

RELATIONAL RESILIENCE IN A DIGITAL WORKPLACE: A HUMAN RESOURCE  
INQUIRY

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**Relational Resilience in a Digital Workplace: A Human Resource Inquiry**

by

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the way people work together, particularly how colleagues communicate with one another in a remote work setting. With the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, all organisations in Canada were mandated to move their employees to work from home to slow the spread of the virus. This resulted in the work from home phenomenon (WFH) and a transposition of the social aspects of work and relations between colleagues. This study investigates the WFH phenomenon through the lens of workplace communication and applies the findings to the practice of HR and organisational leadership. Through the use of adaptive structuration theory (AST), which proposes the idea of *soft* technological determinism, the study explains the introduction and utilisation of information and communication technologies in the workplace, particularly for a workforce with low digital literacy. The study reveals the absence of organisational policies and legislation on remote work, while acknowledging the challenges created by differences between organisations, unique features of various communication software, and varying individual preferences. Furthermore, the results demonstrate the importance of workplace relationships in organisational resilience and the role that HR and organisational leaders play in supporting a culture that promotes flexibility and openness.

*Keywords:* Workplace communication, collegial relations, human resources, COVID-19, adaptive structuration theory, context collapse, remote work, relational capital.

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*“The economic might of business accelerated by exponential technology is too volatile to leave unexamined for its effects on societal health, for its philosophical merits, for what it could do if it’s broadest objectives aligned more closely with those of humanity overall”*

- Kate O’Neill, Tech Humanist

### **Focus and Framing**

During the early days of COVID-19 pandemic (henceforth referred to as the pandemic) I was working as a human resource (HR) manager for a company that had a dual workforce, made up of an office team on one side and a production team on the other. Public health orders across Canada began to instruct organisations across industries to send their people home to “shelter in place.” HR professionals like myself were left struggling to figure out how to adapt the people operations from a co-located workplace to a work from home (WFH)<sup>1</sup> model. This meant that along with new on-site social distancing safety processes I also needed to figure out how to transition and support the office team as they were forced to abruptly move from a collocated office to their homes.

Throughout this process I was dismayed to find a lack of information from the Canadian government— in particular, the provincial agency WorkSafe BC—on how to facilitate this necessary process. From my perspective, the question of facilitation included all of the regular support(s) that people need to work in comfort and safety as well as understanding what they need to work efficiently. In a collocated work environment, the

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<sup>1</sup> Remote work and work from home (WFH) are used interchangeably throughout this paper. The term remote work was commonly used prior to the pandemic and includes working from anywhere (WFA) other than an office space provided by the organisation. After the COVID-19 pandemic people were ordered to stay home thus the term remote work meant working from home.



responsibility is clear and—in Canada—legally defined; the employer provides the work space, pays the utilities, ensures access to the tools needed to perform work and ensures that the workplace is both psychologically and physically safe (Government of Canada, 2020, para 1). In most cases the employer also employs HR or people operations personnel like myself to uphold workplace legislation. Professionals like me work to ensure legislation, meant to protect the wellbeing of employees, is prioritised and measured against the profitability of the business. This work is done by interpreting the legislation as well as the organisation's needs, then translating that into written policy and training programs.

In a remote, home-based work environment, the question of responsibility becomes complex. Is it the responsibility of the employer to set up their employees' home office? Should the employer pay for a portion of their home utilities such as the internet or phone? How does the organisation provide the necessary work tools (computers, printers, phones, etc.) in a home environment? These are some of the questions around the physicalities of the workplace. A remote work environment also presents psychological challenges that raise further and arguably more complicated questions. How can an organisation ensure that employees are taking breaks and logging off at appropriate times while working remotely? What sort of social activities can be set up in a digital environment, so colleagues can connect with one another and build rapport? What types of technologies should be utilised that allow for efficient work communication but also enable the nuances from body language and facial expression to be conveyed? What steps should be taken to investigate personnel issues such as friction between co-workers in a digital work environment? These types of questions are related to engagement metrics that an HR practitioner would typically use to benchmark and monitor the organisation's relational capital and culture. In other words, these types of

questions and their answers help HR practitioners to see how strong the relationships between colleagues are, and if people are effectively happy with the organisation.

Prior to the pandemic, remote work, or the idea of WFH, had been steadily on the rise, especially in advanced market economies like Canada, with 18% of Canadian workers citing they had the flexibility of working from home (Holland & Brewster, 2021; PWC Canada, 2020). Post-pandemic, 32% of Canadians between the ages of 15-69 report they are now working “most of their hours from home” (Mehdi & Morissette, 2021, para. 1.). Americans have reported an even higher number with “roughly half of their paid work hours from home between April and December 2020, as compared to five percent before the pandemic” (Barrero, Bloom, & Davis, 2021). The pandemic increased the existing trend of remote work, most notably across the service-based industries it had yet to reach and that typically had low levels of digital literacy (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020, p. 9.; Danilovich, Norrick, Lessem, Milstein, Briggs, & Berman, 2020). The pandemic also changed remote work in that it was no longer “work from anywhere” but became strictly within the home environment, hence the use of the term “work from home” became synonymous with remote work. Prior to the pandemic the remote work trend presented the idea that people no longer had to work in a shared office space or any fixed location, rather a remote worker could be a digital nomad<sup>2</sup>. This explains why remote work first began gaining popularity in industries that don't require a collocated workspace, and inherently have a high level of digital literacy. This new context to remote work, represents a gap in the knowledge on remote work and subsequent impacts on service-based industries that have adopted WFH models. It also presents an opportunity to

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<sup>2</sup> A digital nomad is a working professional who works solely online and thus can work from anywhere. (Reichenberger, 2018)

further add to what is known about the social impacts to workplace communication and collegial relationships.

The purpose of this study is to gather information from working professionals who experienced a change from in-person to remote work during the pandemic. To this end, my research asks: how and to what extent has workplace culture, particularly interpersonal relations between remote colleagues, been affected by the transition to remote work? To answer this question, I pursue these further questions:

- What digital communication tools are used by remote workers and how are they used to maintain their work relationships?
- How have workplace relations and relational capital at organisations been affected by the transition from in-person to remote work?
- How has job design changed as a result of the shift to remote work and to what extent has it impacted job satisfaction?

To answer these questions, I collected data from working professionals outside of the technology industry who did not work remotely prior to the pandemic. The rationale for this was to take advantage of the unique proposition the pandemic offered the remote work model by looking at the experiences of professionals who work in industries traditionally perceived as reliant on in-person communication. Within that group I collected data from various levels of professionals, ranging from entry-level to intermediate, to get a holistic data set from which to understand the experiences of the remote workers, as well as the people managing them. Outreach to locate participants was done through digital marketing on LinkedIn and cold-emailing organisations. Once the research participants were found, data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted over the phone and were

designed to draw out the experiences of the participants by asking how they felt about their work, relationships with their colleagues, and how they adapted their communication practices through the use of digital tools.

### **Literature Review**

To establish the territory for this study I discuss the history of remote work and how personality and job type contribute to its known risks and benefits. This section then moves into discussing context-collapse as it relates to WFH and the subsequent blurring of work and home lives and how that affects the employee experience. In the second section, I review the literature on ICTs used by remote workers and adaptive structuration theory (AST) as a framework to understand the interplay between the two. To end the second section, I will expand on what is known about workplace social structures by focusing on collegial relations and the idea of relational capital as an important metric.

Scholarly work on remote work has been done for many decades now, however it should be noted there is a significant difference between the participants in the pre and post pandemic research. In the post-pandemic literature the research participants experienced remote work as involuntary, unplanned and during a time of crisis whereas prior to the pandemic the research was done on participants who did so voluntarily and were supported by planned process (Eriksson & Petrosian, 2020). The pandemic has created a definitive point in time where research on remote work has begun to eclipse itself, casting a new light onto the pre-pandemic literature. The pandemic has also expanded the field of research by forcing a diversification in the industries that have been trying remote work, thus producing an infinitely more diverse workforce to study (Danilovich, Norrick, Lessem, Milstein, Briggs, & Berman, 2020).

