

Identifying the Factors Influencing Employee Engagement in Remote Work Environments

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore and identify the key factors that influence employee engagement in remote work environments, focusing on organizational, psychological, and technological dimensions. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences of remote employees. Sixteen participants from various professional sectors in Tehran were purposefully selected, all of whom had been working remotely for a minimum of six months. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The coding process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, allowing for inductive theme development. The analysis revealed three overarching themes: (1) Organizational Support Structures, including managerial responsiveness, communication infrastructure, flexible policies, technical assistance, HR engagement, performance monitoring tools, and virtual recognition; (2) Psychological and Emotional Factors, such as intrinsic motivation, sense of belonging, work-life balance, emotional resilience, burnout triggers, and job satisfaction; and (3) Technological and Environmental Conditions, encompassing digital literacy, ergonomic environment, platform usability, internet accessibility, and tool integration. Participant narratives emphasized that engagement in remote work is not solely influenced by individual factors but is deeply embedded in organizational culture, leadership behavior, and digital infrastructure. Remote employee engagement is a multifaceted construct influenced by a convergence of organizational practices, emotional well-being, and technological conditions. Organizations must adopt human-centered, flexible strategies that address both systemic and individual needs to effectively foster engagement in remote settings. The findings offer practical insights for leaders, HR professionals, and policy-makers aiming to enhance engagement in a post-pandemic hybrid work era.

Keywords: Employee engagement; remote work; qualitative study; organizational support; digital infrastructure; work-life balance; psychological well-being.

Introduction

Employee engagement has long been recognized as a critical determinant of organizational effectiveness, productivity, and workforce retention (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006). Defined as the degree of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral investment individuals place in their roles, engagement is associated with numerous positive organizational outcomes, including higher job satisfaction, reduced absenteeism, and increased commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). However, the global shift toward remote work—accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic—has disrupted conventional models of workplace engagement, raising urgent questions about how organizations can sustain employee involvement in decentralized, digital workspaces.



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The emergence of remote work as a normative practice rather than a temporary solution has fundamentally altered the structure and texture of the work environment (Kniffin et al., 2021). While flexible work arrangements have been linked with increased autonomy and improved work-life balance, they also introduce challenges such as digital fatigue, professional isolation, and diminished supervisory support (Wang et al., 2021). In this evolving landscape, traditional engagement drivers—such as physical workplace culture, face-to-face feedback, and direct managerial supervision—are no longer consistently available. This calls for a reassessment of how employee engagement is understood, fostered, and measured in remote work settings (Chong et al., 2020).

Remote work introduces complexities into the relational, technological, and psychological mechanisms that underpin engagement. From a relational perspective, the lack of co-location can erode informal communication and weaken social bonds, which are known to be vital to emotional engagement (Golden & Veiga, 2008). Team cohesion and organizational identification may suffer when employees operate in isolation, potentially reducing their sense of belonging and commitment (Mulki et al., 2009). Moreover, the shift to digital communication channels has created new dependencies on technology that can either facilitate or hinder engagement depending on factors such as platform usability, digital literacy, and technical support (Maruping et al., 2021).

Psychologically, remote work can influence employee motivation, stress regulation, and overall well-being. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation. While remote work may enhance autonomy, it may simultaneously compromise the other two elements if employees lack sufficient technological proficiency or feel socially disconnected. Furthermore, burnout, a well-documented antecedent to disengagement, has been shown to be exacerbated by blurred boundaries between work and home life, particularly when employees lack strategies for managing time and emotional demands (Derks et al., 2016).

The role of leadership and organizational support becomes increasingly significant in remote work contexts. Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiration, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation, has been positively correlated with remote employee engagement (Bartsch et al., 2020). Equally, managerial responsiveness, access to mental health resources, and flexible policies have emerged as critical supports that influence employee morale and motivation. According to Allen et al. (2015), remote workers who feel supported by their supervisors report higher levels of engagement and lower intentions to leave their organizations.

