



## Going Forward: Remote Working in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Going Forward: Remote Working in the Post-COVID-19 Era

Abstract

**Purpose** – The urgent and unexpected transition to remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic calls for an increased focus on the contemporary workplace, especially for the post-COVID-19 era. While most studies undertaken during the pandemic have focused on the consequences of remote working, this study, using the UK as the research context, focuses on the factors that may facilitate the effectiveness of remote working in the post-COVID-19 era from the perspectives of employees and employers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study uses the interpretivist philosophical perspective to understand the study participants’ subjective meanings and experiences. It utilises a qualitative approach, specifically data drawn from the semi-structured interviews of 31 participants.

**Findings** – The study highlights the factors that may facilitate the effectiveness of remote working in the post-COVID-19 era. Flexible working preferences, smart working practices, self-discipline, and leadership roles and expectations emerge as enablers of remote working among the participants. It is evident from our findings that both employers and employees have expectations about remote working conditions.

**Originality/value** – Due to the changing work environment, where remote working is becoming more acceptable, this study focuses on a salient topic that examines how remote working may be facilitated effectively in the post-COVID-19 era. Thus, it makes predictions concerning the future of remote working post-COVID-19. It also emphasises that employers and employees have developed clear expectations about facilitating remote working and seek to meet these expectations by implementing various strategies.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, remote working, psychological contract, employers, employees

## Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has changed the world of work, with many offices left empty as most employees were instructed to work from home as a means of curbing the spread of the virus (International Labour Organization, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, which many thought would be temporary, resulted in the closure of many physical offices for over a year, especially in the UK. The pandemic has forced many organisations and employees to consider flexible and remote working options, which may continue following the pandemic era (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). This experience has thus created uncertainty in employees and employers' expectations regarding how remote working may be effectively implemented and managed. Although remote working is not new, the pandemic seems to have successfully exposed the positives, the negatives, and the inadequacies associated with remote working – even pre-COVID-19 (Williamson *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the benefits of remote working, various organisational sectors have not fully accepted it, questioning its strengths and acceptability as an efficient and productive arrangement for getting work done. Some researchers have argued that remote working demotivates employees and encourages laziness (Bessa and Tomlinson, 2017). This assertion and other similar pessimistic attitudes may be responsible for the low proportion of remote working among some organisations. COVID-19 has led to the 'world's largest experiment of remote working' (Banjo *et al.*, 2020). The pandemic has triggered a flexible mode of work and a general acceptance of remote working (Banjo *et al.*, 2020). The researchers of this present study are aware that remote working may not be practicable in some organisations (e.g. construction and manufacturing); thus, the article focuses on organisations in which remote working is practicable, such as the services industry.

Most studies on workplace flexibility that were undertaken during the pandemic have focused on the consequences and 'dark side' of remote working (Bahn *et al.*, 2020; Adisa *et al.*, 2021). However, the researchers of the present study, using the UK as its research context, focus on the positive side of remote working and how it may be effectively implemented post-COVID-19 from the points of view of employees and employers. Hence, our primary research question is: 'what factors may facilitate the effectiveness of remote working in the post-COVID-19 era?'. Furthermore, we use psychological contract theory to enhance our understanding of these factors, as we envisage that both employees and employers have certain expectations of their obligations and employment relationships with regard to effective remote working.

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Our study makes two important contributions to the field. Firstly, it provides managerial insights into how remote working may be effectively implemented to enhance organisational productivity and employee wellbeing. Secondly, by considering psychological contract theory, our study brings to the fore the theoretical and practical implications concerning how exchanges and expectations between employers and employees influence positive remote working outcomes. The article is structured as follows. We give a brief overview of the relevant literature on remote working. We then outline our research method, present our data, and discuss the study’s findings and implications.

**Remote Working: An Overview of the Literature**

Research on the practice of remote working was first undertaken in the 1970s, expressed as ‘working from home’, meaning that individuals could work from their homes instead of the centralised workplace (Coenen and Kok, 2014). Remote working is facilitated by using digital assistive technologies and ICT, specifically in order to aid communication across the work environment and replace physical travelling (Morganson *et al.*, 2010). In recent years, the terms teleworking, telecommuting, virtual working, and e-working have been used interchangeably with regard to remote working (Marlow *et al.*, 2017; Groen *et al.*, 2018). More importantly, remote working is considered to provide employers and employees with appropriate work flexibility and is considered a win-win situation for both parties (Whyman *et al.*, 2015; Wheatley, 2017).

Nevertheless, prior studies on remote working have focused on the lack of consistency in its practice, given that only a few organisations give the option for their employees to work remotely (Lapierre *et al.*, 2016; Kaduk *et al.*, 2019). This phenomenon has made it difficult to ascertain the individual-level outcomes or the ‘between-person and within-person effects of telework’ (Delanoeije and Verbruggen, 2020). It thus affects the possibility of exploring remote working outcomes among individuals who practice it extensively and those who infrequently work remotely (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, Lapierre *et al.* (2016) argue that prior research on remote working has been affected by selection bias, since remote working is often voluntary and based on the individual employee’s discretion, i.e. the benefits of remote working may only apply to individuals who are interested or able to engage in it. Therefore, since the COVID-19 pandemic has annulled remote working as a personal choice, it has forced employers to embrace workplace flexibility. The pandemic has advanced the need to pay more attention to leveraging the positive effects of remote working.