***Establishing the Research Territory: History of Remote Work***

Within the scope of the technology industry the remote work trend has been cited as beginning in the 1980's, when IBM introduced remote terminals in workers homes to provide more flexibility to their employees (Dishman, 2019). Regardless of where you put the inception point of remote work on the timeline of history, the point is that human beings have been working remotely for several decades. So, why has remote work remained on the fringe of typical work arrangements? Some experts believe it is due to a hegemonic ideology in which the employee will always stray from productivity if not supervised (Neely, 2021). This mindset is explained as a fear of "cyberslacking" or a remote worker's use of work hours for non-work-related purposes like surfing the web (O'Neill, Hambley, & Bercovich, 2014).

Research on remote work shows that personality and job type can have detrimental effects on the employee's WHF experience (Evans, Meyers, De Calseyde & Stavrova 2022; Luse, McElroy, Townsend & DeMarie, 2013). This research supports the idea that people with certain personality traits such as openness would fare much better in a remote work scenario and suggests that personality assessments should be done when hiring for remote roles (Anderson, Seth, Kaplan, Ronald & Vega, 2015). In some other cases, remote work has proven to be isolating and detrimental to employee wellness (Charalampous et al. 2019; Neilson, 2020; Pattnaik, & Jena, 2020). Other studies focus on work output and productivity highlighting the lack of social interactions with co-workers to be the main barrier for success in remote work (Mehdi & Morissette April 1, 2021).

On the other side of this argument is the literature that focuses on the wide range of benefits in productivity, profits, employee wellness and a positive impact to the environment (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2015; Anderson et al., 2015; Farrer, 2020). From this

perspective the benefits to remote work are enticing both at the individual level, by providing more autonomy, and at the organisational level, by providing less overhead and vastly expanding the talent pool available to hire from (Farrer, 2020). Within this literature the barriers cited above are not overlooked, rather learnings from the early adopters of remote work in the technology industry are applied to them (Donovan, 2020; Neely, 2020). Also, managers can avoid common issues associated with remote work by being selective about the types of technology they are using on their teams (English, 2017). The territory for studying remote work is established, with a rich knowledge base on what makes remote work viable both at the organisational level and at the individual level. This study responds to this literature by addressing a gap in the types of industries previously studied, and by considering that personality type was not a consideration for participants and organisations in this study.

### ***Information Technologies used for Remote Work***

IBM has been acknowledged as one of the first companies to formalise a remote work program with the installation of their remote terminals in employees' homes (Dishman, 2019). Since this early example, technology has developed to the point that social science scholars have become more interested in software application and adoption of ICTs or software like Zoom, Slack, Microsoft Teams that enable teams to remotely communicate and collaborate (Holland & Brewster, 2021; Bailenson, 2021). These studies discuss the design limitations in the technology, proposing that negative human effects are the result of the technology being unable to capture the nuances in-person communication that many people depend on for understanding the 'other' and themselves (Sander & Baumann, 2020). Side effects of the usage include employee burnout, fatigue, depression, isolation, and disengagement; all of which degrade the work experience making it difficult for organisations

to engage and retain employees (Collings, McMackin, Nyber & Wright, 2021; Pattnaik, & Jena, 2020). Beyond the ability to communicate and collaborate, which ICTs offer remote workers, understanding how these tools are impacting the work experience is paramount.

Notably, there have been several studies on the impact of employee relations in organisations using ICTs, however, these studies are focused on large globally distributed organisations, whereas *this* study is limited to smaller sized (under 100 employees) organisations in Canada (Cho, Trier & Kim, 2006; Handel & Herbsleb, 2002; Ou, Davison, Zhong, & Liang, 2010). Regardless of this difference what the Handel & Herbsleb and Cho, Trier & Kim studies demonstrate that healthy employee relationships can develop online, demonstrating that remote work can have positive outcomes to relational capital, teamwork, employee empowerment, and satisfaction (Ou, Davison, Zhong, & Liang, 2010).

#### ***Using Adaptive Structuration Theory to understand ICTs in the Workplace***

The interplay between technology and remote work experience is intertwined, expanding the boundaries of what can be done remotely as new technologies are introduced. As a theory, AST is ideal for studying this relationship because it equally considers how both technology and the people who use it play a part in creating and recreating social structures (Barret, 2018). AST is a theoretical framework used for explaining organisational adoption of technology by focusing on group behaviour. The framework shows how an organisation functions through its group membership, which is made up of individuals who contribute their ‘rules and resources’ that originate from knowledge and experience gained from outside and within the time spent within the organisation. The individual ‘rules’ are guidelines or routines that people follow, whether official or learned through their experiences. An example of this would be that everyone at work ‘knows’ no meetings are booked on Friday’s because

the boss is typically not around. Resources on the other hand are typically non-material elements such as knowledge, experience or friendship. Resources and rules come together to make up the group dynamic and form what AST describes as ‘structures’ that are used in interactions between group members, making up the group dynamic, which ultimately affects the way that the organisation uses technologies (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994).

During the pandemic, the WFH phenomenon exemplified this relationship, with organisations introducing or prioritising ICTs in order to enable remote work communication. For the HR practitioner involved in the introduction of new technology and concerned with the impact it is having on the workplace, AST is particularly useful because it provides “framework for describing how group communication technologies are used in both expected and unexpected ways” (Scott, Quinn, Timmerman & Garrett 1998; Turner, Morris, & Atamenwan, 2019). By using the AST framework the HR practitioner is able to view the issues or successes that occur when introducing new technology in the workplace as being directly correlated with group members' rules and resources and see how they make up a system within the organisation. According to Lethbridge (2003),

“Structures are the rules and resources used to generate a system. A system, in this sense, is a social group or organisation that acts in such a way that there are observable and consistent patterns of iner-personal relations”.

From this perspective AST proposes that the relationship between technology and the user is dynamic, reciprocal and iterative. Simply put, AST makes it easy to understand how the introduction of new technology affects the organisation's structures and likewise, how organisation’s structures affect the technology. Therefore, when applied to a group of people in an organisation, AST makes sense of how the human experience and business outcomes



are connected (Chudoba, 1999; Lethbridge, 2003). The emphasis on the human experience is why AST is so valuable to the HR practitioner as it provides a framework to analyse and explain when change to the rules and resources (group structures) is needed. New rules and resources can be created by group members or appropriated from outside the group, which can be as simple as training or hiring someone that has expertise (resources) that the current team is lacking.

AST is also particularly useful when looking at the WFH phenomenon because of the need for technology to communicate remotely. WFH by design is physically solitary which is contrary to how work groups traditionally work. When we view this new way of working *together* through the lens of AST, we are able to see the social reconstruction of work culture occurring. As work groups begin using ICTs as their primary resource for communication new rules are created, old rules are adapted and change occurs to the technology and the organisation. These changes represent a reassuring flexibility to technology and importantly reject technological determinism or the idea that organisations have little control over how technology influences its social structures (Chudoba, 1999; Dafoe, 2015).

AST embodies *a soft* technological determinism because it recognizes the power that technology has derived from the structures in its design. DeSanctis and Poole (1994) describe this power as “the spirit of technology is the general intent with regard to values and goals underlying a given set of structural features”. The spirit therefore, is how the coding language is designed, which dictates how the technology works and reflects how the designers believe the technology will be used. The interplay between the technology and the organisation occurs when users begin to change those structures as they ‘faithfully’ or ‘unfaithfully’ use and adapt the technology (DeSanctis, & Poole 1994). In the case of ICTs, the structures are

mechanised in the context of communication processes. A good example of this is the design and access to emoji's as a way to communicate body language or emotions without words.

AST also seeks to examine emergent social structures within organisations that use advanced technologies (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), which is similar to the philosophy of HR, in that it is focused on human behaviours at the individual and social level. AST principles like HR place the emphasis on human behaviour, stating that technology alone does not help organisations achieve their goals; people do (Turner, Morris, & Atamenwan, 2019). For all of these reasons, AST is used as a theoretical tool to interpret the data analysis in this study.

### ***The practice of HR and the impacts of context collapse on remote workers***

In this section of the literature, I look at the practice of HR and how it has been impacted by the shift to remote work during the pandemic. The practice of HR is concerned with enhancing workplace productivity, culture, and employee wellness to ensure organisational wellbeing and efficiency is maintained (Schwind, Das, & Wagar, 1999). To protect these interests, HR professionals and organisational leaders are tasked with the duty to conduct analyses when changes such as the WFH phenomenon occur (Shaw, & Zhu, 2021 & Reimer & Bryant, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, HR research has shown that practitioners have been on the "front lines" tasked with leading the implementation of remote work (Collings et al., 2021). Unfortunately, due to the rapid onset of the pandemic, HR practitioners have simply not had the resources needed to support people to transition to work from their homes which has created a gap in the knowledge on how to best set employees up to work from home (Bryant & Reimer 2020).

