Professional jealousy among non-remote working peers and professional isolation may also negatively impact remote worker sentiment towards their teams and organization. The intensity of the remote work arrangement is also a factor in the likelihood of these sentiments occurring, with a greater likelihood of occurrence among High-Intensity remote work arrangements versus compared to moderate-intensity or HYBRID workers.

Allen et al. 's (2015) survey of existing research cite studies that found job satisfaction to be high among the remote worker cohort with the degree of satisfaction correlating with the intensity of the remote work arrangement. They also found that remote workers have been "positively associated with organizational commitment and negatively associated with intent to leave the organization, such that more extensive telecommuting has been associated with a greater commitment to the organization and lower turnover intentions (Golden, 2006a)."

In their paper, *Why the Availability of telecommuting matters: The effects of telecommuting on engagement via goal pursuit*, Masuda et al. (2017) agree with the likelihood of job satisfaction among remote workers and the positive effects it could have on retention among the cohort. However, their research reveals that job satisfaction and engagement inter-related for this cohort, though mediated by relationships with supervisors and their perceived support towards attaining goals. Additionally, they assert the availability of remote work options "signal" a form of supervisory support, and a tangible indicator that the organization cares about its employees (this harkens back to Social Resource Theory). Social Exchange Theory comes in to play here in that subsequently, this perceived support promotes an individual's progress towards "career-related objectives," and in turn, encourages in higher levels of engagement for the employee. The remote work arrangement is positioned here as a driver of engagement rather than an inhibitor to engagement as it can be.

In a further examination of job satisfaction among remote workers, in their research titled *Communication and Teleworking: A Study of Communication Channel Satisfaction, Personality*, and Job Satisfaction for Teleworking Employees, Smith et al. (2018) focused their research on several potential areas that may contribute to job satisfaction among remote workers, including personality compatibility, channel satisfaction. They propose that some remote work models are agreeable to the tendencies of some personality types, such as extroverts who may find corporate culture less challenging and socialization easier. Looking at this assertion through the lens of remote work, it seems plausible considering that isolation is a known risk for remote workers and a hindrance to successful engagement. Furthermore, it suggests that (as in some earlier research presented here) that job satisfaction and engagement can be attributed to the internal attitudes of the worker and therefore lessens the onus on organizations to externally drive engagement, but rather make an accurate assessment of personality/role compatibility to determine if the remote work model will be a hindrance or a complement to achieving engagement.

Deferring to the earlier research of Gardner et al. (2012), Smith et al. (2018) posit that "Personality traits have been shown to relate to the development and initiation of coworker friendships, particularly among coworkers." Adding to this, the researchers found that channel satisfaction—which translates to ICT—alongside personality traits are factors in determining job satisfaction among remote workers.

 In assessing the compatibility between personality and role, the researchers assert that remote workers' satisfaction with available communication channels impact job satisfaction, and to a further extent, engagement. The team defines communication satisfaction as one that encompasses the vertical and horizontal communication (between the worker and his superiors and peers, respectively), as well as communications channels used to facilitate that communication. Smith et al. define "communication satisfaction" as "an individual's satisfaction with various aspects of communication in his organization" (citing research from Crino & White, 1981, pp. 831-832).

In acknowledging the consistent innovation and integration of new communication technologies to the enterprise, Smith et al. view the quality of a channel as determined by its "richness." They state, "Channel richness depends on the ability to handle multiple cues, feedback rate, and the amount of personal focus once (Lengel & Daft, 1988)." The researchers believe that the degree of "richness" of a communication channel may directly appeal to certain types of personalities. Smith et al. correlate job satisfaction and communication channel satisfaction between email, video technologies, instant messaging, and phone communications, with an unexpected and significant correlation with instant messaging—a form of communication they identify as "supplementary." The researchers go on to propose that a broad range of available communication channels increase the likelihood of workers gravitating to a channel that best fits their personality and so would engender job satisfaction.

Expectations and boundaries

Eddleston et al. (2015) found evidence of pressure placed upon remote workers to be "persistently available" to their organizations all the time or were expected to be on-call all the time because they worked at home. This resulted in a difficulty disconnecting or disengaging from work because the hours of work tended to be longer than what would be the case if the role were being performed in an office setting with clearly defined 'business hours.' Their research states, "In reference to boundary theory, this pressure to always be "on" goes beyond role intrusion instigated by family members or coworkers. Rather, the

data uncovered a sense of being pulled to work that the remote workers felt made their work role particularly salient and difficult to disengage from, thus keeping them from transitioning to the family role."

Chapter 3: Primary Research

An earlier pilot study, conducted in 2018, examined engagement among low intensity, HYBRID (moderate) and High-Intensity remote workers and the impact of onboarding experience; individual understanding of engagement; engagement behaviors and socialization, as well as the role of technology in socialization and engagement behavior. The data for this research came from interviews conducted with five (5) full-time employees of Mercer, a global HR consulting company. The sample consisted of varying intensities and durations of remote work arrangements, as well as company tenure.

Data was accumulated via semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in-person via video conferencing or by telephone.

Five interviews were conducted among employees of Mercer, a human resources consulting company, and a member of the Marsh & McLennan family of companies. The subjects varied in employment tenure from a matter of months to 23 years.

While there were limitations to the study, compelling findings emerged:

Defining Employee Engagement: From the inside out

Subjects primarily viewed engagement as a self-initiated endeavor, not necessarily a reaction to efforts put forth by the organization to cultivate or evoke those attitudes or behaviors.

Dimensions of Engagement: the "How" and "How much?"

The depth of engagement behaviors was most distinguishable by the degree of intensity of the remote work situation. High-Intensity remote workers showed the least degree of dimension in their engagement behaviors:

- Engagement behaviors occurred mostly during the transaction of work
- Behaviors were highly deliberate versus the spontaneous opportunities that present in a centralized work setting.
- Enactment of engagement behavior was solely reliant upon technology (ICT).

Engagement among low to moderate intensity remote work subjects revealed:

- Greater dimensions of expression, occurring with and in the absence of technology (in-person), and both during and outside of work transactions.

Onboarding Experience (OE)

- Across the sample of remote work intensities represented in the pilot study, OE was the least impactful factor as it related to their own abilities and inclinations to engage.
- Across related experiences, the onboarding experience did not provide any guidance that specifically addressed remote work arrangements (company policies or specific resources for remote workers).

Technology

- For High-Intensity remote workers, having adequate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and support were foundational to successful performance, productivity, and maintaining a connection to their work and teams.
  - For High-Intensity remote workers, technology support was satisfactory though not always conveniently accessed. They expressed the importance of having a degree of technical understanding to perform routine maintenance and the necessity of access to online Information Technology for troubleshooting while away from a central office setting to avoid the disruption of seeking off-site technology support.
- Low to moderate-intensity remote workers expressed less anxiety around technology and support—though not importance—about the adequacy of available technology and available support.

A Broader Story

Not examined in the pilot study was the impact of perceptions around manager and team member support and the correlation between remote work arrangements and career development and advancement. The pilot, a qualitative study, used a semi-structured interview model that offered opportunities for broader discussion beyond the areas of inquiry. It was in these conversations that subjects—specifically High-Intensity remote workers—indirectly acknowledged the part support plays in role success. With minimal prompting, subjects were cautiously forthcoming with observations about their remote work arrangements and the influence it may have (or had) on their career trajectory and progression.

For High-Intensity remote worker subjects, the remote work arrangements contributed significantly to maintaining a successful and fluid work-life balance. The remote work situation afforded degrees of temporal and geographical flexibility and convenience

around which a lifestyle had evolved. It begged the question (explored in this current study): *to what extent is their commitment to their organization dependent upon the ongoing availability of the remote work arrangement and thus the lifestyle it enables?*

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research comes from a review of existing literature in the field of employee engagement and includes:

- Onboarding is a one-time opportunity for an organization to indoctrinate and inform colleagues of the culture of the company and role expectations. Bauer (2010) asserts that onboarding can occur at four levels ("the Four Cs"): Compliance, Clarification, Culture, and Connection. *Connection,* being the deepest level of onboarding experiences, has the potential to lay the foundation for successful engagement by encompassing all of the previous four levels and offering colleagues the tools and confidence to meet the expectations of their role, build a professional network and learn of the resources available to them.