In addition, the shift to remote working in the wake of the pandemic has generated challenges for organisations, which have been required to swiftly set up the necessary appropriate infrastructure for employees to work from home, such as digital assistive technologies, software, physical equipment, and organisational processes to facilitate the effectiveness of remote working (Williamson *et al.*, 2020). However, the challenges associated with implementing remote working could be reduced as a result of the massive utilisation of remote working by many organisations. For instance, Wang *et al.*'s (2021) study considers the importance of applying a work design perspective to remote working. In their study, the work characteristics form a mechanism for improving the remote working experience and employee outcomes.

Remote working has both advantages and disadvantages for employers and employees. While employees and employers are increasingly leveraging remote working to facilitate work flexibility, increase job autonomy, increase productivity, reduce business costs, reduce employee turnover intention, enhance work-life balance, improve job satisfaction, reduce commuting costs, and increase work engagement (Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010; Ter Hoeven and Van Zoonen, 2015), employers' reluctance to facilitate remote working is due to some perceived adverse consequences thereof, such as limited communication; employee isolation; work intensification; disengagement; reduced dedication and commitment; and employers' loss of control over employees' work processes (Martin and MacDonnell, 2012; Bessa and Tomlinson, 2017). In addition, an unsupportive work culture; health and safety policies; and managerial concerns about trust and performance uncertainty also constrain the effectiveness of remote working (Lautsch *et al.*, 2009; Kossek and Lautsch, 2018). Even though employees do have the legal right to request flexible working arrangements, organisations are not mandated to approve such requests. Rather, they are legally obliged to consider them 'in a reasonable manner' (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service – ACAS, 2014). In fact, the Trades Union Congress survey (2019) found that one in three requests for flexible working are declined.

### **Psychological Contract Theory**

Psychological contract theory is widely considered a useful concept for understanding employment relationships as perceived by employers and employees (Rousseau, 2001). The psychological contract is informed by social exchange theory, given that the principles of reciprocity and expectations between parties are emphasised (Rousseau, 1995). Thus, the

psychological contract refers to an informal contract (mostly unwritten) that reflects both employees' and employers' perceptions of their commitment to each other (Rousseau, 2001; Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). For instance, there is an expectation that employers will fulfil their obligations and pledges to their employees, including payment for compensation, promotions, and salary increases. In return, employees are expected to use their capabilities, knowledge, and skills to enhance job performance (Rodwell *et al.*, 2015). Rousseau (1995) argues that, despite its unwritten form, the psychological contract is based on the impression of a promise made by one party (e.g. the employer) in exchange for a reciprocal obligation from the other party (e.g. the employee). In a sense, psychological contracts are subjective and reflect a social exchange relationship between the employer and employee, which includes multiple undefined commitments that often lack definitive treatment (Li *et al.*, 2016; Lub *et al.*, 2016).

In this present study, we view the psychological contract as an employment relationship in terms of a mutual exchange between employers and employees. We suggest that, given the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more employers may continue to offer remote working opportunities as an incentive to their employees, and expect a reciprocal obligation in exchange (e.g. sustained or increased productivity) on the part of their employees. However, while these expectations may exist, it may be challenging to understand the extent to which both parties are fully aware of their expectations. For instance, a McKinsey survey of 5,043 employees found that most employees are unsure of their employers' plans for post-COVID-19 working arrangements, thus leaving employees feeling anxious (Alexander *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, the psychological contract may consist of several undefined beliefs that confer feelings of entitlement and expectations between the employer and employee in exchange for either party's reaction or contribution (Tietze and Nadin, 2011). For instance, employees may feel entitled to flexible working options (e.g. remote working) because they have the legal right to request the same. On the other hand, employers may expect improved productivity and performance if flexible working options are granted to employees. However, the promissory expectations associated with a psychological contract are 'only those expectations that emanate from perceived implicit or explicit promises by the employer' (Robinson, 1996, p. 575). Thus, a breach of this contract may result in counterproductive outcomes for both the employer and employees, negatively affecting organisational productivity, employee wellbeing, attitudes, and organisational bottom lines (Li *et al.*, 2016; Avgoustaki and Bessa, 2019).

In addition, Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi (2020) found that fairness, trust, and the delivery of the deal are essential components of the psychological contract. For instance, employees may think that it is only fair for their organisations to allow some form of flexibility (i.e. remote working), since, throughout the pandemic, employers have experienced how successful remote working, adopting different working hours than the usual nine-to-five, does not impair productivity (Society for Human Resource Management – SHRM, 2021). Likewise, an organisation's trust or confidence in its employees' performance and attitude to work, as an exchange for employee-related benefits, is essential for organisational outcomes. For example, in a study of 215 supervisors and managers, around 40% did not fully trust that their employees who were working remotely were indeed working (Parker *et al.*, 2020). This scepticism and lack of trust may constitute a breach in the psychological contract, as employees may become demotivated when they perceive a lack of trust in their abilities on the part of their employers. Additionally, delivery of the deal is associated with the satisfaction derived from the successful relational contract between the employer and employee such that a win-win situation is achieved (Guest, 2004). For instance, Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi (2020) state that a positive psychological contract may generate positive outcomes. Furthermore, a successful psychological contract between employers and employees often promotes positive wellbeing; a positive work attitude; trust and loyalty; improved organisational bottom lines; and reduced employee turnover intentions (Tietze and Nadin, 2011; Rodwell *et al.*, 2015). Thus, the psychological contract illustrates how employers and employees understand their relationship, their perceptions of commitment, and the reciprocal expectations of their obligations to one another (Lub *et al.*, 2016).