Work and home life has never overlapped for so many people as it has during the pandemic, highlighting the connection between physical and digital life (Holland & Brewster,

2021). Drawing from my experience as an HR Manager during the pandemic, I hypothesise that remote workers are facing a context collapse of their home and work lives that is creating negative impacts due to the lack of guidance within a digital work environment (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017 & Nowland, Necka, & Cacioppo, 2018). Generally speaking context collapse provides a framework for understanding how multiple contexts merge into one context (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Meryowitz 1986). Context collapse is a theory that explains the psychological impacts to human beings when multiple social environments collide into one another. It explains why individuals exhibit signs of stress and have difficulty understanding how to communicate and behave socially, especially when the ‘collision’ first occurs between two social environments. In other words, context collapse provides a framework to explain why individuals struggled so much during the early days of the pandemic, when they were forced to move their ‘work life’ into their ‘home life’.

The theory of context collapse was first applied in academic study to journalism and in media studies to explain the expansion of audiences and their various expectations and how those expectations impact the way in which the sender manages the psychological process of creating their communication (Meyrowitz, 1985). More recently, this concept has been further developed and used by Marwick and boyd (2011) in a digital context to explain the psychological negotiations that users experience when communicating to their audiences on social media platforms. Marwick and boyd (2011) document how Twitter users experience a context collapse of their networks into one audience that is made up of the users ‘‘most sensitive members: bosses, parents and partners’’ (p.125). Twitter is not typically used for work communications; however, the experience of the Twitter users in the Marwick and boyd study is relevant as it demonstrates how people experience context collapse while using

digital communications. Beam, Child, Hutchens, & Hmielowski (2018) also use context collapse along with privacy management theory to explain social media communication behaviour. The results of their study show how context collapse can result in an immersive state whereby individuals become more comfortable online; they actually “use context collapse to mindfully build social support” and demonstrate “increased control over their information environment” (p. 13). From this perspective, context collapse becomes an almost desirable state, where the collapsing of one context into many, revealing a new state of communication possibilities.

I propose context collapse can be applied to the use of ICTs within the digital work environment and remote workers behaviour as they adopt the ICTs as their primary means to communicate. Furthermore, I hypothesise that context collapse is occurring in the lives of people that have transitioned to WFH during the pandemic and is a point of interest for framing this study. The rationale being that when remote workers communicate online they must rearrange the typical moments of their working lives into new behaviours while interacting with their colleagues, bosses, clients and customers online. In other words the various contexts that existed prior to remote work, the workplace, the home and the transition points in between, have now flattened into one making the management of the self and navigating identities increasingly complicated (Grant, Wallace, & Spurgeon, 2013). The transition to WFH has involved many stages and through the use of context collapse we are able to understand the initial transition and the adoption of new technologies. It offers insight into the human experience and effect that WFH has had on the social structures within an organisation which from the HR perspective equates to relational capital.

***Relational Capital: A foundation for Success in Remote Work***

As the pandemic continues, so does the growing body of literature on how the pandemic has impacted the working world (Collings et al., 2021 & Holland & Brewster, 2021 & Pattnaik, & Jena, 2020). Research showing the progression of human behaviour in relation to the transition to WFH began to reveal best practices such as creating a separate space in your home for work, emphasis on keeping normal routines, and the importance of self-care and communication (Eriksson, 2020; Neilson, 2020). It is within this group of literature where this study joins in defining best practices for HR practitioners to use when supporting remote workers. Based on this existing research, along with my experience going through this transition, I hypothesise that success in a remote work environment largely depends on an organisation's relational capital (RC). RC assumes that the relationships between colleagues, as well as the relationship between an employee and the organisation, are paramount to a successful workplace regardless of it being collocated, remote, or hybrid (Zornoza, Orengo, & Peñarroja, 2009). HR practitioners encourage RC by developing a culture of openness so that people feel safe to self-disclose and build trust with one another. According to Posey (2010), rates of self-disclosure between colleagues are directly related to engagement in the workplace community, which leads to higher rates of work satisfaction and retention (p. 192). The emphasis on self-disclosure and ultimately trust between colleagues supports the importance of positive relational capital as a component for remote work success. For these reasons, along with my experience transitioning people to WFH and subsequently supporting them during the pandemic, collegial relationships are the overarching focus for this study.

### **Methodology & Complimenting Theory**

In this section I explore how my chosen methodology, phenomenology validates my point of view as a participant researcher. As a discipline, phenomenology is concerned with understanding consciousness and the structural aspects of a lived experience (Connelly, 2010). Phenomenology offers three methods: the social scientist, transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic (Phillips-Pula, Strunk & Pickler, 2011). Where they differentiate is in the research application. Existential phenomenology focuses on the reality in which the phenomenon occurs, concerned with the broader perception or nature of reality. Hermeneutic phenomenology invites the researcher to collaboratively participate in the process and values their respective interpretation of the experience in question (Moustakas, 1994). In contrast, transcendental practice rigorously asks the researcher to exclude themselves, their experiences, values, and beliefs, by “bracketing” (Ashworth, 1999). Hermeneutic phenomenology argues that lived experience is the path to understanding what is shared (social), what is unique (individual) and proposes that experience is the epistemological basis for human life (Dibley, Dickerson, Duffy, Vandermause, 2020). Similarly, my research questions are founded in my experience as an HR practitioner.

Hermeneutic phenomenology can be used in interviews to emotionally frame the inquiries by focusing on the experience in question; asking how they feel or felt, as well as how they express themselves with language, tone and nuances in their speech (Dibley et al., 2020 pp. 96-101). Once collected, the experiences are reflected on and compared to the researchers' similar experience to uncover meaning. I used hermeneutic phenomenology for two purposes in my interviews, 1) To explore and develop a deeper understanding of the WFH phenomenon that I have been a part of, and 2) to develop a conversation around the

meaning of the experience and what it offers the practice of human resources (van Manen, 2017). For this study, having conversations with my participants where I was able to apply my own experiences while working remotely was integral to the process. Placing myself in their experience through the language and questions in the interview allowed me to speak with them sincerely and with empathy. In this way hermeneutic phenomenology was paramount in understanding my participants' experience. It allowed me to share my experiences working remotely and gave me credibility by allowing me to find a common ground with my research participants.

#### **Data Collection Method**

I interviewed six working professionals from varied industries about their lived experience working remotely during the pandemic. Five industries were represented in this study: cannabis retail; environmental programming and consulting; healthcare for people with disabilities; and a social club that offers co-working spaces, fitness classes, and event facilitation. Due to the nature of the recruitment for this project (availability in schedules due to widespread labour shortages) (Statistics Canada, 2022), the participants interviewed were intermediate, senior level workers or owner-operators. My sample comes from small organisations (defined as having under 100 employees) in Canada that had to shift 50% or more of their workforce to a remote model during the pandemic. This was important because I wanted to better understand how the forced and unplanned shift to remote work was impacting industries that likely would not have tried remote work prior to the pandemic. Phenomenological studies put the emphasis on a deep understanding or a rich quality of data rather than on quantity (Smith et al., 2009, p.29). Therefore, a small sample group worked well for this research and allowed me to go in depth with the participants' experiences.

To recruit participants, I used my existing business network in British Columbia, such as the Chartered Professional Human Resources of British Columbia & Yukon where I am an active member. This initial outreach was done via an introductory email to the owner/operator or human resource manager at companies that fit my requirements. Within the email I outlined the research project and invited them to participate (see appendix A).