In addition, recent research has highlighted the relevance of technological infrastructure in shaping remote work experiences. Platform reliability, integration of communication tools, and ergonomic working conditions all contribute to either enabling or constraining employee performance and satisfaction (Donnelly & Johns, 2021). Organizations with robust digital ecosystems—those offering easy access to documents, real-time collaboration tools, and efficient feedback channels—are more likely to foster a positive remote work culture. On the other hand, inconsistent internet connectivity, fragmented platforms, and poor user interfaces can lead to frustration and disengagement (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008).

Work-life balance is another critical dimension influencing engagement in remote work. While flexible scheduling allows employees to better manage personal obligations, it also requires strong boundary management skills. Employees who are unable to delineate work from home life may experience role conflict, exhaustion, and reduced effectiveness (Kreiner et al., 2009). Organizations that actively support boundary-setting—for example, through policies that discourage after-hours emails or encourage scheduled breaks—help mitigate these risks and enhance sustainable engagement (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012).

Although the benefits and challenges of remote work have been widely studied since 2020, there remains a gap in qualitative research that explores the lived experiences of employees in relation to engagement in remote contexts. Much of the current literature is quantitative, relying on survey-based assessments that may overlook nuanced personal and contextual factors that shape engagement (Chong et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). A qualitative approach can provide rich, contextualized insights into how remote employees perceive, construct, and sustain engagement within the complexities of digital work environments.

This study, therefore, aims to identify the factors influencing employee engagement in remote work settings through a qualitative inquiry. Using semi-structured interviews with 16 remote employees from various sectors in Tehran, this research seeks to uncover the organizational, psychological, and technological elements that enable or impede engagement. The study applies thematic analysis to identify emergent themes and patterns in participant narratives, thereby contributing to a more grounded and human-centered understanding of engagement in contemporary work contexts.

By focusing on individual perceptions and experiences, this study also aims to provide practical insights for organizational leaders and HR professionals tasked with designing engagement strategies for a hybrid or fully remote workforce. Understanding what drives or detracts from engagement under remote conditions can inform more effective policies, tools, and leadership behaviors. As organizations continue to redefine their operational models in the post-pandemic era, these insights are timely and critical for sustaining performance, well-being, and organizational loyalty.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the underlying factors influencing employee engagement in remote work environments. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the need to understand subjective experiences and contextual influences, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. The study relied on purposive sampling to recruit individuals who had firsthand experience with remote work settings. A total of 16 participants, including both men and women from various organizational sectors (e.g., technology, education, services, and finance), were selected from Tehran. All participants had been engaged in remote work for at least six months at the time of the interview, ensuring they could reflect on sustained remote work experiences.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to allow for flexibility while maintaining consistency in key topic areas. The interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature on employee engagement and remote work, focusing on themes such as communication, motivation, technological support, work-life balance, and organizational culture. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either via video conferencing platforms or in person, depending on participant availability and preference. Interview sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached—defined as the point where no new themes or insights were emerging from additional data collection.

Data analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software to ensure a systematic coding process. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. An inductive approach was adopted to allow themes to emerge organically from the data rather than imposing a preexisting coding framework. To ensure credibility, peer debriefing and member checking were conducted. Two researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts and reconciled discrepancies through discussion to enhance inter-coder reliability. Thick descriptions and direct quotations from participants were used to support the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings and Results**Theme 1: Organizational Support Structures****Managerial Responsiveness.**

Participants frequently highlighted the importance of timely and empathetic communication from supervisors as a core factor in sustaining engagement. They appreciated managers who were accessible and offered constructive feedback. As one participant noted, "Even though we were remote, my manager always checked in weekly, not just about work, but how we were coping. That meant a lot." Timely responsiveness, emotional support, and regular acknowledgment of achievements were cited as vital elements of leadership that fostered motivation in remote contexts.

Communication Infrastructure.

Effective communication channels were described as the backbone of remote engagement. Employees mentioned the utility of regular virtual meetings, shared digital calendars, and responsive chat platforms. A participant stated, "The team Slack channel became our office – if someone didn't reply quickly, it felt like they had left the building." Clear protocols and reliable communication platforms were crucial to prevent feelings of disconnect and misalignment.