Despite the significant contributions of psychological contract theory to management study, some scholars have criticised it, mainly due to its proposition as a contract rather than a formalised agreement. Moreover, it is influenced by the subjective perceptions of either party and leads to problems in determining the exact point of a successful negotiation (Marks, 2001). In addition, researchers consider the theory to be problematic due to its 'mixed messages and divergent expectations' and the fact that organisations can influence the expectations (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006). In situations where employees perceive a breach of the contract, a sense of deception and distrust is engendered or, according to the organisation's claim, false expectations (Marks, 2001). Therefore, there is a problem in measuring the attainability of such subjective beliefs. Thus, the increased utilisation of remote working due to the COVID-19 pandemic may give further insights into how employees and employers manage their



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employment relationships. Current working conditions may also explain both parties' subjective views and how they shape the content of their psychological contracts. Their perspectives could similarly provoke some thoughts and ideas regarding the future of remote working, which in turn may generate some practical insights for organisations to assess and provide adequate job resources to enhance employees' productivity while working remotely post-COVID-19.

**Methods**

This study uses the interpretivist paradigm as a mechanism to gain insight into the participants' positive experiences of remote working, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. The method of interpretivism interprets the subjective perceptions, meanings, beliefs, and motives attached to human actions in order to understand social reality (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). This study attempts to understand the realities of remote working through the participants' beliefs and experiences and examine the factors that may facilitate remote working after the COVID-19 era. A qualitative method is employed here to capture the participants' expressions of the beliefs and feelings that influence their remote working behaviours, which may be difficult when using quantitative methods (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, previous studies (e.g. Grant *et al.*, 2013) on remote working have called for more qualitative studies to enhance the richness of data collection.

The data was collected between November 2020 and January 2021. The study sample comprises 31 participants (16 males and 15 females), including 19 employees and 12 employers working across different organisations in the professional service industry in the UK. Table 1 presents the participants' demographics. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, all the participants signed forms consenting to their participation and were assured of anonymity and of the confidentiality of their information. We use pseudonyms to represent the participants' names by ascribing numbers to them (e.g. Participant 1). We used a snowballing sampling technique, which enabled us to leverage our network by soliciting participants through referrals from the initial participants, who then nominated others that also met the research criteria (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The study required the participants to be employees and employers who have had positive experiences of remote working in the UK services industry. Furthermore, the interviews, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, took place using digital assistive technologies (Zoom and Microsoft Teams), enabling ease of



contact and adherence to the UK government's social distancing measures, implemented to curtail the pandemic.

### **Insert Table 1 about here**

The semi-structured interviews began with a broad discussion of general perceptions of remote working, which enabled the participants to narrate their lived experiences. The interviews then shifted into discussions of specific areas of remote working in order to identify the factors that facilitated its effectiveness among the participants. Despite initially using a pre-determined set of open-ended questions, the authors probed further, allowing the participants the liberty to comment beyond the pre-determined questions. Some of the questions asked include: (1) What is your experience of remote working? (2) How did you effectively manage remote working to meet organisational and personal needs/expectations? (3) How does working remotely affect the expectations of employers and employees? (4) What changes in remote working post-COVID-19 do you hope for?

All of the authors of this article were involved in the interviews, and we each transcribed the interviews verbatim immediately after they were conducted. To strengthen data validity, we also took notes during the interviews and used the notes to verify the information obtained from the interviews. After conducting 26 interviews, we achieved data saturation, and no new information or themes emerged. However, we conducted five additional interviews, and these participants supported the comments of the first 26 participants. After independently transcribing the interviews, we followed a descriptive coding process to identify specific data relevant to the research inquiry, thus focusing on the participants' remote working experiences. This process provided the research with a degree of investigator triangulation, enabling us to present our differing views based on our interpretations of the coded transcripts (King and Horrocks, 2010). The researchers began the interpretative coding process immediately after agreeing the descriptive codes. We applied manual coding and a thematic process by deriving first-order codes and creating conceptual categories by consolidating the codes. In order to do so, we thoroughly reviewed the data and theory by searching for commonalities, relationships, and differences between them (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Four overarching themes thereby emerged (Table 2). This protocol also strengthened data validity and allowed the researchers to provide a theoretical explanation that is consistent with the data obtained (Gibson and Brown, 2009). For instance, we searched for patterns within the data that would allow us to identify the underlying elements of the psychological contract.

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**Findings**

This study examines the factors that may facilitate the effectiveness of remote working in the post-COVID-19 era. Our findings are based on analyses of individual and firm perspectives. The former category includes individuals’ personal perspectives and discretion that lead to effective remote working, while the latter category covers organisations’ perspectives and cultural change regarding effective remote working related to a firm’s performance or productivity. Our analysis of the data uncovered four key themes: (1) flexible working preferences, (2) the utilisation of smart working practices, (3) scheduling breaks and the critical role of self-discipline, and (4) leadership roles and expectations. These themes are discussed alongside the sub-themes derived from the consolidated data’s conceptual categories (Table 2).