Similar to work conducted by Bevan (2014), the interviews designed to guide the participants chronologically through their experiences by first recalling how they felt at the beginning of the pandemic when public health orders forced people to stay home and shelter in place, to the point where they had pivoted operations and teams were now successfully working from home. The interview questions were semi-structured; made up of 8-10 primary questions with additional prompts, this allowed the participants to be open with their answers and for myself as the interviewer to ask prompts or follow-up questions depending on how they responded to the primary questions, which gave the interviews a comfortable conversational feel. I ended the interviews by asking them to look ahead and imagine what the future might look like for their careers. We explored their experiences, especially focusing on how they felt in the typical day-to-day moments when they were working on projects, supporting one another, and redefining their working relationships in their new remote reality. I asked participants to compare their initial feelings to how they feel now in hindsight. This was important to ask because I wanted to understand the transition in their mindset after they had realised operational continuity rather than focusing on the trauma of the initial move to remote work, which naturally stood out in comparison to when the situation normalised. I then began to wrap up the interviews by asking more personal questions about how remote work had impacted their careers and their personal lives. To conclude, I asked the final



question “independent of the company you work for now, what do you hope the future of work is like for you?” This question brought the interviews to a natural conclusion, inviting the participant to a place in which they were imagining what the future of their work life could be like. By following this procedure, I was able to stay true to the process of phenomenological inquiry by leading them through their lived experiences using reflective prompts and by listening and allowing the participant to immerse themselves in the recollection (Van Manen, 2017). Collectively, these experiences culminated into a rich data set that allowed me to answer my research question: how and to what extent has workplace culture, particularly interpersonal relations between remote colleagues, been affected by the transition to remote work?

### ***Recording and Analysing the Data***

The interviews were conducted by phone and the audio was recorded then transcribed to text. It was then analysed using MAXQDA, a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative analysis. Using this program, I created an emergent code that aligned with the reports on employee experience and social discourse on remote work (Dubey, 2020). This data was then used to write the findings. Due to health restrictions and regional differences, it was not practical to conduct in-person interviews, however, my goal was to utilise phone conversations to focus on the nuances in their tone and how they expressed their experiences. The phone interviews were done on a one-on-one basis between me, as the researcher, and a single interviewee. This was important for providing privacy for the interviewee so that they feel comfortable in disclosing their thoughts and feelings about their relationships with their colleagues, or in the case of the owners or manager, their observations and interpretations of relationships between their employees.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations for this research are limited. The only ethical consideration I foresaw in my research was that employees might feel pressured to participate in the study because their organisation supports it. To navigate this concern, I worked carefully to explain the purpose of my research and how I would ensure anonymity and confidentiality to gain informed consent. I utilised anonymisation techniques by replacing personal information, detailed organisation descriptors, and any other details that I deemed to be easily identifiable or traceable with aliases. Throughout the data collection process, I ensured that participants understood that all the data collected from my research would be privately stored in password protected files upholding the legal guidelines in The Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA), ensuring to protect the participants rights and well-being (Punch, 2016).

### **Participant Profiles**

A defining factor of phenomenological inquiry is the aim to understand the lived experience of everyone in the study. I have included this next section to provide enough context about the participants' family composition, professional designation, and at-home work set up without exposing the participants identities. Each of the following participant profiles have been given pseudonyms to keep their identities anonymous.

#### ***Participant one: Ralph***

Ralph is the CEO of a multifaceted non-profit community service-based organisation. The organisation operates as a service centre that seeks to provide vulnerable people with the support they need to thrive in their communities and families. Prior to the pandemic this organisation was a bustling day centre. During the early days of the pandemic Ralph held a

management position, and as a result of the previous CEO retiring, he stepped into the reins approximately 12 months into the pandemic. His career transition gave Ralph a unique perspective comparatively to the rest of the group as he had various levels of responsibility in overseeing the facilitation to remote work. Ralph had a history in theatre and was a self-proclaimed creative, which showed in how he pushed his organisation to be innovative, looking for ways to tackle all the various challenges facing the teams and their clients.

During the pandemic his remote work environment was based out of his home which included two school aged children and his partner. He had a home office that was secluded away from this family allowing him a quiet and private workspace. Ralph notably talked in-depth about the importance of coaching in our interview stating he felt he needed to have long phone conversations with his direct reports on a regular basis to keep his team connected. He also spoke fondly about the healthy changes in work dynamics because of working remotely and his positive feelings on the emphasis it put on mental health.

***Participant two: Solange***

Solange is a scientific consultant working for a for-profit organisation with approximately 20 employees. The organisation works with other organisations, in the private and public sector, to improve their social and environmental impact. Prior to the pandemic her primary place of work was an office based in a downtown core. Solange described the office space as a “typical open office concept with a lot of distractions” and “off the side of the desk conversations”. She is in a middle manager position and oversees a small team of 3-5 people who liaise with the clients in order to facilitate project-based work such as building community infrastructures. Notably she was the only self-professed introvert in the group and cited how the open office was a challenging space for her to work in. For this

reason, she found the transition to working remotely easy when she comparatively spoke about the struggles some of her direct reports experienced. She lives in a home that was able to comfortably facilitate working from home. She turned a spare room into her office allowing her space to work in relative privacy and peace. She lives with a partner and no dependants and did cite that she found herself becoming “comfortably isolated” while working remotely.

***Participant three: Tom***

Tom is a mid-level manager for a non-profit service-based organisation focused on supporting the ageing population with social activities and providing a sense of community. He oversees approximately 40-50 staff that going into the pandemic had very little experience working with technology. His experience during the shift to remote work was extremely difficult and saw a high level of attrition on his team. He talked of his own feelings and that of his team members as being burnt-out, lost and frustrated with the lack of support during the transition to remote work. The lack of resources on how to utilise technology for work communication and group activities while being remote severely impacted their organisation’s ability to pivot in a timely manner, highlighting the vulnerability of their sector.

Tom lives alone and has the extra space to accommodate a home office. He expressed the feeling of being constantly online while working and being unable to ever fully relax or unplug. Tom expressed difficulties sleeping and often found that he was “bracing” for the next emergency coming up with contingency plans for staffing shortages and that staff issues were constantly on his mind. The barriers between his home and work life dissolved and with

no direction or suggestion from his organisation Tom was unable to retain any separation between work and home resulting in no space to retreat from work and relax.

***Participant four: Shelly***

Shelly is what could be defined as a front-line worker, with no direct reports working in the service industry. She works on a small team of people under the direction of the first mentioned participant Tom. Throughout the interview Shelly struggled expressing herself resulting in her interview being the shortest and most limited in depth. It was my impression that she struggled because she seemed to be *still in the experience*, which could have been tied to her not having had any time off work since the beginning of the pandemic. She expressed dissonance and confusion and was unable to define what remote work was for her or her organisation. Her team did successfully pivot to remote operations, and she cited some projects that she felt were done well but the social aspect was felt deeply by her. She repeatedly expressed how much missed being around people, which is indicative of her being an extrovert. Shelly also struggled with her living situation and not being able to spatially accommodate a workspace at home. She lives alone in a small apartment with little space for her to work saying how it felt “awkward and confusing”. Being the only one in the study to live alone and the social nature of her work prior to the pandemic the transition was most negatively felt by Shelly, overall she struggled a great deal and when asked about the value of the experience and remote work for her organisation she said she believed that there was some value in it, especially in time of health emergencies but felt for her it was better to be in a collocated work environment.

***Participant five: Kyle***

Kyle is an outgoing entrepreneur who opened a service-based retail business during the pandemic. He built the business plan during the early days of the pandemic and went through the challenge of interpreting the public health orders and mandates while hiring and training a team. He is now successfully overseeing his business in retail cannabis and is acting CEO. As CEO he is responsible for managing a team of locations of managers as his direct reports. His perspective on the transition to remote work was optimistic, seeing it as a catalyst for change in the retail industry towards a more “equitable approach to the treatment of front-line workers”. He expressed feeling it “was a whole new game” and that gone were the days of slow hiring, inflexible scheduling, and low-value on service-based work. He also delighted in the fact that technology was able to solve so many issues for the industry allowing for employers to upskill workers and enhance their overall work experience. As CEO he oversaw several locations of managers as his team of direct reports.

Kyle has a family with two school aged children and his “long term partner” said as a result of working remotely he was able to spend more time being with them. He talked a lot about the recaptured time he had from not having to travel to and from the office and expressed how much he revelled in the fact that he was able to avoid commuting.