- Social Resource Theory (Saks and Gruman, 2012), which posits that if employees are given the right resources and support, they are better able to make the necessary adjustments and achieve socialization. Socialization will engender a stronger attachment to the organization

- The formation of organizational cultural competencies as an antecedent to successful engagement. These competencies are developed through organizational socialization. Madlock et al. (2014), citing Van Maanen & Schein (1979) describe organizational socialization as: ". . . a process through which an organizational newcomer adapts from being an outsider to being an integrated and effective organizational insider . . . an individual acquires the attitudes, behavior, and knowledge required to participate as an organizational member."

- As put forth by Bauer et al. (2007), "role clarity, self-efficacy asocial acceptance" are also precursors to employee engagement. In short, assimilation and socialization set the stage for engagement and maybe present ongoing challenges in the remote work model.

- Madlock and Chory (2014), characterize organizational commitment as ". . . the comparative strength of identification with and involvement in an organization (Porter, Steers, Mowday & Boulan, 1974), and "Loyalty, involvement, and a propensity to stay."

- Outcomes of remote working situations vary and are reliant upon how technology is appropriated. Boell et al. (2016)

Chapter 5: Hypothesis

Hypothesis #1: A new metric for gauging engagement

Engagement among remote workers is expressed in intent, as well as action and sentiment. Time differences and distance may present obstacles to demonstrable engagement behaviors, which makes those behaviors aspirational rather than executable. That desire should be viewed as meaningful, aspirational intent, and considered a type of engagement unique to the remote work model.

Hypothesis #2: A hierarchy of influencers to engagement

The hierarchy of influences (and possible barriers) for engagement among remote workers in descending order is:

1. Socialization
2. Technology (access to, support for and reliability of)
3. Perceptions of support and opportunities for career growth and development
4. Quality of the onboarding experience

Hypothesis #3: Organizational commitment for remote workers correlates with the organization's support for and continuity of the remote work arrangement.

Organizational commitment, a 'first fruit' of successful engagement, is reliant upon an organization's demonstrated support of the remote worker's lifestyle and ongoing delivery of the benefits reaped from the remote work arrangement such as a successful work/life balance, temporal and geographic flexibility, as well as the time and cost savings gained from the absence of a commute and related out-of-home work expenses (e.g., commuter costs and childcare expenses).

If this support were to end (e.g., such arrangements were suspended), sentiment towards the organization would be negatively impacted as would the extent to which the worker is committed to the organization. A significant change to the remote work situation would be more impactful to the worker's sentiment and commitment towards the organization than, say, a salary reduction, change in responsibilities, or demands for increased productivity. In short, cessation of the remote work arrangement would undermine previous and future engagement and its potential positive outcomes for the organization.

Research Question

To explore the above hypothesis, the research question to be answered in this survey project is: **What are the key influences on communication and colleague engagement among remote workers?**

Chapter 6: Methodology

Sources of Data

The data for this research came from an online survey on the Qualtrics survey platform accessed through a portal for CUNY students.

Survey Design

The survey instrument consisted of 27 questions (excluding Informed Consent) that sought to explore respondents' attitudes and behaviors as they related to their work-life in the following Areas:

Remote work arrangement intensity

Use of technology

Socialization and collaboration tendencies

Perceptions of support

Career development and advancement

Onboarding experience

Separation Intention

Target Group

The target group for this study was adults at least 20 years old who worked full-time and from home at least one day per week.

Sample: Size and Selection

Two-hundred and one (201) respondents participated in the survey distributed via email. Respondents skewed heavily in certain areas:

- Age - the 45 or older group made up 58.6% of overall respondents, followed ages 36 – 44 at 24.73%.
- Gender - Respondents skewed heavily female at 72.43%.

Recruitment and Distribution

Participants were recruited through the Principal Investigator's professional network via requests made via email. The survey was distributed through an anonymous link.

Screening Methods

Upon accessing the survey platform, potential participants were asked a series of screening questions to determine eligibility. Participants were required to:

- Be at least 20 years old
- Employed full-time and salaried (not freelancer or contractor)
- Work remotely at least one day per week

Margin of Error

The sample sought to—but did not successfully—represent a population of 3.9 million Americans who work remotely (The 2017 State of Telecommuting, US Employee Workforce Report, Flexjobs.com, https://www.flexjobs.com/2017-State-of-Telecommuting-US/#formstart). The margin of error for the survey was 7.0%

To properly distinguish the frequency of remote work arrangements examined, the Investigator used the following terminology to describe the frequency and duration of remote work activity:

High-Intensity Remote Work(er)	HIRW	Remote working 4 – 5 (or more) days per week
Hybrid Remote Work(er)	HRW	Remote working 2-3 days per week
Low-Intensity Remote Work(er)	LIRW	Remote working 1-2 days per week

Information and Communication Technology	ICT	

Chapter 7: Key Findings

Intensity and duration of Remote Work Arrangements

Most survey participants have been involved in remote work arrangements between one and five years.

- Among **HIRW**s, 49% had been doing so anywhere from over one year and up to five years, while 30% have been in such arrangement for over five years,

- Similarly, 50% of **HRW**s had been doing so for one to five years; 25% have been in such arrangements for over five years.

- Compared to the other groups, there was little statistical difference within the **LIRW** sample: 55% have a remote work arrangement enduring from one to five years.

Hypothesis #1: Engagement among Remote Workers is expressed in intent as well as behavior

Engagement among remote workers is expressed in intent, as well as action and sentiment. Time differences and distance may present obstacles to demonstrable engagement behaviors, which makes those behaviors aspirational rather than executable. That desire should be viewed as meaningful, aspirational intent, and considered a type of engagement unique to the remote work model.

**Individual Understanding of Employee Engagement**

Q.14 Which of the following statements best represents your understanding of employee engagement? (Choose up to three)

As previously noted, there is a multitude of definitions for employee engagement. Engagement as a measurable behavior is elusive without an established definition of what it is; operative definitions can vary even within the same organization. From a selection of related statements, survey respondents were asked to choose up to three that best represented their own understanding of the term. The top-ranking responses were:

> *Engagement happens when an organization provides employees with what they need to succeed and, in turn, employees are more inclined to perform well in their jobs. (33%)*
>
> *Engagement means the company listens to its employees and creates an environment where they are encouraged to interact and speak up. (23%)*
>
> *Engagement is an employee's willingness to go that extra mile for the company, promoting the mission, and wanting common goals. (21%)*

15%

33%

7%

21%

23%
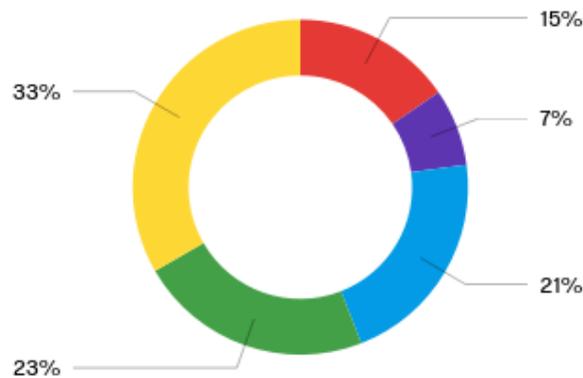
■ Employee engagement means you love where you work and you believe in the work you're doing.

■ Engagement is how interested employees are in all facets of the company .

■ Engagement is an employee's willingness to go that extra mile for the company; promoting the mission and wanting common goals.

■ Engagement means the company listens to its employees and creates an environment where they are encouraged to interact and speak up.

■ Engagement happens when an organization provides employees with what they need to succeed and, in turn, employees are more inclined to perform well in their jobs.

The responses imply that engagement is the result of a reciprocal relationship between an employer and the employee. The employer's demonstrated values, actions, policies, and ability to maintain an environment wherein employees' needs are met and their voices heard is the currency traded in a complex mental and emotional engagement economy. Being 'engaged' occurs in response to actions on the part of the engager; however, referring to the survey statements above, engagement behavior and mindset also correlate to some basic human needs being met. What comes to mind is *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs* wherein psychological, love/belonging, and safety form the basis of the human need model.