**Insert Table 2 about here**

**Flexible Working Preferences**

The need for flexible working precedes COVID-19 and continues to be in demand, even though the COVID-19 pandemic has increased that demand. For instance, a UK survey undertaken by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2021) revealed an increase of remote workers from 12.4% in 2019 to 25.9% in 2020. While the increase may be attributed to the lockdown measures taken due to the pandemic, from an individual-level perspective, we find that, within our study context, many participants who experienced the positive and negative effects of both on-site work and remote work (either before or during the pandemic) expressed a greater preference and desire for working remotely even after the pandemic. The participants expressed two categories of preferences: full-time remote working and hybrid working. The following responses exemplify the participants’ remote working preferences:

*Having spent close to seven months working remotely, I was very productive compared to when I worked in a centralised office. I worked hours that fit into my schedule...I could work some hours in the day and some at night to accommodate my family life and other personal things. Commuting saves me time and money...my work-life balance is better, and I am better engaged, which I believe meets my manager’s expectations. For me, I would love to work remotely full time (Participant 1, employee).*

An employer also expressed a similar preference for full-time remote working:

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3 *Remote working works perfectly for me. Despite the downsides of COVID-*  
4 *19, I do not have problems with productivity; rather, I have been more*  
5 *productive [than when I worked in a physical office space]. I hope that the*  
6 *way of the future is remote working because I'm loving the experience. I*  
7 *think it makes me a better manager of people, time, and other resources.*  
8 *Having an option to work remotely would be great and productive for me*  
9 *and my employees (Participant 12, employer).*

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16 The data reveals that 35% of the participants favour working remotely full time, while 65%  
17 feel hybrid working is more suitable for enhancing efficiency; thus, most participants prefer  
18 hybrid working. For example, a participant commented:

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22 *I think our employees will have to decide what works for them. Personally, I*  
23 *favour hybrid working, and I think organisations should consider it because*  
24 *it reduces the risk of loss of control for managers. I am looking forward to*  
25 *hybrid working (Participant 26, employer).*

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29 Another participant said:

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32 *It would be great to have a flexible working option and switch between*  
33 *working remotely and working in the physical office. I think the mixed*  
34 *(hybrid) mode of working should be embraced as the way forward. The*  
35 *pandemic has taught us the lesson that remote working isn't all that bad... I*  
36 *feel it provides a win-win situation for organisations and employees*  
37 *(Participant 30, employee).*

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43 The quotations above evidence the participants' preferences for workplace flexibility and  
44 reinforce the argument that flexibility is important for employers and even more so for  
45 employees (Bessa and Tomlinson, 2017). The participants value their autonomy and ability to  
46 choose from various options that fit their work and personal schedule. Our findings imply that  
47 remote working has more positives than is generally portrayed in the literature. In addition, like  
48 many others, Participant 1 highlighted that remote working does not undermine their ability to  
49 meet employers' expectations: 'I am better engaged, which I believe meets my manager's  
50 expectations.' This portrays a pattern of the psychological contract, as enabling remote working  
51 is perceived as an incentive in exchange for meeting employers' expectations (i.e. improved  
52 performance).  
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Moreover, the preference for hybrid working is due to the participants’ belief that it allows them to work both remotely and on site for specific time periods. For some of the participants, hybrid working allows them to split their working days between working on site and working remotely (e.g. two days on site and three days remotely). For others, their preference for working on site or remotely is determined by the nature of the task or activity. For example, some tasks require collaborative in-person work, which requires on-site presence. In this case, remote working may be desirable but not feasible. In sum, hybrid working is commonly preferred because it improves efficiency; allows working parents to plan and saves them childcare costs; and reduces the costs and stress that may arise due to the need to commute. It also allows employees the autonomy to engage in personal work at their preferred and specific times while working remotely.

Additionally, employers expressed their preference for hybrid working in terms of maintaining power, and this corroborates studies that highlight managerial concerns (e.g. trust and performance uncertainty) as one of the constraints of remote working (Lautsch *et al.*, 2009; Morganson *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, our findings on the employers’ preference for hybrid working also corroborate the results of a recent CIPD survey that many employers (at least 40%) are beginning to shift from using no remote working at all to hybrid working (CIPD, 2020). In fact, most employers feel that should employees meet their expectations (i.e. sustained or increased productivity), they are more likely to increase the regularity of remote working. From the perspective of the psychological contract, it is clear that, while there are still some trust issues and uncertainty associated with remote working, employers are willing to give remote working a chance – provided that their employees meet their expectations. However, all parties (employers and employees) must accept and fulfil the psychological contract’s underlying principles of reciprocity and expectations (Rousseau, 1995). In essence, understanding the beliefs held by employers and employees regarding their relationships can help stimulate successful exchanges, especially concerning the desired outcomes of remote working. Therefore, based on the norms of reciprocity, both parties are likely to show positive behaviours and attitudes if they perceive that they are both fulfilling their part of the psychological contract (Kutaula *et al.*, 2020).