***Participant six: Tina***

Tina is the CEO and business owner of a large-scale social club that supports small businesses and contractors offering a space to work, socialise and workout. The space also has a food and retail outlet. It is located in a downtown core and is often used as a space for

public and private events. When the pandemic hit it was described as a “black swan”<sup>3</sup> for Tina more so than the other participants, as there was no obvious or immediate way to move her business operations remote. She explained that she was devastated at first but was able to collaborate with her team of creative extroverts to create social programs that included a full weekly calendar of online activities. Operationally her and her team were able to make it work and much of what, to her surprise became popular online programming has remained on after the club reopened. These programs have now added another revenue stream and value to the club members.

Tina and her team are all extroverts who thrive on sociability. As the leader she spent a lot of time checking in on her team's emotional states. She expressed that it was very hard for her team and many of them became “completely isolated” or “lost” in their home environments and required mental health interventions that consisted of drive-by drop offs of meal kits and goodies to help cheer them up and through the window chats. Tina herself expressed feeling unhappy working from home but said she now sees the value in having alone time to put into project work which she had “been putting on the backburner for years”. In this way the shift to remote work showed her the value as a leader to be open to her team to have the flexibility to work from home certain days of the week. She now operates on a hybrid model, allowing certain team members to work from home for part of the week and then invoice for the rest of the week.

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<sup>3</sup> The Black Swan Theory refers to those events which are difficult to predict in the normal course of business. They are random, unexpected, but high-impact events. These events are considered outliers, because there is no past data which can point towards its occurrence in the foreseeable future. (The Economic Times, 2022)

Tina is a single mother of a school aged child who had the space to work from home but struggled with schools being closed to balance her work and tending to her child's education and social needs from their home space.

### **Findings & Discussion**

The focus throughout this study has been to understand how working professionals experienced a change from in-person to remote work during the pandemic. To do this I conducted several in-depth interviews in which the participants and I discussed: how and to what extent has your workplace culture, particularly the interpersonal relations between you and your remote colleagues, been affected by the transition to remote work? These interviews and the subsequent analysing of them produced the following several themes:

1. A context collapse of the pre-pandemic work/life architecture happened during the initial transition to WFH that has affected the employee experience.
2. ICTs fundamentally change the way that colleagues interact with one another and maintain their relationships.
3. Collegial relationships provided a basis for service-based industries to successfully work remotely.
4. The lingering question of equity in a remote workplace.

#### ***Theme 1: A collision of home and work & impact to the employee experience***

The context surrounding a workplace informs job design impacts how people understand how to contribute to their organisation. Through this lens, context can be correlated with the rate of employee engagement and attrition, both of which are key metrics for human resource professionals to use when measuring the success of policies and practices (Schwind, et al., 1999). Context is also one of the primary ways in which workplace culture is



expressed by the company and realised by those who interact with it (Cole, Oliver, & Blaviesciunaite, 2014). Simply put, the work environment provides crucial information to its workers on what to do at work and how to behave in order to do it. Context can be understood as the “physical arrangements, social relationships, situational definitions, temporal moments and distinct locals” (Davis & Jurgenson, 2013). Applying this definition of context to work life can therefore be parsed out into what is physical and philosophical; the social norms and rituals associated with the way workers interact within their respective work environments (digital or physical). Here Kyle discusses how context impacted his life:

“Pre-COVID, you could, on a weekend, you'd actually get away, but I haven't left my job in over two years. It just never leaves. I think that definitely has an impact on your parenting, your sense of energy and connection to your home, because you're so exhausted, you just don't feel like doing anything. Then, just psychologically, it never really feels like you'll ever leave work, you're always at work. I probably sleep now maybe from 10 o'clock at night until 2 o'clock in the morning, that's about my normal sleep pattern. Then, I wake up, and I just start dealing with emails or processing and writing things down for ideas of how we can problem-solve something or all that kind of stuff. That's just how it is.”

This quote shows how Kyle struggled with context collapse while working from home, leading to dissonance, stress, and burnout (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Kyle's situation is acute because he and the other participants in this study had very little experience with ICTs

in a professional setting; rather, their experiences with them were primarily social or leisurely. Previous research has explored the context collapse of home and work life, through the use of communication technologies but focused on "white-collar" or "knowledge workers" (Mazmanian, M., Orlikowski, W. J., & Yates, J. 2013 & Gregg, 2013). However, this previous research has confirmed that people who work remotely feel compelled to stay online, leading to difficulty in separating personal and professional lives. This "always on" mentality has been thoroughly explored by Gregg (2013) in her metaphor of intimacy for work, calling out the blurring of home and work life as "presence bleed" and using that as a basis for arguing the need for new "benchmarks" that accommodate the communication maintenance (checking of emails and message monitoring) that happens in a remote work setting (Work's Intimacy, 2013, p.2 & p. 167).

Prior to the pandemic, the natural transitions between work and home, such as dropping your kids off for school, walking or driving to work, having lunch and coffee breaks with colleagues, or going to a yoga class on your way home, all suddenly ceased when public health orders mandated everyone to stay home. Again, we see these contextual changes as an example of a "flattening" or "collapse" of multiple contexts into one. As the data from the early stage of the interviews shows, many of the participants and the people on their teams were experiencing high levels of dissonance while working at home. When I asked Shelly to think back to when WFH was being established for her organisation, she explained the transition felt like "a shock." She explained: "It was definitely a shock because we're so used to, "Go, go, go." The transition? It was different. It just felt really different because I'm someone who is very used to just getting up and moving and going." When I asked Ralph that same question he replied

“It was it was a mixed bag of feelings and emotions, I think. I'll speak just largely from the management perspective. There was an unease of what to expect. There were a lot of unknowns, there were far more questions than there were answers. We had a responsibility to ensure that the employees, the people that work for us, and the people that we support...felt like they were being supported and that their best interests were being kept in mind.”

These statements demonstrate how the management of self and the navigating of the home and work identities became increasingly complicated for the participants (Grant, et. al., 2013). For this group to be able to work from home it meant that they needed to make spatial and mental accommodations for their work activities, which many were not prepared or equipped to do. To understand this point it is important to acknowledge that pre-pandemic the home was solely a place for personal and family activities. Simply put, the transition to remote work meant the collision of two different worlds; home and work. This not only changed the physical aspects of the context but also the main communication contexts surrounding daily work activities.

In the case of Tina's organisation she explained what it was like for her and some of her clients who use the co-working space (thus making them sort of like an external on-site staff group)

“One of the big things for us was safety. It's really nice if you've got a really comfortable house and you have no kids and you live in a safe house. You live in a place that you're not exposed to abuse or whatever. Not everybody has that. Not everybody has facilities to accommodate working from the kitchen table. It was just really interesting to be like, hey, everybody, check your entitlement, come from a

place of compassion. We're totally hearing what you're saying, we know this isn't for everyone, we're doing the best we can.”

Again we see the loss of the regular routines that once tethered people to their work the social context around work collapsed and were forcefully being rebuilt remotely. The philosophical reckoning and subsequent mental burden of bringing work into the home as well as the loss of routines represents a complete redefining of the workplace.

These significant changes provided the backdrop for participants’ stories to be told. How and where people performed work was dramatically changed by the onset of the pandemic. The data shows the loss of physical intimacy between colleagues and clients/customers was greatly reduced, causing a loss of the social networks that people rely on for their mental well-being. The highest referenced emotions felt by the participants (see appendix C) were isolation and disconnectedness while they were WFH, which correlates with what Neilson (2020) said “no human is an island” when discussing the effects of WFH during the pandemic. When asked, “how did it feel in the moment when everyone had to suddenly start working from home?,” responses from participants were influenced by the fact that throughout the early days of the pandemic there was little information available from government and health authorities on the predicted duration of the pandemic and therefore, no one knew what the future held for themselves or their colleagues. Ralph explains how the limited communication impacted his team

“We were in a constant state of readiness to take different actions and then implement different protocols based on the daily change of information that was coming up. In the very early days, first and foremost, it was risk mitigation...we didn't really know what we were dealing with at that point.”

This combined with the fact that they had very little remote work infrastructure or training in place to facilitate work activities and communication while working remotely, meant that the initial transition was extremely difficult. Here Shelly talks about the infrastructure issues “we didn't really have any communication during lockdown or remote working...It really revamped everything that we had known and had been doing for years and years prior to COVID.” The general lack of guidance required an extempore approach for the newly remote workforce to learn and adopt radical changes to their systems and tools in order to get work done. Here Solange talks about how the early days of WFH felt for her and her team

“It did take a little bit of time to get used to. You've been working in an office space for so long and then suddenly, you're at home making your makeshift office, whether it's on the kitchen table or for me personally, our second bedroom, which had turned into a bit of a storage room was now the office space that I needed to clean out. Yes, so it definitely came with a bit of a learning curve.”