The HIRW group responded most prominently to the highest-ranking statement in the group (*Engagement happens when an organization provides . . .*) with 94.21% choosing the statement that spoke directly to employees' needs being met.

Engagement Behavior and Intent

Q.15 What would you describe as your—actual or desired—engagement behaviors? (Choose up to three)

Each category of remote work intensity reported a range of engagement behaviors. Surprisingly, the HIRW category of participants reported having the most diversity in engagement behaviors, indicating activity in each of the nine activities proposed. The most popular choices (in order) across all groups were:

> *Lending my time, experience and skills not related to your role (82 responses)*
> *Interacting informally with colleagues (71 responses)*
> *Participation in company-sponsored activities (39 responses)*

Of the HIRWs, 90% (more than the other remote work intensities surveyed) chose "Lending my time, experience, and skills not related to your role" as an engagement behavior. "Attendance at networking events" was chosen most Among HRWs, "Participation in company-sponsored activities" topped choices of engagement behaviors. This is not an unexpected outcome since these groups have access to a collective work setting at least part of the time during the course of their work. Among LIRWs "Attendance at networking events" was the most popular engagement behavior.

Findings among HIRWs suggests this group is deliberate in its effort to engage, seeking out or creating opportunities that call on resources within their control (". . .time, experience and skills"), gravitating to more functional than recreational activities, yet still allowing opportunities to socialize. This desire and willingness to participate in the colleague community even though it may not have a connection to their current role can be interpreted as a defense against isolation and a form of self-advocacy because the giving of one's time and skills could also lead to socialization and networking opportunities comparable to traditional colleagues and remote workers of less intensity.

Q.16 Are there ways you would like to engage but cannot BECAUSE of your remote work arrangement?

Note: few in each group chose to answer the optional survey question. The majority of LIRWs (82%) expressed satisfaction with their current engagement behaviors ("No"). In contrast, 75% of HRWs indicated remote working hindered their ability to engage ("Yes").

1 day per week

18%

82%

2 - 3 days per week

25%

75%

4 -5 (or more) days per week

48%

52%

Yes   No
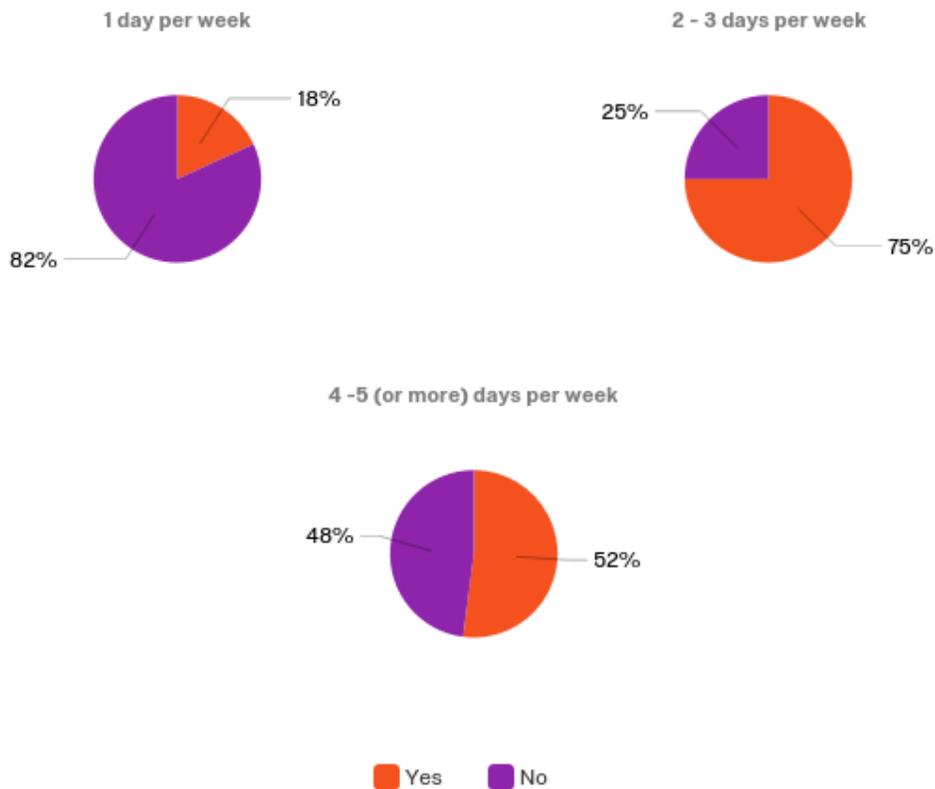
The highest number of responses came from the HIRW group whose responses were nearly equally dispersed as to whether their remote work arrangements adversely impacted their ability and desire to engage: 52% answered "Yes," and 48% answered "No." Interestingly, this implies that some HIRWs surveyed are expressing engagement behaviors with some satisfaction and success. The prominent engagement activities (such as those mentioned previously) are facilitated through avenues at least partially made possible by the organization (i.e., mentoring and business and employee resource groups). Yet, nearly half of the group indicated that they have unfulfilled desires and would like to engage but prevented from doing *because* of their work from home arrangement.

This supports the hypothesis that in seeking to gauge engagement among remote work colleague populations, the *desire* to enact engagement behaviors should itself be considered a *type* of engagement that can *only* exist when circumstances (temporal or geographical) prevent the execution of such behaviors in earnest. An engagement *mindset*, rather than a behavior, can be leveraged—with creativity and thoughtfulness— by an organization to potentially deliver on (or reinforce) some of the known outcomes of successful engagement such as organizational commitment.

Hypothesis #2: A hierarchy of influences to engagement:

The hierarchy of influences (and possible barriers) for engagement among remote workers in descending order are:

1. Socialization

2. Technology (access to, support for and reliability of)

3. Perceptions of support and opportunities for career growth and development

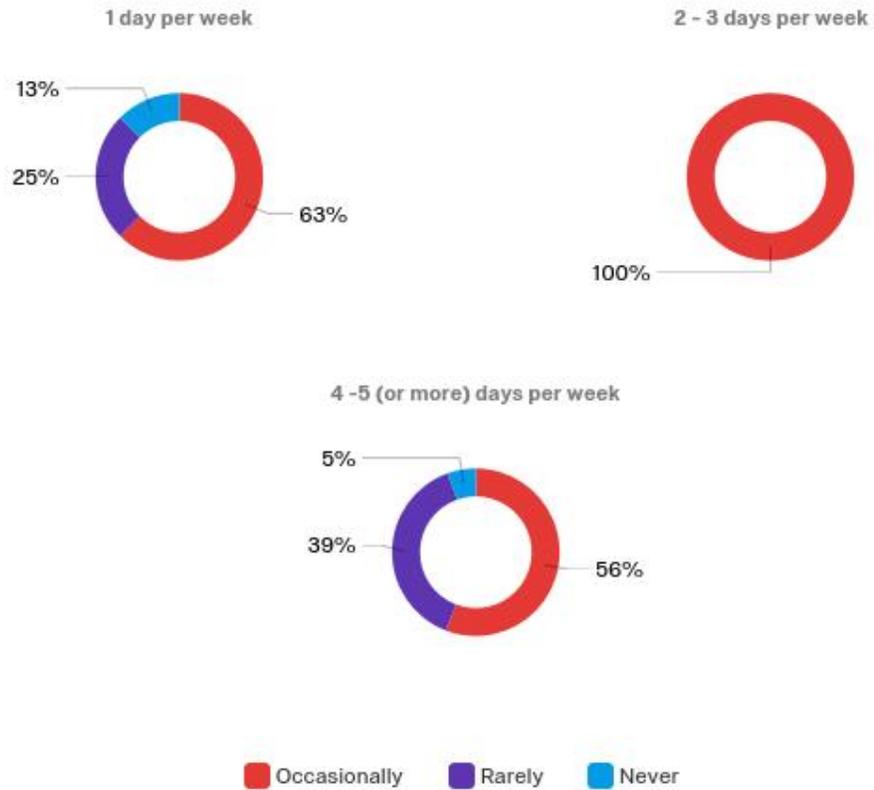*4. Quality of the onboarding experience*

Socialization

Q.17 How frequently do you socialize with your colleagues during your workday?