**The Utilisation of Smart Working Practices**

While our data emphasises employers’ and employees’ preferences for flexible working, there is a common perception that, for remote working to be effective, it must go beyond the mere

implementation of flexible working towards implementing smart working practices. At the individual level, our data reveals that most participants used smart working practices to effectively manage remote working in order to meet organisational and personal needs/expectations. According to Lake (2013, p. 3), smart working relates to ‘taking a comprehensive and strategic approach to modernising working practices’. In our present study, this implies that utilising smart working practices while working remotely adds greater value to remote working and the flexibility involved therein. Specifically, our data demonstrates the need for organisations and individuals to adopt smart working in their approach to flexibility by taking proactive measures to seek mutual benefits (for employers and employees) and to prioritise work results rather than employees’ physical presence at work. In addition, the majority of the participants are keen to see how their organisations react to remote working post-COVID-19 and hope for its continuity:

*Through smart working, I have been able to organise my work activities better and in a more relaxed environment. Managers have expectations, and I think they are scared that working remotely may be a challenge to meeting targets, but [the COVID-19 lockdown] has proved them wrong in many ways, now that we are forced to work from home... I’m more productive than ever because of my smart working approach (Participant 21, employee).*

*I think it’s important to understand that, [concerning the provision of] remote working as an option, it is not enough to think that employees will be productive and, at the same time, have work-life balance... I have been very clear to my staff that they must fashion strategies that will help them manage their time and tasks in such a way that their productivity is not threatened... so, they need to be smart and optimise their time and resources because working remotely requires more accountability on their part as well (Participant 4, employer).*

Furthermore, the acquisition of soft skills for smart working is crucial for the successful facilitation of remote working. Soft skills are non-technical abilities that enable personal and social interaction with others (e.g. co-workers) and enhance job performance (Maurer, 2020). Many participants alluded to the importance of soft skills, such as creativity, innovation, setting expectations, humour, professionalism, good communication, a positive attitude, empathy, and emotional intelligence:

*Working remotely has been very productive for my employees and me...this is driven by soft skills...the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has opened our eyes to why interpersonal skills, communication skills, creativity, and problem-solving skills are imperative. We can't keep doing things the old way – there's a need for creativity, and remote working is just the answer to that (Participant 23, employer).*

*There are clear expectations from the management team, and this is the driving force. I am happy to have been given the chance to work remotely... I have developed some soft skills, such as communication skills and teamwork skills, and my attitude to work has improved. I'm simply loving it [working remotely] because there's more room for prioritisation and critical thinking and forsaking the 'always "on"' culture, which is counterproductive for me (Participant 8, employee).*

Most participants considered that their smart working practices, particularly the acquisition and utilisation of soft skills, facilitated their productivity, fulfilled business demands, and allowed them to meet their personal needs:

*Dealing with remote working isn't difficult...I have been working remotely for almost three years now, and I think that I have a better work-life balance...for me, the pandemic and the pressure concerning productivity has not changed anything. Multitasking is a skill that you must acquire as a remote worker, because it saves you time and money, and it enhances productivity (Participant 31, employee).*

*At the beginning of the work-from-home directive, my organisation was quick to organise remote working training...some of the important skills and knowledge I acquired from the training was how to multitask and prioritise activities. This training helped me achieve my work targets and fulfil my family responsibilities (Participant 7, employee).*

Generally, our findings corroborate Baruch's (2000) assertion that remote workers must show their self-organising and time management skills as independent workers to convince employers of their ability to meet business needs. Thus, while the participants (especially employees) clearly expressed their preference for remote working, some expectations need to



be met to allay the existing fears of employers and employees associated with remote working (e.g. 'out of sight, out of mind'). This finding emphasises the relevance of the psychological contract, as employees are often aware of their employers' expectations concerning productivity when working remotely. While employers are under pressure to implement flexible working options (e.g. remote working) to meet individual and business demands, following the psychological contract's norm of reciprocity, employees must also be responsive to the associated expectations and targets, especially given that remote working requires greater accountability from employees. Thus, employers may not necessarily formally communicate their expectations in black and white, but it is in the interest of remote working employees to utilise smart working to meet the spoken and unspoken expectations of their employers.

### **Scheduling Breaks and the Critical Role of Self-Discipline**

Another common strategy for effective remote working that was found to be prevalent among the participants is scheduling breaks. From an individual-level perspective, most of the participants noted that having the discretion to take planned breaks and refreshments is necessary for productivity. Moreover, some of the participants considered the common understanding that efficiency is only gained through constant focus as counterintuitive. They generally agreed that having breaks at regular intervals is essential and results in greater productivity. However, they highlighted the challenges of taking breaks and the importance of self-discipline – intentional and self-imposed breaks – which facilitates productivity and reduce adverse health issues (e.g. stress). The following quotes typify the participants' shared experiences:

*My employer recommended 'power breaks' as a way of reducing the stress and distractions that are associated with working remotely. I have to be very disciplined to follow this. So, I set my alarm to ring every one hour of work to take a 15-minute break. It actually works....scheduling my breaks helps me clear my head and get more work done. This should be actively encouraged! (Participant 8, employee).*

*I am having to be more intentional in taking breaks while working remotely. It works magic. It takes self-discipline to plan breaks and actually take them. Now, working remotely seems fun because those little breaks, like walking around the house or taking my dog on a quick walk to get some fresh air,*



*boost my energy levels and make me more productive (Participant 29, employee).*

The participants also considered creating micro-boundaries an efficient strategy for scheduling breaks and dealing with intrusion of work into their private lives and vice versa. For example, one of the participants commented that:

*Working remotely can be stressful if you don't set micro-boundaries. Letting people know that you need some space is important in managing one's work and private roles...it doesn't push them away; rather, it makes them understand that there is more to life than work. The same goes for family – [my family members] need to realise that I need to do some work, and at intervals, I will give them some attention (Participant 2, employee).*