Policy Flexibility.

Flexible policies were reported as empowering and trust-enhancing. Participants valued adjustable work hours and autonomy over task scheduling. For example, one interviewee explained, "I was allowed to log in earlier and take a long break mid-day for childcare. That flexibility made me more productive." The presence of adaptive remote work policies was linked with higher satisfaction and reduced stress.

Technical Support.

Reliable access to technical help was essential in maintaining workflow and reducing frustration. Some participants shared that slow responses from IT teams led to work delays, while others appreciated proactive support. One participant recalled, "Once my laptop crashed, and within an hour, I had remote assistance fixing the issue – it kept me from panicking."

HR Engagement.

HR departments that implemented online wellness initiatives, virtual events, or anonymous feedback tools were perceived positively. As one participant put it, "The mental health webinars and Friday games made us feel seen and cared for." HR's active virtual presence helped bridge the emotional gap created by physical distance.

Performance Monitoring Tools.

Digital performance evaluation systems were discussed with mixed feelings. Some employees valued transparency in expectations and real-time tracking, while others feared surveillance. One respondent shared, “Seeing my progress on a dashboard helped me stay on track without feeling micromanaged.” Well-designed tools were engagement boosters when coupled with trust and clarity.

Recognition and Rewards.

Virtual rewards and appreciation were critical in compensating for the lack of physical acknowledgment. Recognition during online meetings or through digital certificates was viewed as motivating. A participant noted, “Just a ‘thank you’ in a Zoom call in front of the team made my week.”

Theme 2: Psychological and Emotional Factors

Intrinsic Motivation.

Employees with high levels of self-driven interest in their tasks reported stronger engagement. Those who viewed their roles as meaningful or intellectually stimulating remained motivated despite the remote setting. One participant reflected, “I love problem-solving, so even at home, I found myself immersed in projects.”

Sense of Belonging.

Social connection was repeatedly emphasized. Employees missed spontaneous office interactions and relied on virtual spaces to recreate that sense of inclusion. As one said, “Just having a space to joke with teammates made me feel like I was still part of something.” Being included in decisions and team rituals contributed to their perceived belonging.

Work-Life Balance.

Maintaining boundaries between professional and personal life emerged as a major concern. Participants expressed both appreciation for flexibility and struggles with overwork. One respondent explained, “It was hard to shut off. I’d be checking emails at midnight without realizing it.” Balancing household demands and work expectations was critical to emotional well-being.

Emotional Resilience.

Resilience, adaptability, and emotional regulation were central to sustaining engagement during challenging phases of remote work. Employees described coping strategies such as mindfulness, peer support, and self-talk. One interviewee stated, “I had to train myself not to spiral when deadlines loomed. Breathing exercises helped a lot.”

Burnout Triggers.

Prolonged isolation, lack of variety, and digital fatigue were major contributors to burnout. Participants mentioned feeling “trapped” in repetitive routines. A respondent shared, “Every day looked the same — log in, stare at screens, log off — it wore me down.” The absence of physical separation between work and rest areas contributed to emotional exhaustion.

Job Satisfaction.

A sense of purpose, career growth, and alignment with organizational values influenced overall satisfaction. Several participants found renewed appreciation for their roles when their contributions were recognized or when projects aligned with their interests. One participant remarked, “I felt proud when our remote project got company-wide praise. It reminded me why I do this.”

Theme 3: Technological and Environmental Conditions

Digital Literacy.

Digital skill level played a critical role in shaping remote work experiences. Participants with prior experience in online tools adapted more quickly, while others faced a steep learning curve. One said, “I had never used project management software before, and learning it on the fly was stressful at first.”

Ergonomic Environment.

Work-from-home setups varied significantly, influencing productivity and comfort. Some participants invested in ergonomic furniture, while others improvised with household items. A participant noted, “I worked from my dining table for months. Only after getting a proper chair did my back pain go away.”