Here we see the dissonance and unsupported nature of the WFH transition show up when she explains how she had to suddenly adapt her home space to accommodate a makeshift office.

***Theme 2: ICTs fundamentally change the way that colleagues interact with one another and maintain their relationships.***

Many participants cited that pre-pandemic their organisations had ICTs such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams operating in the background as a secondary or tertiary communication channel. With the onset of pandemic and pivot to remote work these channels became the primary means of communicating. This rapid transition to utilising ICT tools as the primary means for the day-to-day was novel for these industries. Here Ralph explains the use of ICTs in his organisation as being adopted after phone and email

“I think the familiar tools that we used were with a lot of talking on the phone and through email, but new tools that we explored and became familiar with were all the rest of the world using zoom....we've got a subscription to the Microsoft 365 suite which we use for email and everything like that. There's a whole plethora of apps in there and different resources. The pandemic really gave us a need and in some ways a bit of space to really explore that.”

The use of traditional technologies like phones and email as a primary means early on in the transition to remote work was cited by several participants. Tina talks about how her team stayed in touch “Slack, and obviously phone, I check in with them all the time... We'd check in with each other, see how we're doing. I sent them little cocktail gifts, curbside cocktail gifts because it's a nerve-wracking time for an employee”. Here Tom talks about his experience and how the expectation around communication changed from “ the plain old phone call, then you had group messaging platforms like Slack”. Most participants discussed using the phone, especially during the early days of the pandemic and was cited at 15.69% of the overall tools, which is 1.96% higher than any other asynchronous tools. When I inquired into why the phone was used rather than an ICT the reason was the need for emotional intimacy that the phone offered. The phone is a commonly used tool that people are familiar with, so its use didn't require a new skill set, making it a viable tool for this group to facilitate emotionally charged or complex conversations.

Notably, Zoom came in as the most utilised tool and was cited as the tool that provided the most flexibility for teams to use for meetings. Solange explains how her team uses video calls “Over the last two years, I don't think I've ever spent more time on video calls [chuckles] than I have through the pandemic. We utilise Zoom a ton. I am on there-- Oh

gosh, 10 to 15 times a week for different meetings.” Tina credits Zoom to being one of the main facilitators for her business operations citing “We just did up a whole brand new website and we put all the programming on there, and then we did all the classes on Zoom. It was a lot of work”. When I asked about how the emotionally charged conversations were happening Ralph said that Zoom was the tool they found most effective “I found that it was a really important thing to do to take the time, to have them, the virtual face-to-face. It was important for us to see each other's faces and not do it over the phone but to coach a lot of my direct reports through this process.” This data supports what Holland & Brewster (2021) say about the importance of video-conferencing tools in the suite of ICTs used for remote workers in the effort to fulfil the visual need to understand emotions.

When Solange was hosting team meetings she noticed some of their team members were regularly signing on to Zoom meetings early which put them in a virtual waiting room that provoked the idea: “why don't I open it up early and see if people want to start chatting?” She noticed that people immediately started socially connecting with one another about topics unrelated to work, sharing about their families and how they were emotionally faring. Solange then began regularly opening up the Zoom meetings early and leaving them open after the meeting finished as a space for people to connect socially. Kyle’s team also used Zoom in a less-conventional way “Hooking up peers to peers through virtual-- obviously, Zoom became a pretty big component to everything that we did. Setting up and delivering things to individuals so that they could have tactile kind of things to do, putting together puzzles or whatever, then they would share them with each other. Just little things like that, and kind of things that the client’s things they could do.”

By applying the framework of AST to these examples of Zoom use it becomes clear how organisations have made adaptations to their structures by using Zoom to change the way that they host creative activities whilst adapting the technology to suit their needs. In this scenario the human need for connecting socially is being addressed by the users changing their *rules* about creative activities whilst the organisation recreates its social structures, that used to occur in-person, in a digital environment (DeSanctis, & Poole 1994). The water-cooler impromptu conversations that happen in a collocated workspace did not naturally happen with this group once they moved to a remote work scenario which is a key finding from this research. The human need to connect with one another was not fully realised through the use of ICTs which reduced the overall job satisfaction felt by this group. Whether ICT's are limited in their ability to provide a means to satisfy the social aspects of work or if human behaviour (the way in which humans use ICT's) has yet to adapt to the point in which the richness of impromptu in-person conversations can be achieved through their use is an exciting area of interest that requires further research and inquiry.

***Theme 3: Collegial relationships provided a basis for service based industries to successfully work remotely.***

In this section of the findings, I concentrate on the relational implications of working remotely within the organisations, seeking to answer my research question: how have workplace relationships and relational capital at organisations been affected by the transition from in-person to remote work? To understand this question, it is necessary to point out that without the pandemic, this group likely would not be considered suitable for remote work due to the physically social nature of their work. In discussions with Shelly about the likelihood



that her organisation would have gone remote had the pandemic not occurred “There's no way that we would've just been like, oh, we're going to go remote”.

Sociability is a “fundamental feature of extroversion” (Lucas et al., 2000) and people who demonstrate this personality type tend to be more open to reaching out to colleagues for social support than their introverted counterparts (Swickert et al., 2002). Inadvertently, during the process of the interviews, five out of six participants said that most of the people they managed identified as extroverted. Here Tom talks about what he noticed on his team: “they are outgoing, they found it super tough because their energy was based on being around people and feeding off other people. Now they're just in their own minds and by themselves”. It was further explained from his experience working and hiring people that service-based industries typically attracted extroverts, who they described as people that thrive in work environments supportive of highly social interactions become “lost” while working remotely. Tina explains how this also happened on her team “what I've noticed is people, they're so deep in the isolation, which for most people would include loneliness, that they're not realising that they're in it. That's when you get that disconnection and the loneliness and depression”. Shelly put it more simply, stating “ I definitely think like in our organisation, a lot of people are more extroverted. We just do better in person than remote.” This feedback supports work that Evans et al., (2022) did on the importance of considering personality and how especially during the pandemic extroverts experienced deteriorating job outcomes. To this same point the data showed that the one introvert in the group, Solange described her WFH experience “I personally have loved this remote work. I find that I'm a more introverted person so I had no problem working from home at all. I also found that my productivity went up. Not that our office is loud, but when you are sharing a space with people, there is usually

different distractions going on.” As a people manager Kyle saw the introverts on his team flourishing as well “I think it became easier for the introverted to become more connected, and the reason I say that is, through short form messaging and emojis and these other forms of low stress communications, it permitted introverted people to have a capability to have a voice much bigger.” Considering that both the introverted and extroverted personality types experience remote work very differently is a key finding that supports the work done in this area already (Anderson, Seth, Kaplan, Ronald & Vega, 2015 & Townsend & DeMarie, 2013).

The findings also showed relational capital boomeranged through the timeline of the transition to remote work. Ralph discusses how the crisis of the pandemic brought his team closer together “I think in some ways it made us all vulnerable. When you've got people who are sharing in that feeling of vulnerability, there's that opportunity for galvanization. Once the initial transition had passed this group showed a strong resilience and willingness to reach out to their colleagues and maintain their relationships with one another...there was that acknowledgment that regardless of where you sit in the organisational structure, we've all had this shared experience together. It's been a very level playing field. I think there's been respect on all sides for what everyone has gone through and what everyone has contributed. It just feels a lot of the day-to-day distraction of the grind of the job was removed.” Once they had overcome the initial crisis and reached a level of operational continuity they felt extremely proud and hopeful. They had become closer to their colleagues. Solange talks about how her team established supportive rituals “I think we've done a really good job of making sure we get to know each other, to check-in. I'm sure like many businesses, we did the virtual get-togethers for a bit. We did way too many rounds of bingo and get to know you, but it was a good time.” These emotional check-ins that became structured and routine created a culture

that supported self-disclosure and relational intimacy that had not existed before remote work. Emotional intimacy by way of self-disclosure and trust building is a fundamental step in developing and maintaining relationships, especially in a remote setting, (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020, p.7) and although it took a period of disruption, the people I interviewed showed themselves to be adaptable, able to utilise new technologies to be intimate and caring for their colleagues. This is a testament to the human need for connection and aligns with the AST framework, showing the use of technology in “expected and unexpected ways” to overcome barriers by changing their communication practices between colleagues to successfully WFH (Scott, et. al., 2019).