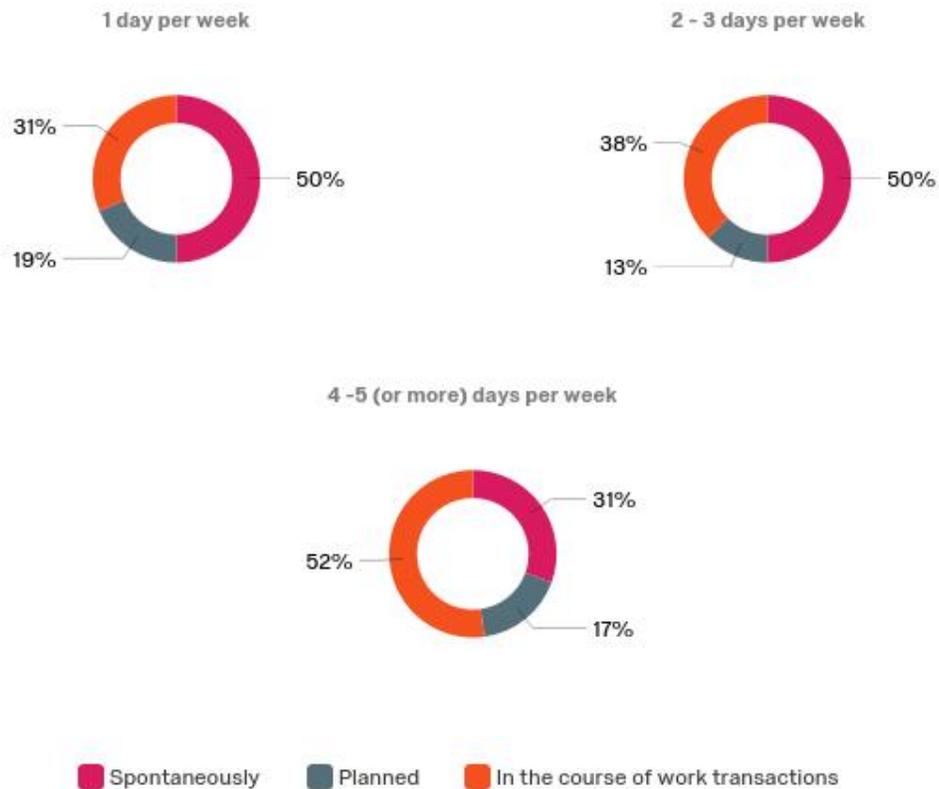*Q.19 How does social interaction come about? (Check all that apply).*

The majority of LIRWs and HRWs engaged socially "Occasionally," 63%, and 100%, respectively.

In notable contrast, 56% of HIRWs "Occasionally" socialize in the course of their day, and 39% "rarely" engaged in socialization." The comparatively high percentage of respondents who "Rarely" among HIRWs affirm assumptions made in earlier studies of remote workers that isolation brought about decreased opportunities for informal socialization with peers was a formidable challenge. Socialization, an antecedent to successful engagement, looms large in the work lives of remote workers and is more impactful as an influence on engagement. It is better mitigated in the Low-Intensity and Hybrid groups because of

access to collective work environments.

1 day per week

13%
25%
63%

2 - 3 days per week

100%

4 -5 (or more) days per week

5%
39%
56%

■ Occasionally ■ Rarely ■ Never

All groups indicated that informal socialization with colleagues overwhelming occurred "In the course of work transactions" as opposed to "Planned" or "spontaneously. Predictably, the High-Intensity group outpaced their counterparts with this choice.

1 day per week

31%
50%
19%

2 - 3 days per week

38%
50%
13%

4 -5 (or more) days per week

31%
52%
17%

■ Spontaneously   ■ Planned   ■ In the course of work transactions

Collaboration

Q.13 Please indicate the percentage of your day spent: (a) Working independently (b) Collaborating with team members, colleagues, and clients (meetings, training, brainstorming sessions, etc.)

Each remote workgroup reported spending more time working independently than collaboratively. Statistically significant findings were found within the HRW group because they reported *less* time spent working collaboratively than their counterparts. This is an unexpected outcome because of their presumed increased opportunity for in-person, spontaneous access to colleagues, as well as access to ICT comparable to that of the other remote worker groups surveyed. Although not explored in this study, a possible contributor to this finding could be the type of work performed by this group. For example, some roles may have greater autonomy and rely primarily on individual judgment and execution.

1 day per week

Working independently

69

0 100

Collaborating with team members, colleagues and clients (meetings, trainings, brainstorming session etc.)
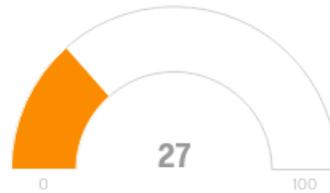
47

0 100
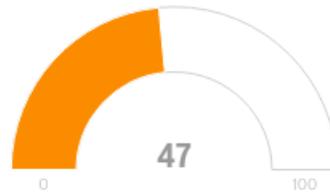
2 - 3 days per week

Working independently

77

0 100

Collaborating with team members, colleagues and clients (meetings, trainings, brainstorming session etc.)
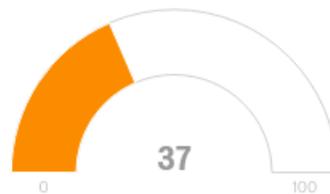
27

0 100

4 -5 (or more) days per week

Working independently

73

0 100

Collaborating with team members, colleagues and clients (meetings, trainings, brainstorming session etc.)

37

0 100

Unexpectedly, collaborative work among the HIRW group exceeded that of the Hybrid group, which—when compared to the earlier finding socialization for this group occurs primarily during work transactions—suggests that collaboration presents the best opportunity for High-Intensity remote workers to socialize and strive towards successful engagement.

Technology
Q.11 What types of communication technology do you use when working remotely? (Check all that apply)
Q.23 Do you feel the technology (and technology support) you're provided meets your work needs?

The use of ICT was substantial among all groups surveyed and was an anticipated finding since business is largely conducted in this manner among knowledge workers across all industries. In ranking the types of ICT used, email (23%), instant messenger platforms (23%), and video conferencing platforms (22%) emerged as leading technologies over texting and phone use.
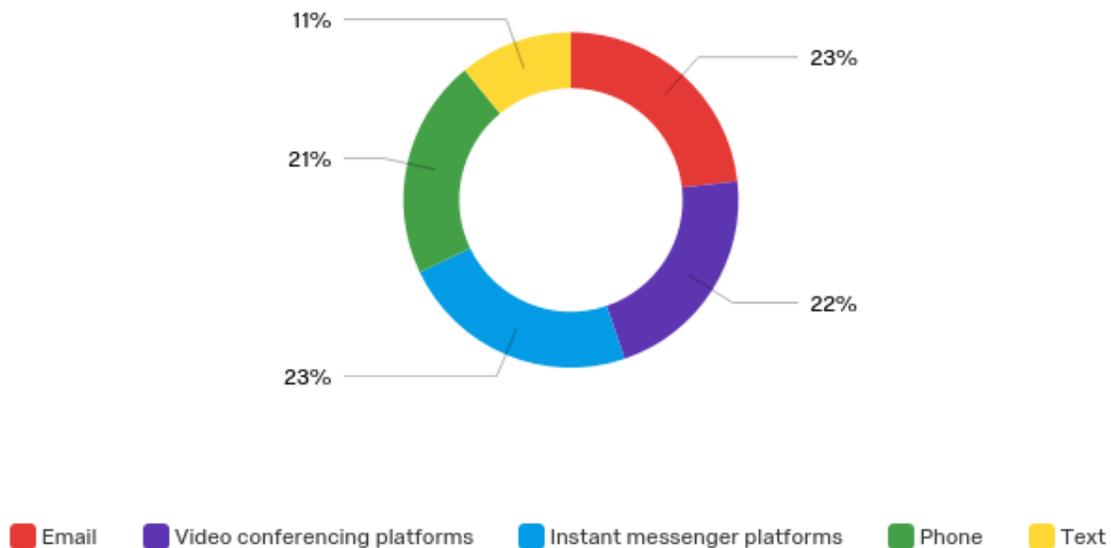
Respondents in each category overwhelmingly reported satisfaction with the technology and related support provided, with a majority indicating "Very Well" or "Good." In light of the degree to which ICT is used as stated above, this response regarding the quality of ICT affirms that the efficacy of technology is a heavily weighted factor to enabling engagement

among remote workers and its significance correlating to intensity of the remote work arrangement.