Another participant further emphasised creating micro-boundaries by defining closing hours. He shared his signature message in his email with us:

*I actually try to create micro-boundaries with work and non-work spheres. My email signature is: 'Please note, if your message arrives during an evening or a weekend, it will be attended to during working hours, usually between 9am–5pm, Monday to Friday. I will endeavour to reply to emails within 48 hours, where possible, within the working week. I also recognise the significance of work-life balance and will not expect you to read or reply to this email outside your normal working/study hours. Thank you!' This is just to let people know that work and non-work times are clearly defined (Participant 14, employer).*

Evidently, the participants define 'breaks' differently in terms of duration and the activity performed during the time off work. For example, breaks could last from a few seconds to several minutes without any work activity. Breaks could also include activities such as walking around the house, taking the dog for a walk, a short workout session, or a glance at social media networks. It could also mean a period that is purposely set aside to indicate time off work (e.g. closing hours). Thus, the participants agree that scheduling breaks have a powerful impact on their productivity, even though it is often challenging to achieve this practice without self-discipline. According to Jackowska and Luring (2021), taking breaks in between work

activities enhances productivity because it improves concentration and reduces the stress of being tied to the desk all day.

In relation to the psychological contract, employees seeking to work remotely must understand that meeting their employers' expectations (i.e. sustained or improved productivity) is a reciprocal behaviour. As the psychological contract implies, there must be mutual satisfaction in order to facilitate continuity of the exchange – the anticipation of meeting mutual expectations serves as a motivation for a continued relationship (Gillani *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, organisations may become aversive to workers' requests for remote working if they perceive their inability to meet their job expectations. Therefore, self-discipline is key in taking breaks. It will ensure that breaks are not abused and that employers' expectations are met. Wang *et al.* (2021) argued that self-discipline is important in terms of achieving remote working effectiveness and matching employee effort to organisational/employer expectations.

### **Leadership Roles and Expectations**

Leadership of an organisation is crucial to the success of flexible working arrangements. In particular, the roles of employers in making decisions and in the implementation of remote working cannot be overlooked because there must be a mutual understanding between employers and employees in order to successfully implement remote working (Martin and MacDonnell, 2012). The pandemic forced many organisations to transition into remote working, affecting many workflow processes. This situation consequently threatened leadership roles and increased expectations due to the pressure on the supply and demand of organisational resources (both human and financial) (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Our data reveals that, at the firm level, there is a cultural change, specifically in leadership culture. For example, employers' expectations of their employees to meet work targets while working remotely results in a change of leadership roles to enhance employee productivity, as the following quotes exemplify:

*As employers, it was challenging to adapt initially. Our roles were pressurised by the need to implement interactive and ICT-based communication channels. The organisational culture was altered, and it took days and a lot of hard work to get things up and running (Participant 4, employer).*

*Our expectations of productivity have not changed. My role as an employer is more challenging because, unlike the centralised office, remote working requires increased communication. We make good on our promises by providing work flexibility and resources, so we expect our employees to do the same (Participant 10, employer).*

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose challenges to organisational communication networks. As a result, the centralised leadership culture in many organisations has been altered, leading to a decentralised form of leadership, which is considered vital to achieving productivity, enhanced organisational performance, and remote working effectiveness. Thus, organisations transitioned from an individual leadership responsibility structure to one of shared leadership responsibility.

*With the intensified pressure and expectations concerning remote working, there was a need to adopt shared leadership and distribute the power in order to allow employees to make some minor decisions. This enhances communication and takes a lot of the burden from the centralised leader... For instance, there has been an increase in employee check-ins, which would not be possible with a centralised leadership system. However, it takes a lot of effort to retrain and upskill those who share these responsibilities (Participant 13, employer).*

*Once we switched to remote working, we immediately changed our centralised management structure to accommodate the new normal (remote working). We moved from a top-down management system to a distributed management system. We increased the power of line managers and supervisors to make decisions that ordinarily would be the sole responsibility of upper-level managers. This was done to help our employees increase and sustain their productivity (Participant 5, employer).*

Even though the extant literature on leadership has demonstrated the advantages of shared leadership, our data shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the demand for shared leadership in order to enhance effective remote working. Moreover, given that the rapid transition to remote working comes with new sets of demands (e.g. the need for quicker decision-making), the actions taken by employers, such as increasing the power of line managers and distributing responsibility between individuals, means that it allows employees

with relevant skills and capabilities the autonomy to make decisions regarding their work. In terms of the psychological contract, the norm of reciprocity exists in that, for remote working to be enhanced and in order for employees to fulfil their obligation to their employers (i.e. productivity), employees also demand more autonomy in making key decisions about their work. Therefore, a shared leadership that leads to being interdependent rather than solely dependent may induce the reciprocal exchange for effective remote working, and it may solve complex organisational problems of remote working related to productivity, engagement, and talent retention.