***Theme 4: Surveillance in a remote workplace.***

This study has shown technology and its relationship to remote work is clear but the question of how its use impacts equity in the workplace is not. The possibility that built in surveillance features within ICTs to enhance the hegemonic position of the employer over the employee and degradation of personal privacy is lurking behind remote works' promise of autonomy. Reports show that organisations who are using digital communication tools like Slack can listen in, record, and archive conversations between their employees (Holland & Tham, 2019). A Canadian study from 2007 outlined the concerns around digital surveillance, showing this type of surveillance violates employee rights to privacy and intrusion upon seclusion (Levin,p. 315). As part of my own professional interest I reviewed the Worksafe and Employment Standards Act of BC (ESA) legislation on the topic of digital surveillance there is little to offer organisations.

Accordingly to Worksafe BC:

“Surveillance is a tool of last resort to be used where there is existing evidence to suspect misrepresentation or fraud by a worker, there is a strong likelihood the surveillance evidence will assist in establishing fraud or misrepresentation, and other investigative methods would be ineffective (Worksafe BC, 2022).”

Similarly the Employment Standards Act cites:

“An employer can only use covert (hidden) surveillance if the employee under surveillance is suspected of having breached the trust relationship between the employee and the employer by engaging in fraudulent activity (such as falsely claiming to have suffered a workplace injury) (Employment Standards Act, 2022).”

Each of these government bodies have yet to recognize the implicit surveillance features built into digital communication tools and, given that they are commonly used for remote work and can be used in unlawful or questionable ways by the employer (e.g., in violation of Canada’s Personal Information Protection and Electronics Act [PIPEDA]), the need for research on the ethical implications of digital surveillance and remote employees’ human rights is acute (Officer of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, 2021). Furthermore, the inclusion of surveillance features that monitor employee’s keystrokes, browsing history, and overall interaction with technology is absent and undefined in the legislation.

Now is the time for the government bodies in Canada to do their jobs as gatekeepers of progression in society to develop legislation that supports the remote work movement. Based on the results from this study and my experience as a HR professional I believe that the common negative aspects of remote work: the loneliness, isolation and burnout can be mitigated through researched informed policy for organisations to lean on. Each participant I spoke to in this study expressed some level of happiness and hope for the future of work,

citing “we must learn from this experience, even though it was hard we learned so much and what a shame it would be if we didn't apply those learnings to make the future of work better”. Remote work is ripe with possibility and as a result of this study I see that as a society where we have the opportunity to make the future of remote work more human centric. Government has a responsibility to participate in legally defining remote work and build research-informed legislation that supports its practice across major industries. From my experience as a practitioner and insight gained through this study I know that had legislation existed that outlined the basic requirements of the employer such as: technology and workstation set up, internet and data allowances, scheduling parameters and what health and wellness benefits should be provided to remote workers would have made the facilitation process much easier for organisations that had to pivot to remote work during the pandemic.

### ***Discussion***

This study sought to understand how collocated workers experienced the sudden shift to remote work during the pandemic and what sort of impact that has on workplace culture and to some extent, the answers to these questions existed in the literature. What my data adds to the existing literature is the focus on people who work in jobs that wouldn't have been considered appropriate for remote work pre-pandemic. The unique situation that the pandemic created by forcing everyone to shelter-in-place meant that organisations had one of two choices: 1) work remotely, or 2) shut down operations. Simply put, remote work became a necessity, and for the service-based industries like the ones I spoke to, it meant that they were completely unprepared.

The findings show a chronological pattern beginning at the start of the pandemic when WFH mandates came into effect causing widespread disruption to people's lives and a

contextual collapse of their work and home lives. These findings align with the early pandemic research from Bryant and Reimer when they discuss the implications to the HR process from the rapid and unplanned shift to remote work (2020). Further to that initial point of transition the next phase in the data shows the context collapse experienced by the participants. This data highlights the importance of transition planning when migrating collocated workers to WFH, as well as what is required to support their unique needs once the transition has been made. Holland and Brewster also discuss these needs in the Handbook of Research on Remote Work and Worker Well-Being in the Post Covid1-9 Era (Holland & Brewster 2021), showing the importance of understanding the differences between collocated and remote work to protect employee wellness. Based on this research, the existing literature and the unique parameters that the pandemic put on organisations it is clear that remote work should not consist of packing up your desk at the office and simply moving it into your home. The dissonance, isolation, and general un-happiness expressed by the participants in this study align with these points and suggest the need for new training, support, and programs that are specifically designed to prepare and inform remote workers of the common psychological impacts felt by remote workers.

The participants expressed a perceived connection between introversion and early success and overall happiness while working remotely was also evident. Likewise, the extroverts in the study experienced the transition with more difficulty and discontent. Nevertheless, after the initial transition to remote work, the results show that by establishing regular “check-in” rituals and adapting ICTs to suit the social aspects lost from being collocated, the barriers to remote work could be overcome. Pre-pandemic research on personality type as it relates to rates of self-disclosure and overall success in remote work has

been highlighted (Anderson et al., 2015). My data shows that this work remains relevant by showing that care and consideration should be taken by HR professionals in not overlooking the importance of personality type. Another substantial contribution of this research is that it shows how service based organisations adapted to WFH because the people in my study had no choice, other than quitting or taking leave, when it came to working remotely. The majority of the participants were self-expressed extroverts or were managing extroverts who struggled a great deal during the early days of the pandemic, however, for the most part they were able to eventually find success. This was done with ICTs like Slack, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, to socialise and connect with one another and a great deal of determinism and flexibility in their mindsets. Overall, this study uniquely adds that service-based industry workers can adapt to remote work and successfully service their clients/customers in a digital environment.

### **Limitations**

This research discusses the impacts that remote work and subsequent use of ICTs is having on company culture. Due to several constraints, there are limitations to this study worth noting. First, the small sample size, although inline with the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, was also a result of the allowable time frame to complete the research. The sample size of six participants all came from what Statistics Canada designates as 'small businesses' that employ between 20-99 people (May 2011). Another limitation was the organisations were not from the technology industry because it was important to exclude any companies that had a formalised work from home framework setup prior to the pandemic. Finally, it is important to note the emotional impact that COVID-19 has had in my life and in each one of the participants' lives. The health concerns surrounding the spread of the virus

was the rationale for the public health mandates and so ultimately it is the reason why the shift to remote work happened. None of the questions in the interviews directly cited COVID-19 but the ongoing impact of the pandemic went without saying and its effect is omnipresence in this research.

### **Conclusion**

As society continues to explore the new epoch of hybrid and remote work, whether that be from home or anywhere, HR professionals and all levels of organisational leaders can benefit from continued research on this topic to inform job design, recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction. Time is of the essence as many organisations that are key to economic stability are facing the complicated question of whether a remote model should be permanent, and if so, which types of organisations are best suited for this type of work? This research project is a cultural inquiry that discusses this as a question by applying it to the practice of human resources. It shows the correlations between the negative impacts of remote work and discusses how they can be mitigated. Likewise, it shows that many industries can—should they wish to—adapt their traditional co-located models to include remote work.

Remote work has many compelling positives for those wishing to recapture time spent on going to and from the workplace and are seeking for a healthier work life balance. Culturally, remote work can also provide many benefits by using ICTs to mediate workplace communications, especially for those that express themselves as introverted and benefit from the inherent introspectiveness digital communications afford (Remus, 2005, p. 118). Finally, I believe this study exemplifies the strong desire people have to connect with one another. This study demonstrated that with time remote teams of people, even those with a low-digital



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literacy, do maintain relationships in a digital work environment by seeking out new ways to communicate and *be* together.

This research project was an exciting and personally enriching opportunity for me to contribute to the enduring discussion on what constitutes human progress. Practically, this research has created a new resource for organisations that are seeking to understand the rapid pace of technology and its influence on their organisational communications. It also modestly contributes to the discussion on what the future of work might be like post-pandemic, and how that future reality will impact the field of HR and organisational communication.