Onboarding

Q.21 Which Statement best describes your onboarding experience as you remember it?
Q.22 Remote work arrangements were described as (a) Optional (b) Merit-based (c) Selectively available d) Discouraged

Forty-two percent of all participants who answered the question described their onboarding experiences as occurring at the "Compliance" level ("It was basic. I was given basic information and completed some administrative tasks for new employees."). At the same time, 32% indicated an immersive onboarding experience, which is a characteristic of the "Connection" level of onboarding experience (Bauer, 2010).
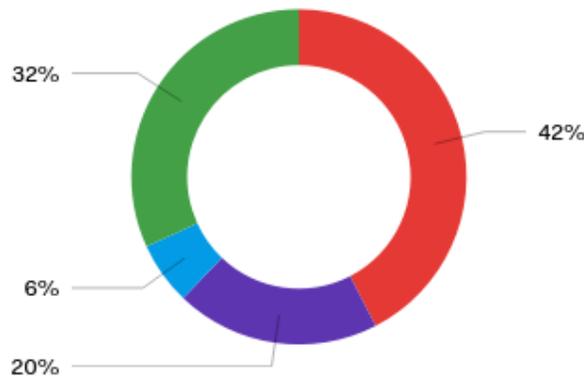

🟥 It was basic. I was given basic information about and completed some administrative tasks for new employees.

🟪 I learned about the company, my role and what was expected of me.

🟦 I learned about the organization's history, mission and strategic goals, in addition to employee resources and benefits.

🟩 All of the above and I had a chance to connect with other colleagues and begin to build my network. I felt supported and optimistic about that period in my career.

Only 24% of respondents were designated as remote workers at the time of hire. The remaining 76% were transitioned to a remote worker capacity (in varying intensities) with circumstances not explored at the time of this study.

| 24% Yes | 76% No |

Yes   No
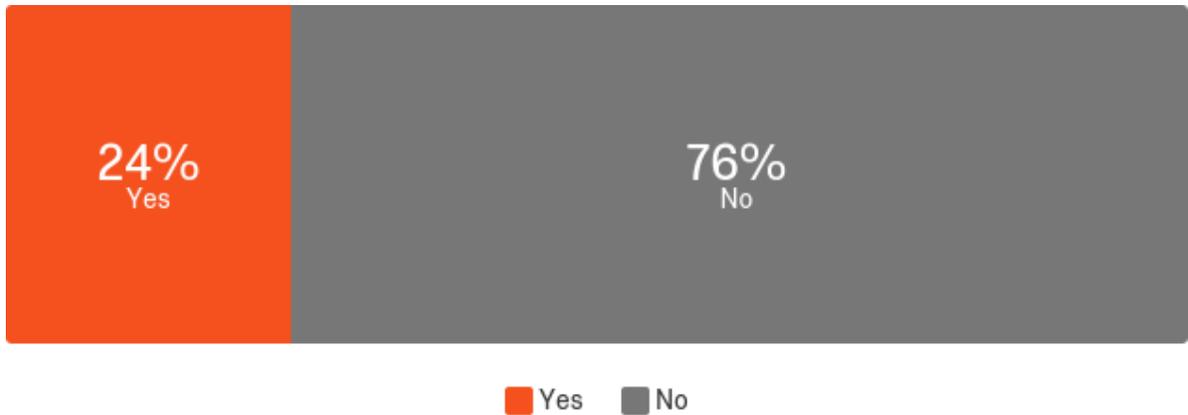
For those respondents designated as remote workers at the time of hire, remote working was communicated as either optional or subject to a manager's discretion. In contrast, those who were *not* designated remote workers at the time of hire and later transitioned into a remote worker role stated that the remote working was communicated as an option subject to a manager's approval or as a merit-based benefit.

Optional   Merit based   Selectively available (e.g. at a manager's discretion)   Discouraged
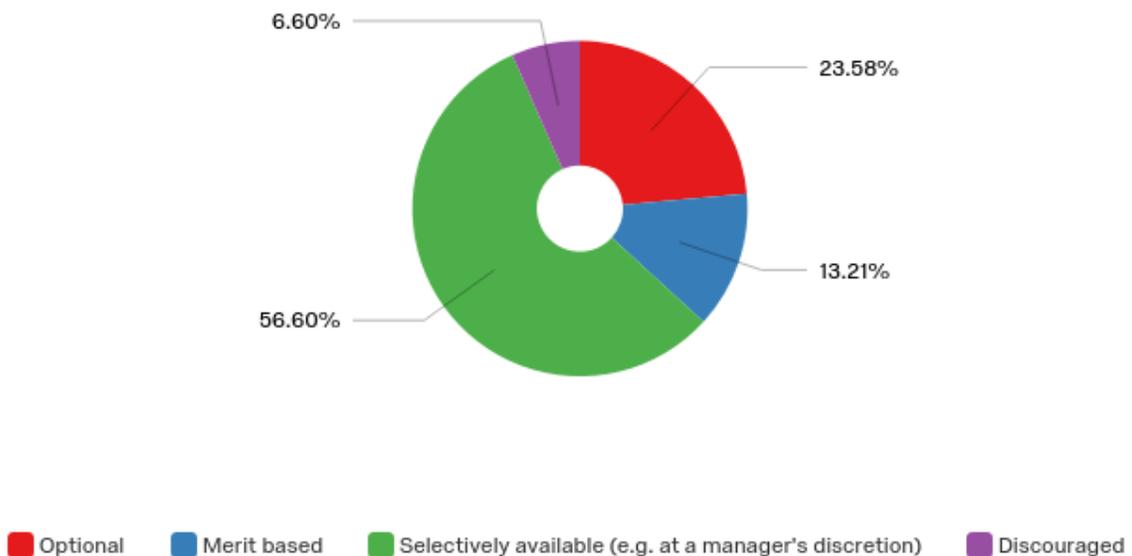
The positioning of remote work options as a merit-based benefit harkens back to Bentley et al. stating that remote work can be a driver of engagement, signaling a 'gesture of support'

or a type of 'privilege' or beneficence which in turn engenders 'loyalty and appreciation' on the part of the employee.

Hypothesis #3: Organizational commitment for remote workers correlates with the organization's support for and continuity of the remote work arrangement.
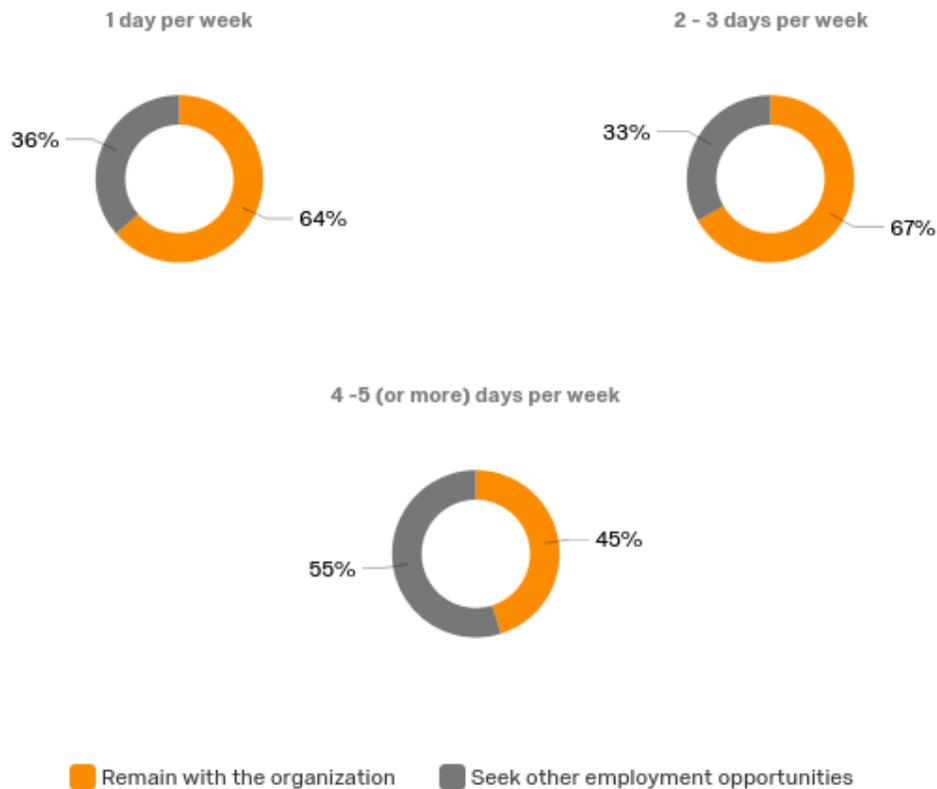
Organizational commitment, a kind of 'first fruit' of successful engagement, is reliant upon an organization's demonstrated support of the remote worker's lifestyle and ongoing delivery of the benefits reaped from the arrangement such as a successful work/life balance, temporal and geographic flexibility, as well as the time and cost savings gained from the absence of a commute and related out-of-home work expenses.