Furthermore, 'trust' is crucial for maintaining the psychological contract, and where this is affected by a contract breach, mistrust often results (Rayton and Yalabik, 2014). Such is the case for the majority of our participants — employees want to be able to take ownership over their work, and, while they are often aware of their employers' expectations, they also expect trust and respect from their employers:

*My responsibility as an employee is to increase my productivity, but my employer has to respect my judgement and trust that I am working really hard to be productive while working remotely. There is a difference between high-performing and under-performing employees... It is not all about work duration or how much time I put in; rather, it is about achieving my targets (Participant 18, employee).*

Besides respect and trust, employees also expect their employers to be fair in the decision-making process:

*Remote working requires a system that is designed in a way that is fair, flexible, and effective. Resources have to be fairly distributed to make working from home effective. I think I'm currently enjoying that and hope it doesn't change after the pandemic (Participant 20, employee).*

An employer also commented:

*Remote working has to be fairly implemented. Let employees decide what suits them... if they want to work full time remotely or part time, let there be a mutual agreement after careful consideration between employers and employees (Participant 23, employer).*

Our conclusions here corroborate the finding of Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi (2020) that fairness, trust, and delivery are essential components of the psychological contract. Our data suggests that both employers and employees have expectations (mostly unwritten but sometimes spoken) that require careful consideration. For instance, employers must allow fairness to enhance remote working. This is supported by a statement made by Participant 23 that, ‘It starts with providing employees with the option to choose how they prefer to work flexibly.’ However, this poses the question of whether it is possible to get employees to decide what they want. The fact that shared leadership encourages collaborative work, increased interaction, stronger bonds, and shared knowledge (Karriker *et al.*, 2017) will increase the potential for resources to be shared fairly and equitably by considering individuals’ different circumstances and needs in order to enhance remote working. Therefore, these outcomes fulfil the underlying principle of the psychological contract of a mutual exchange relationship between the employers and employees (Kutaula *et al.*, 2020). Thus, rather than favour a single party (e.g. employees), the psychological contract stresses the interest of both parties (including the employer), such that the mutually beneficial behaviours enhance the continuation of both parties to trust themselves in fulfilling their promises to each other (Kutaula *et al.*, 2020).

**Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications**

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a unique context for understanding employees’ remote working experiences, particularly given the obligatory requirement to work from home. Remote working, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, is due to employers’ and employees’ efforts to seek alternative work arrangements. In this study, we examined the factors that may facilitate remote working effectiveness going forward.

This study focuses on the positive experiences of remote working and how such experiences may contribute to realising effective remote working in the post-COVID-19 era. This is not to say that remote working is free from negative experiences, as most literature, especially studies undertaken in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has given more attention to the drawbacks of working remotely (see Adisa *et al.*, 2021; Bahn *et al.*, 2020). Thus, we provide some important theoretical and practical implications and contribute to the scholarly discourse related to remote working and the psychological contract.

**Theoretical Implications**

The previous analysis illustrates that the psychological contract can play a vital role in better understanding the dynamics of remote working both from employers’ and employees’

perspectives. In this context, our contribution to the literature is twofold. Firstly, gaining insights from the experiences of employees and employers in the UK services industry, we utilised the psychological contract to provide insights on the factors that may facilitate the effectiveness of remote working in the post-COVID-19 era. We contribute to the literature on remote working by stressing that allowing and managing flexible working preferences, promoting smart working practices, encouraging scheduling breaks by maintaining self-discipline, and emphasising leadership roles and expectations are crucial for enhancing remote working. We argued that remote working practices influenced by shared leadership responsibility can influence how employees and employers manage their expectations and why matching expectations is crucial for fulfilling their contractual obligations and for enhancing remote working outcomes.

Secondly, we argued that the psychological contract offers valuable insights by stretching the boundaries of psychological contract reciprocity to examining employment relationships during a turbulent period, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we argued that the pandemic has increased several demands among employers and their employees. For instance, there is an increased need for trust, fairness, and respect between both parties. The psychological contract is based on a sense of fairness and trust between the parties and their belief that they both are honouring the 'deal' between them (CIPD, 2020). Moreover, a breach in the psychological contract could come from either party (employee or employer) and not only the employer, as most studies have found (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020), because the psychological contract is a two-way exchange between both parties. Thus, the occurrence of a contract breach could lead to affective reactions from either party as they perceive a violation of the contract or mistrust from the other party. It could also lead to a withdrawal of exchange of content due to the perceived failure of one party to deliver on its promises (Rayton and Yalabik, 2014).

### ***Practical Implications***

From a practical perspective, it is apparent that remote working is becoming more acceptable due to the changing work environment. Therefore, employers must review their conventional work policies and practices to effectively facilitate remote working. This includes creating a supportive environment, ensuring structured communication with employees, regular check-ins, continuous clarification of goals, quick decision-making, and building employer-employee trust. In addition, employers must reconsider their expectations for managing remote workers



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and take their remote working requests and desirable working conditions seriously even post-COVID-19. They must also update their digital technologies to enhance remote working experiences. Employers must become more aware that some employees working remotely spend longer hours at work with fewer breaks; hence, they must encourage employees to take breaks between work activities and employ various strategies to implement this practice, e.g. demonstrating care by leading by example, making breaks part of the culture, providing break-friendly apps, and other wellness options. Remote workers must also implement strategies that foster remote working effectiveness and fulfil organisational expectations, including greater work responsibility and accountability; the acquisition of soft skills; collaborative work; independent working; and social networking, to improve workplace communication.