Platform Usability.

Easy-to-navigate platforms contributed to workflow efficiency. Employees praised tools that were intuitive and integrated well across tasks. One respondent shared, “Google Workspace just worked for us. We didn’t waste time switching between apps or losing files.”

Internet Accessibility.

Stable and fast internet access was fundamental. Those with unreliable connections experienced frequent disruptions, leading to stress and disconnection. A participant remarked, “Every time my Zoom froze, I felt embarrassed. It made me hesitant to speak up in meetings.”

Tool Integration.

Participants valued platforms that allowed for seamless coordination across functions. Integrated systems reduced redundancy and improved task tracking. As one explained, “Having task boards, messaging, and file sharing in one place was a game-changer. We weren’t constantly jumping apps.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that employee engagement in remote work environments is shaped by a complex interplay of organizational support structures, psychological and emotional factors, and technological and environmental conditions. These themes resonate with and extend existing research on remote work, providing new insights into how individuals experience and maintain engagement outside of traditional workplace settings.

One of the most prominent themes was the role of **organizational support structures**, particularly managerial responsiveness and communication infrastructure. This finding supports earlier studies indicating that leadership behaviors such as availability, empathy, and feedback are crucial for maintaining engagement in distributed work settings (Bartsch et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2015). The participants in this study valued regular check-ins, clear communication protocols, and a sense of accessibility to their managers, which helped maintain motivation and reduce feelings of professional isolation. Similarly, the presence of flexible policies, technical support, and recognition mechanisms emerged as key enablers of engagement. These results align with Wang et al. (2021), who argued that structural supports—including access to digital tools and flexible work norms—significantly predict job satisfaction and performance among remote workers. Importantly, our findings also suggest that the nature of performance monitoring tools can either enhance or threaten engagement depending on how they are perceived—echoing concerns in the literature regarding digital surveillance and trust (Donnelly & Johns, 2021).

The second theme, **psychological and emotional factors**, illustrates how remote engagement is deeply tied to internal motivation, well-being, and emotional resilience. Participants who reported high levels of intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction tended to view their work as meaningful, autonomous, and intellectually stimulating—conditions

known to support engagement under Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This reinforces the argument by Bakker and Demerouti (2008) that personal resources such as self-efficacy and purpose act as psychological capital that buffer against disengagement. However, the findings also highlight the dark side of remote work: burnout triggers such as blurred boundaries, emotional fatigue, and social isolation were commonly mentioned. These outcomes are consistent with Derks et al. (2016), who noted that remote work can hinder psychological detachment and contribute to exhaustion if not properly managed. Moreover, the theme of belonging indicates that virtual social connection plays a significant role in sustaining morale, which is consistent with Golden and Veiga's (2008) findings that team identification significantly impacts remote worker commitment.

The third theme, **technological and environmental conditions**, underscores the infrastructural and physical components of engagement. Digital literacy, usability of platforms, and internet accessibility were reported as foundational elements that enable—or inhibit—effective remote work. These insights support the findings of Venkatesh and Bala (2008), who proposed that perceived ease of use and technological self-efficacy are key predictors of technology acceptance and sustained engagement. Participants' descriptions of ergonomic challenges further highlight the embodied nature of work—those lacking proper chairs or quiet workspaces reported discomfort and distraction, underscoring the importance of environmental design in engagement (Donnelly & Johns, 2021). Interestingly, our study also found that tool integration (e.g., having all necessary functions in one platform) reduced mental load and enhanced continuity, aligning with recent arguments by Maruping et al. (2021) about the importance of digital convergence in virtual collaboration.

Taken together, these findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of employee engagement in remote environments by identifying both enabling and inhibiting factors across multiple dimensions. This multidimensionality challenges simplistic or single-factor explanations and suggests that effective remote engagement requires integrated attention to technology, leadership, policy, emotional needs, and physical space. The results affirm that remote work is not merely a logistical arrangement but a psychological and relational experience that depends on thoughtful design and support at both organizational and individual levels.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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