If this support were to end (e.g., such arrangements were suspended), sentiment towards the organization would be negatively impacted as would the extent to which the worker is committed to the organization. A significant change to the remote work situation would be more impactful to the worker's sentiment and commitment towards the organization than, say, a salary reduction, change in responsibilities, or demands for increased productivity. In short, cessation of the remote work arrangement would undermine previous and future engagement and its potential positive outcomes for the organization.

Turnover Intent

Q.30 If your remote work arrangement were to end, would you: a) Remain with the organization or b) Seek other employment opportunities?

The majority of LIRW survey participants (64%) expressed a likelihood of remaining with the organization should their remote work privilege end. Nearly the same percentage (67%) is noted for the HRW group as well.

1 day per week

36%   64%

2 - 3 days per week

33%   67%

4 -5 (or more) days per week

55%   45%

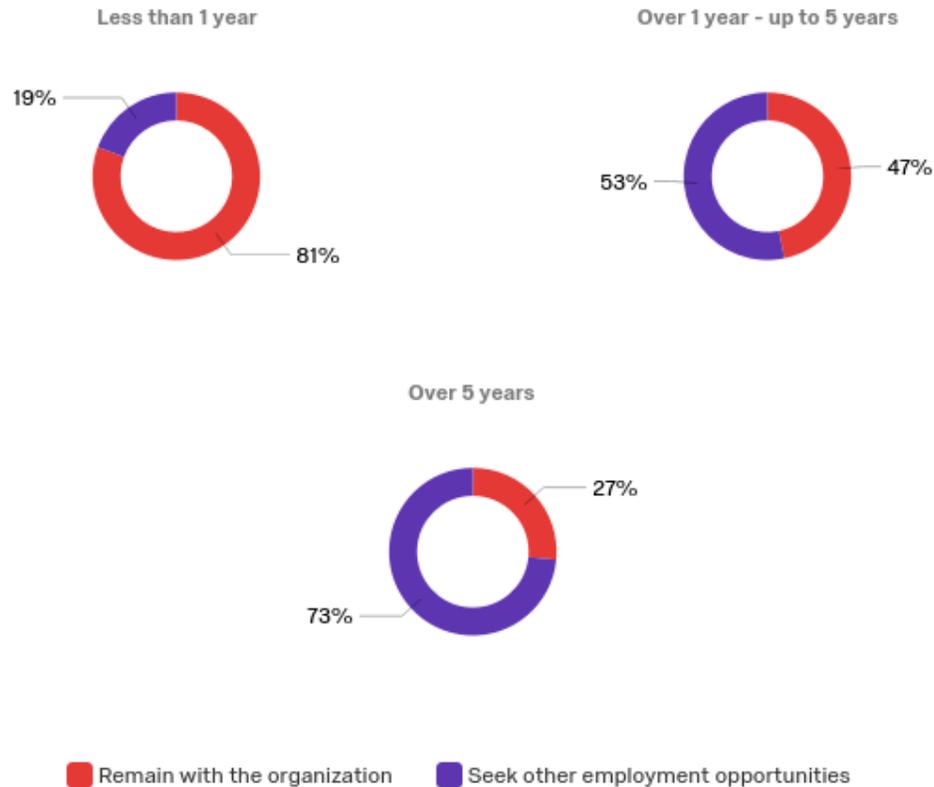🟧 Remain with the organization   ⬛ Seek other employment opportunities

Most responses to the question of turnover intent came from the HIRW group, who were nearly equally split between the two possible responses: 55% of High-Intensity respondents said they would seek other employment, the remaining 45% expressed a likelihood of remaining with the organization.

These figures suggest that for the LIRWs and HRWs, remote work is a favorable condition or option to their employment. It may not be a non-negotiable element in their work lives as there are other attributes to their employment that are equal to—or surpass—the benefits that come with the remote work arrangement. The Investigator posits that these groups have not established lifestyles (family, personal, social, or professional) reliant upon remote work arrangements to be successful.

On the contrary, there is a strong suggestion that for HIRWS, the remote work model may have a greater degree of embeddedness and is, in fact, a not so easily dispensable element in the successful functioning of varying aspects of their lives (i.e., home and family life). This may especially be the case for those who have been working remotely in excess of a year: 53% of HIRW participants working remotely from one to five years expressed a likelihood of leaving and, 73% of those working remotely for over five years said they would indeed leave if remote working arrangements were no longer available.

This suggests that the remote work arrangement may be viewed as previously mentioned as a supportive gesture and, thus, an engagement sentiment-producing benefit. If taken away, engagement could cease, as well as the organizational commitment it produced.
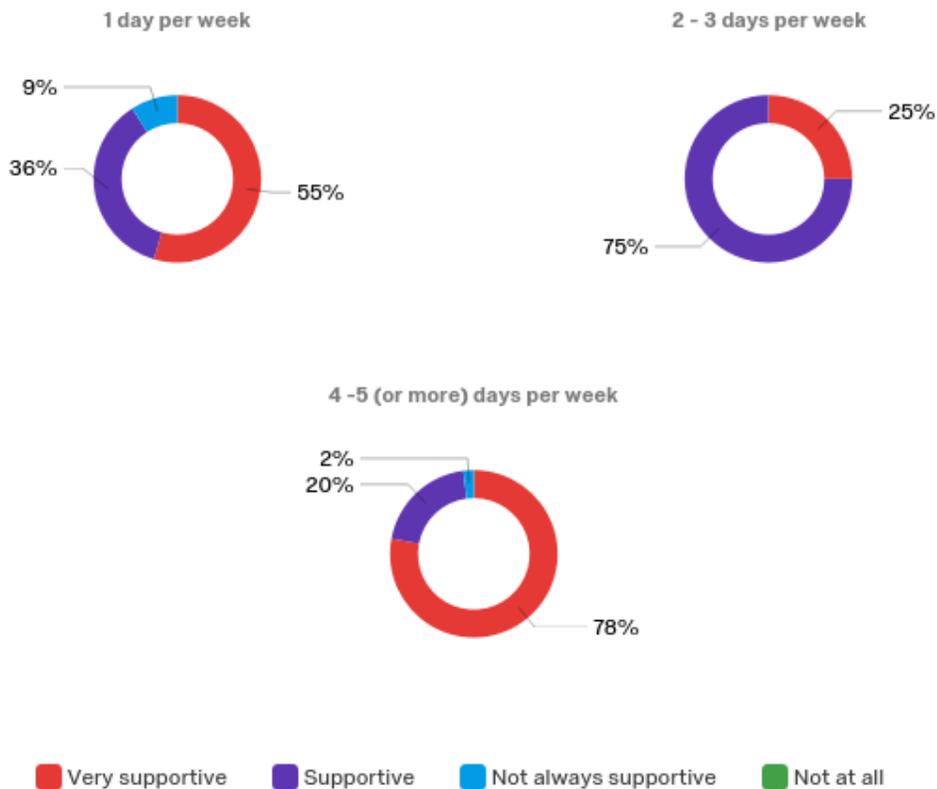
Less than 1 year

19%

81%

Over 1 year - up to 5 years

47%

53%

Over 5 years

27%

73%

🟥 Remain with the organization   🟪 Seek other employment opportunities

Perceptions of Support

Q.25 How would you describe your manager's degree of support for your remote work arrangement?