In addition, with an awareness that changes in circumstances (e.g. those that are emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic) can lead to changes in expectations (e.g. the psychological contract) or a contract breach, both parties must be willing to renegotiate their psychological contracts in such a way that the contributions from one party are sufficient to generate efforts from the other to maintain a mutually beneficial reciprocal exchange. Employers, in particular, must understand that a written or formal contract is unlikely to cover all aspects of performance requirements, especially for those who are working remotely; therefore, employers must make their expectations clear and seek the views of their employees on their expectations.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

While our study advances understanding of remote working, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era, it also has limitations, which can also be considered future research opportunities. For instance, we collected the qualitative data in the UK, which may raise concerns about its generalisability. Our findings may not be replicable in other research contexts, such as countries in developing countries, where remote working is scarcely practised due to the inadequacy of technological infrastructure and due to cultural views. Future research may also consider quantitative studies and a longitudinal design to further investigate the effectiveness of the identified factors facilitating remote working.



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**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Job Position</b>	<b>Years in service</b>
Participant 1	37	Male	Married	Insurance	Employee	10
Participant 2	32	Male	Married	Computer/I.T.	Employee	8
Participant 3	40	Female	Married	Computer/I.T.	Employee	11
Participant 4	43	Male	Single	Telecommunication	Employer	17
Participant 5	40	Male	Married	Telecommunication	Employer	15
Participant 6	36	Male	Married	Banking	Employee	8
Participant 7	30	Female	Married	Legal	Employee	7
Participant 8	37	Male	Married	Marketing/Sales	Employee	11
Participant 9	31	Female	Divorced	Education	Employee	8
Participant 10	38	Female	Married	Financial	Employer	12
Participant 11	33	Male	Married	Banking	Employee	13
Participant 12	43	Female	Married	Insurance	Employer	16
Participant 13	50	Female	Married	Insurance	Employer	22
Participant 14	54	Male	Married	Education	Employer	29
Participant 15	31	Female	Married	Entertainment	Employee	6
Participant 16	28	Female	Single	Consulting	Employee	3
Participant 17	28	Male	Single	Education	Employee	4
Participant 18	30	Female	Married	Marketing/Sales	Employee	7
Participant 19	34	Female	Married	Marketing/Sales	Employee	11
Participant 20	29	Female	Single	Marketing/Sales	Employee	3
Participant 21	34	Male	Married	Financial	Employee	6
Participant 22	40	Male	Married	Consulting	Employee	14
Participant 23	45	Female	Married	Computer/I.T.	Employer	20
Participant 24	39	Male	Married	Banking	Employer	16
Participant 25	38	Male	Single	Banking	Employer	14
Participant 26	44	Male	Married	Legal	Employer	22
Participant 27	38	Female	Separated	Education	Employer	13
Participant 28	36	Male	Single	Telecommunication	Employer	10
Participant 29	36	Female	Married	Telecommunication	Employee	9
Participant 30	29	Female	Married	Banking	Employee	3
Participant 31	33	Male	Single	Computer/I.T.	Employee	7

Table 2: Qualitative Data Analysis

Research inquiry	Illustrative quotes	First-order codes	Creation of conceptual categories through codes consolidation	Main themes
Experiences of remote working and post-COVID-19 preferences	I am happier and productive when I have a say in my schedule... I prefer to work remotely on a full-time basis because I can control my work schedule and take care of my personal wellbeing (Participant 17, Non-manager).	Full-time remote working	Full-time remote working	Flexible Working Preferences
	The hybrid workplace is the future and can help organisations and especially employees achieve a balance between work and personal activities. I have communicated my preference (hybrid working) to my organisation, hoping that it will be considered (Participant 27, Manager).	Hybrid working	Hybrid working	
Factors that facilitate remote working effectiveness and employer-employee expectations	I recently started taking 10 minutes to walk around the house after the first 2hours of work and then have a more extended lunch break where I eat, listen to music and do fun things with my kids... breaks are important to be taken else the mind will become unstable (Participant 22, Non-manager).	Self-discipline to taking breaks	Scheduled breaks	Scheduling Breaks and the Critical Role of Self-discipline
	It's easy to be so busy that we sometimes ignore other important things... Once I made up my mind to define my closing hours, it has been easier working from home... I don't respond to work emails, and I switch off my work phone and computer to concentrate on other things to avoid losing my mind [laughing] (Participant 25, Manager).	Creating boundaries	Micro-boundaries	
	Multitasking is one skill that is mandatory to acquire while working remotely... It saves me a lot because using sophisticated technology makes it easier to combine different activities at one go (Participant 19, Non-manager).	Multitasking	Soft Skills	The Utilisation of Smart Working Practices
	I'm better organised since working from home because I tend to prioritise my work and non-work activities easily...	Prioritisation		



It is a needed skill for effective remote working (Participant 9, Non-manager).			
Communications have intensified because there is a need to convey relevant information to the team and make clear the expectations for meeting the department's target (Participant 13, Manager).	Increased communications		
We have to keep operating a shared leadership system... As a manager, it can be challenging to monitor performance when your team is working remotely... Having a decentralised system allows a quick flow of information and decisions to be taken (Participant 4, Manager).	Distributed leadership	Change of leadership roles	Leadership Roles and Expectations
Some managers are yet to recognise the importance of trusting their employees... It doesn't matter if I spend 8 hours or 2 hours working; as long as the job is done, that is what counts (Participant 1, Non-manager).	Demand for trust and respect	Increased support	
Before the pandemic, I have witnessed some unfair practices in granting flexible work options. My requests have been turned down many times because of my single status...my manager says I do not have family obligations. Why does it have to take a pandemic to happen before organisations do the right thing? (Participant 20, Non-manager).	Fairness		