Q.27 Do you feel there are different expectations made of you BECAUSE of your remote work arrangement, such as (Check all that apply): Availability, Work hours, Quantity of Work, Quality of Work, None of the above

Each group reported high levels of support from their managers. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of HIRWs described their manager's level of support as "Very supportive," and 20% stated "Supportive," leaving just 2% expressing a lack of support ("Not always").

1 day per week

9%
36%
55%

2 - 3 days per week

25%
75%

4 -5 (or more) days per week

2%
20%
78%

■ Very supportive ■ Supportive ■ Not always supportive ■ Not at all

The LIRW group reported the highest level of a lack of support, with 9% responding, "Not always." HRWs overwhelmingly reported favorable levels of support, though not exceptional, with the majority (75%) describing their manager's support as simply "Supportive."

Exceeding other groups only slightly, HIRWs indicated a greater expectation placed upon them in terms of availability, working hours, and quantity of work as a condition of having a remote work arrangement. However, *most* (61%) of the HIRW group *did not* believe different or greater expectations as a result of their remote work arrangement.

HRW survey participants expressed similar findings to the HIRW group regarding expectations around availability, though none reported any expectation around work hours. These findings suggest that there may be temporal and productivity expectations placed upon remote workers that differ from those of traditional workers. However, examining this fact through the lens of perceptions of support, the Investigator believes that a high level of managerial support for the remote work arrangement may act as a mitigator to perceived expectations. This is implied in the reported high levels of managerial support, 78% for HIRWs, and 75% for HRWs, respectively. If there is an actual difference in time and productivity demands between remote and traditional workers, the perceived support of

16

managers (and probably peers as well) may make the impact of those demands tolerable for remote workers and not produce a negative effect on job satisfaction.

Career Development and Advancement

Q.22 Please answer TRUE or FALSE to the following statements:

- 🟥 Working remotely has, in some ways, benefited my career.
- 🟪 My career has advanced due to working remotely.
- 🟦 Working remotely has negatively impacted my career growth.
- 🟩 I have access to resources for career development.
- 🟨 I would probably have more opportunities to develop and/or advance my caree...
- 🟧 I expect to have fewer opportunities for career growth because I work remot...

When asked about how remote working impacted their career growth and development, most participants responded favorably. Twenty-one percent answering "True" that their remote work arrangement has proven beneficial to their career growth and 29% answering in the same manner as to whether there was enough access to career development resources. Less than 20% believed they would have had more opportunities for career advancement if they did not work remotely, and a similar percentage of participants (under 20%) indicated that they *expected* diminished opportunity for career growth as a drawback to working remotely. Overall, only 6% of participants believe that working remotely has directly and *negatively* impacted their career growth.

In examining the responses of HIRWs, there was little statistical variance for this group as compared to the whole. The majority of HIRWs also felt that their remote work situation was beneficial to their careers and, identical to the entire survey panel, 29% percent of HIRWs agreed they had ample access to career development resources. Again, with regard to a diminished expectation of advancement and causation, the HIRW group reported below 20%.

The findings here indicate that this group of remote workers have access to resources needed to grow their careers, and some have been able to thrive as a result of working remotely. However, examining the responses regarding an expectation of diminished opportunities as an attribute of remote working, there appears to be a kind of unstated trade-off: an acceptance of the benefits of the remote work arrangement with the implicit understanding that advancement (if not development) may take longer to achieve.

Chapter 8: Discussion

Engagement is a mindset borne out of a relationship between an employee and the employer. It is a transactional, physical, mental, and emotional response to the demonstrated values, actions, and environment established by the employer. The findings in this study reveal an employee's understanding of engagement as one where needs for psychological safety, acceptance, and inclusion are met in the context of the work environment.

For remote workers, these needs may be amplified because the tangible signifiers of inclusion and acceptance are not present as they would be for traditional workers. The temporal and geographical aspects of the remote work model may impose limitations on how engagement behaviors may be expressed. Outcomes found here suggest that when organizations create opportunities for engagement that take in to account the limitations and access of remote workers, engagement can be successfully enacted and sustained. 52 % of HIRWs stated there are ways they would like to engage but cannot because of their remote work arrangements. I assert that this desire is evidence of an **Engagement Aspiration Mindset (EAM)** defined as ***An expressed and unfulfilled desire to interact professionally and socially within the parameters of organization-supported channels and opportunities.*** The inability to fulfill the desire to engage is due to limitations that correlate to conditions or characteristics of a given work role.

From this research project, the following hierarchy of engagement influences (in order of greatest to least impact) emerged for remote workers: 1) Socialization, 2) Technology, 3) Perceptions of support, career development, and advancement, 4) onboarding experience (least impactful). This hierarchy proves the hypothesis put forth earlier.

This hierarchy differs slightly from that of traditional workers, which, according to the research, positions perception or support as a more significant influence on engagement. Collaboration goes hand-in-hand with socialization and engagement, occurring mainly during work transactions, as reported by HIRW survey participants. However, transaction-based socialization varies depending upon the intensity of the remote work arrangement and possibly even the nature of work being done. Even still, around 39% of HIRW started that they "rarely" socialized, proving that while collaborative work presents opportunities for socialization, alone, it does not entirely overcome the isolation characteristic of the remote work model.

Technology is the underpinning that supports both productivity and engagement. In this research, the impact of technology was nearly equally dispersed among co-influencing elements identified. Survey participants indicated overall satisfaction with their technology and related support. Yet, if their technology (access to and support of) were lacking, almost inevitably, other areas of influence would be adversely affected.

The emphasis placed on perceptions of support by survey participants implies that remote work requires partnership from managers (and likely peers) for engagement and role success to be achieved. For remote workers, managers are the face and voice of the organization, and their support is representative of the organization's support (or lack thereof) for the employee. Goodwill towards the organization begins with the workers' feelings toward the manager. The support of a manager is particularly weighty for remote workers as it can affect a worker's home life as in expectations of availability and productivity away from a central office setting. The findings in this study suggest among some remote workers, the perceived support of a manager mitigates increased expectations of time and productivity tolerable.

Remote work, depending on intensity, may be a facilitator of work/life balance, enabling a level of control and autonomy over one's time even though more may be expected of them. Among HIRW, above the other groups surveyed, a majority expressed the probability of leaving their organization should their remote work situation no longer be available to them. This was less the case with HRW and LIRW survey participants. As mentioned previously, this indicates a high degree of embeddedness of the remote work model for some HIRW survey participants to the extent that an end to the arrangement would presumably require a significant lifestyle change. If the remote work situation itself is viewed as a signal of support on the part of the employer, should that situation change then so might the sentiments of the employee towards the organization which supports the argument (not explored in this research project) that the availability remote work arrangements should probably not be merit-based but rather upon business need, keeping it out of the engagement equation.

Onboarding experiences appeared to have very little impact on engagement for remote workers. However, the findings reveal that onboarding is an opportunity that often goes unexploited to lay a foundation for engagement through thoughtful execution. Specifically, executing the process with the intent to immerse new joiners into organizational culture and facilitate the establishment of a professional network. For those designated remote workers

at the time of hire, onboarding is probably the only such opportunity available to do what comes readily for traditional workers—socialize.

Recommendations

To cultivate sustainable engagement among the remote worker cohort, the researcher suggests the following as germinating ideas from which others can form:

Socialization & Collaboration	• Remote worker' Lunch & Learn' sessions for company-sponsored forums for development and network building.
Engagement	• The formation of remote worker-specific business resource groups centered on corporate social responsibility to cultivate a sense of individual brand-ambassadorship while serving the communities of remote workers.
Technology	• Early adaptor communities include remote workers in the piloting of new productivity and communications technology.
Support	• Manager-driven, regularly scheduled 'Office Hours' initiatives during which remote work colleagues can regularly communicate their needs to supervisors.
Onboarding Experience	• Design onboarding experiences specifically to address the needs of remote workers, and re-onboarding workers who are transitioning to a

	remote work arrangement from a traditional one.

Limitations and Future Direction

It is estimated that about 3.9 million people in the US have flexible work arrangements. The comparatively small sample size for this study does not fully represent that population. And so, the outcomes here serve to suggest that more (funded) research should be undertaken that will offer a broader view of engagement influences and behaviors for remote workers. As businesses rely more on globally dispersed teams and the cost of commercial real estate continues to rise in some areas, the remote work model will increasingly be looked to as a solution for productivity and cost-savings. Along with this comes the issue of maintaining connection and inclusion among the workforce. Technological innovation offers more tools than ever before for communication and productivity, but they are only the means. The end-users, however, are people. Organizations must continually explore ways to forge a connection with far-flung employees and offer opportunities to participate in the larger community. Specifically, future research should explore the types of support needed by remote workers and unique opportunities to engage them.

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Appendix A.

Survey Questionnaire

Together Apart: Influences and Barriers to Engagement Among Remote Workers

Q28 Do you work remotely at least one day a week?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (3)

Skip To: End of Survey If Do you work remotely at least one day a week? = No

Q7 **How old are you?**

○ Under 20 y.o. (1)

○ 20 - 25 y.o. (2)

○ 25 -35 y.o. (3)

○ 36 - 44 y.o. (4)

○ Over 45 y.o. (5)

Skip To: End of Survey If How old are you? = Under 20 y.o.

Q1 **Gender**

○ Male (1)

○ Female (2)

Q3 **Is your current role managerial?**

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q4 **Are you a full-time, salaried employee?** (Not freelance or contractor)

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Are you a full-time, salaried employee? (Not freelance or contractor) = No

Q5 **Approximate number of employees in your organization?**

○ Under 500 (1)

○ Up to 1,000 (2)

○ Over 1,000 to 3,000 (3)

○ Over 3,000 to 5,000 (4)

○ More than 10,000 (5)

○ More than 20,000 (6)

Q6 **Does your organization operate in more than one country?**

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Page Break

Q8 **Were you designated a remote worker at the time of your hire?**

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q9 **How long have you been working remotely?**

○ Less than 1 year (1)

○ Over 1 year - up to 5 years (2)

○ Over 5 years (3)

Q10 **How frequently do you work remotely?**

○ 1 day per week (1)

○ 2 - 3 days per week (2)

○ 4 -5 (or more) days per week (3)

Q11 **What types of communication technology do you use when working remotely?**
(Check all that apply)

☐ Email (1)

☐ Video conferencing platforms (2)

☐ Instant messenger platforms (3)

☐ Phone (4)

☐ Text (5)

Q12 **On a scale of 1 to 5, please rank the FREQUENCY OF USE for each type of communication technology.** (1 is LEAST frequent, 5 is MOST frequent)

Email (1)	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆
Video conferencing platforms (2)	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆
Instant messenger platforms (3)	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆
Phone (4)	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆
Text (5)	☆	☆	☆	☆	☆

Q13

Please indicate the percentage of your day spent (totaling 100%)**:**

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90   100
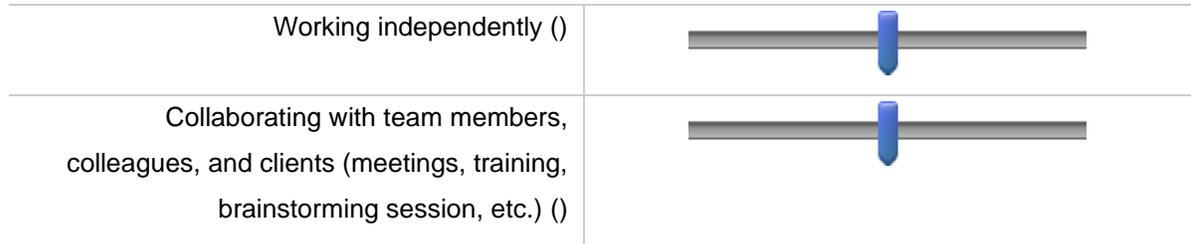
Working independently ()	
Collaborating with team members, colleagues, and clients (meetings, training, brainstorming session, etc.) ()	

✱

Q14 **Which of the following statements best represents your understanding of employee engagement?** (Choose up to three)

☐ Employee engagement means you love where you work, and you believe in the work you're doing. (2)

☐ Engagement is how interested employees are in all facets of the company. (4)

☐ Engagement is an employee's willingness to go that extra mile for the company, promoting the mission, and wanting common goals. (5)

☐ Engagement means the company listens to its employees and creates an environment where they are encouraged to interact and speak up. (6)

☐ Engagement happens when an organization provides employees with what they need to succeed and, in turn, employees are more inclined to perform well in their jobs. (7)

✳

Q15 **What would you describe as your—actual or desired—engagement behaviors?**
(Choose up to three)

☐   Internal or external social media activity (1)

☐   Participation in company-sponsored initiatives (2)

☐   Interacting informally with my colleagues (3)

☐   Lending my time, experience, and skills to projects and initiatives not related to your role. (4)

☐   Membership in employee or business resources groups or Communities of Practice within the organization (5)

☐   Participation in special interest groups (6)

☐   Attendance at networking events (7)

☐   Participation in Corporate Social Responsibilities activities such as volunteering events and community partnering (8)

☐   Colleague mentoring (9)

☐   Not applicable (10)

Q16

Are there ways you would like to engage but cannot BECAUSE of your remote work arrangement?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q17 **How frequently do you socialize with your colleagues during the course of your workday?**

○ Occasionally (3)

○ Rarely (4)

○ Never (5)

Skip To: End of Block If How frequently do you socialize with your colleagues during the course of your workday? = Never

Q19 **How does social interaction come about?** (Check all that apply)

☐ Spontaneously (1)

☐ Planned (2)

☐ In the course of work transactions (3)

Page Break

Q21 **Which statement best describes your onboarding experience as you remember it?**

○ It was basic. I was given basic information about and completed some administrative tasks for new employees. (1)

○ I learned about the company, my role, and what was expected of me. (2)

○ I learned about the organization's history, mission, and strategic goals, in addition to employee resources and benefits. (3)

○ All of the above and I had a chance to connect with other colleagues and begin to build my network. I felt supported and optimistic about that period in my career. (4)

○ I do not recall (5)

Q22 **Remote work arrangements were described as:**

○ Optional (1)

○ Merit-based (2)

○ Selectively available (e.g., at a manager's discretion) (3)

○ Discouraged (4)

○ Not applicable (5)

Q23 **Do you feel the technology (and technology support) you're provided meets your work needs?**

　　○ Very well (1)

　　○ Good (2)

　　○ Adequately (3)

　　○ Somewhat adequately (4)

　　○ It does not meet my needs (5)

Page Break

Q25 **How would you describe your manager's degree of support for your remote work arrangement?**

○ Very supportive (1)

○ Supportive (2)

○ Not always supportive (3)

○ Not at all (4)

Q27 **Do you feel there are different expectations made of you BECAUSE of your remote work arrangement, such as:** (Check all that applies):

☐   Availability (1)

☐   Work Hours (2)

☐   Quantity of work (3)

☐   Quality of work (4)

☐   None of the above (5)

Q28 **Please answer TRUE or FALSE to the following statements:**

	Answer True or False	
	TRUE (1)	FALSE (2)
Working remotely has, in some ways, benefited my career. (1)	○	○
My career has advanced due to working remotely. (2)	○	○
Working remotely has negatively impacted my career growth. (3)	○	○
I have access to resources for career development. (4)	○	○
I would probably have more opportunities to develop and advance my career if I did not work remotely. (5)	○	○
I expect to have fewer opportunities for career growth because I work remotely. (6)	○	○

Q30 **If your remote work arrangement were to end suddenly, would you:**

○ Remain with the organization (1)

○ Seek other employment opportunities (2)

Q31 *Thank you very much for completing the survey!*

Your responses will contribute to an expanding body of research around remote working arrangements and engagement.

If you would like to receive a summary of the survey findings, please enter your email address below.

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Thank you very much for taking time to complete my survey! Your responses will contribute to an e... = No
Skip To: Q33 If Thank you very much for taking time to complete my survey! Your responses will contribute to an e... = Yes

Q33 Email Address?

_____