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**Appendix A: Letter of Invitation (sent by email)**



**participant line - Letter of Invitation: Study on Remote Work  
[Date]**

Hello [Prospective Participant]

My name is Sarah Tessier, I am a Royal Roads graduate student and would like to invite you to be a part of a research project on how individuals like yourself have experienced remote work during the pandemic. This project is a requirement for the completion of my Master's Degree in the Professional Communication program. My credentials can be established by contacting my thesis supervisor Dr. Jaigris Hodson at [jaigris.hodson@royalroads.ca](mailto:jaigris.hodson@royalroads.ca).

You have been chosen as a prospective participant because of the size of the business you work for and the likelihood that you have pivoted from in-person work to remote work during the on-going pandemic.

My ask is that you participate in a one-on-one interview with me that will take approximately 45-60 minutes during which I will ask questions to investigate the following aspects of the remote work experience:

1. How and to what extent individuals and working teams of people have been impacted by the shift to remote work.
2. How communication practices have changed amongst co-workers and what tools are being used to facilitate remote work communication.
3. Explore the ways in which remote work is being facilitated in order to identify ways in which it can be improved.

The interview will be conducted and recorded by using Zoom or phone depending on *your* preference. All recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed and anonymized into text. An electronic copy, with no public access, will be held online in the Royal Roads library repository.

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You are not compelled to participate in this research project; you may decline to participate without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question during the interview process. Once the comments collected during the interview become part of an anonymous data set it *may* no longer be possible to withdraw from the study.

Please feel free to contact me should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes. All participants will receive a copy of the final thesis report no later than one month from the publication date of the thesis.

I appreciate that you are busy and want to thank you in advance for taking the time to consider participating in my project.

If you feel you would like to participate in my research project, please contact me at and I will email you the full details on the study and the consent form.

Name: Sarah Tessier

Email: *[email address]*

Telephone: **[phone number]**

Thank you,

Sarah Tessier

**Appendix B: Interview Consent Form (sent by email)**



**Letter of Information & Consent Form**

**Study Name:** Relational Resilience in a Digital Workplace  
**Principal Investigator:** Sarah Tessier, MA Student at Royal Roads University

Hello [NAME],

You are receiving this email because you have expressed interest in participating in Royal Roads graduate student Sarah Tessier's study on the remote work phenomenon. *Sarah is a student in the Professional Communications program working under the supervision of Dr. Jaigris Hodson and Dr. Chandell Gosse.*

**INTERVIEW OVERVIEW**

You are invited to participate in a one-on-one interview. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. Data from approximately 10 research participants from various small businesses (under 100 employees) across Canada will be collected for this study.

- The objective of this research project is to investigate how and to what extent individuals and teams of colleagues who have moved from a primarily in-person work scenario to working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic have been impacted in terms of their wellbeing and respective careers.
- As a part of this study, you will be recorded for research purposes/research. You have the right to refuse to be recorded. Only *Sarah Tessier* will have access to these recordings and information will be kept confidential. You will not be able to preview these recordings. The digital recordings will be transcribed by date TBD.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Please note that your valuable ideas and opinions will appear in the report itself. However, no personal information such as your name or personally identifiable information will be used to attribute those comments to you.

The confidentiality/anonymity of your data will be ensured by:

- Identifiable data (names, positions, and organisational affiliation) will be anonymized with numerical coding to protect all participant's identities.
- All data including recordings will be transcribed to text, anonymized and stored on a password-protected computer.
- While in transmission on the internet, the confidentiality of data cannot be guaranteed.

### **RIGHT TO WITHDRAW**

You are not compelled to participate in this research project. Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer any question during the interview process.

Once the comments collected during the interview become part of an anonymous data set you may no longer be able to withdraw from the study.

### **FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION**

The results of this research will be published/presented in a thesis.

- Only aggregate findings and no individual responses will be reported.
- An electronic copy, with no public access, will be held online in the Royal Roads library repository.
- The results of this research may be made available through Open Access resources.
- An executive summary of the findings from this study will be available to you within a month of the thesis publication.
- You can request the thesis by e-mailing [*email address*]. OR if you choose to provide your email address for this purpose at the end of the study, the thesis will be e-mailed to you no later than one month after the thesis has been published.

### **RISKS**

As a result of your participation in this study, you may experience some nervousness or anxiety, participants will be emailed a copy of all interview questions prior to the interview beginning to prepare for the session.

While the likelihood is small, it is required that as a participant know that if Zoom is chosen for the interview, the collected data may be stored on or accessible by servers in the United States and may be subject to examination by government or law enforcement under the Patriot Act.

### **BENEFITS**

The research will contribute to the body of literature/knowledge on the work from home phenomenon otherwise known as remote work or telework, digital communications, change management, relational capital, adaptive structuration theory, and workplace health and wellness. This knowledge can be applied to the facilitation of remote work which will reduce the negative impacts on remote workers and employee turnover thus creating workforce stability and economic growth.

### **CONTACTS**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study you may contact the researcher, *Sarah Tessier* at *[email address]*

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the *Office of the Research Ethics* at *[email address]*

If you have any questions that go beyond this or wish to verify this study you may contact the Research Supervisor, *Dr. Jaigris Hodson* at *[email address]*

### **CONSENT**

If you consent to the terms laid out in this letter please email *[email address]* to indicate you wish to continue with the study and a digital copy of this consent form will be emailed to you via docusign for you to digitally sign.

*This research project has been approved by the RRU Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at [email address]*

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I \_\_\_\_\_ (Participant full legal name) have read the information listed above and agree to participate in the study.

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Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Interview Questions and Preamble



### Interview Questions and Preamble

Hello [name],

Thank you for meeting with me today, I am very excited to hear about your remote work experience.

Before we get started can I please confirm with you that your participation in this study is voluntary?

Yes/ No.

Thank you. Okay I will quickly go over a few housekeeping points and then we can get started. As you know from our earlier communication, this interview will take approximately 30 minutes and is designed to understand your experience as a remote worker during the pandemic. Also a gentle reminder that if at any time during the interview you wish to stop please let me know and we will conclude the session. Likewise if there are any questions that you prefer not to answer let me know and I will be happy to move on.

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### Employee Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about how you came to be working from home?
  - a. Can you describe how this transition felt to you?
  - b. How does it feel to you now?
2. How would you define remote work?
  - a. What is the difference between in-office work and remote work?
3. Describe how you communicate with your colleagues while working remotely?
  - a. How does this compare to how you communicated with them prior to the pandemic?



- b. How do you feel about the communication between you and your colleagues now that you are working remotely?
4. Describe your working relationship with your coworkers since you began working remotely?
5. Describe your working relationship with your manager since you began working remotely?
6. Can you tell me about a time that you felt engaged or enthusiastic about a project or a task you worked on remotely with another co-worker?
- a. Can you describe the context surrounding this experience?
  - b. What type of communication tools did you use to work on this project or task?
  - c. Are there other tools that you use while at work for communicating?
  - d. If so, how do you decide which tool to use for what scenario?
8. How has working remotely impacted your career or work life?
9. How has it impacted your personal or home life?
10. Independent of the company you work for now, what do you hope the future of work is like for you?

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### **Manager Interview Questions**

1. How would you describe remote work as it is for you and your company?
2. Can you tell me about how your organisation came to be working from home?
- a. How did this transition feel to you at the time?
  - b. How does it feel to you now?
3. Can you describe how you communicate with your colleagues while working remotely?
- a. Can you tell me how you communicate with your direct reports while working remotely?
  - b. How do you feel about the communication between you and your reports?

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4. How would you describe your relationship with your direct reports since you began working remotely?
  - a. How do you feel about these relationships?
  
5. Can you tell me about a time while you were overseeing a project or task and your team was engaged or enthusiastic?
  - a. Can you describe the context surrounding this experience?
  - b. What type of tools did you use to work together?
  - c. Are there other tools that are used while at work for communicating?
  - d. If so, how do you and others decide which tool to use for what scenario?
  
6. How has working remotely impacted your work life?
  
7. How has it impacted your personal life?
  
8. Independent of the company you work for now, what do you hope the future of work is like for you?

**Appendix D: Emotional Reference Coding List from Interviews**

<b>Emotional State</b>	<b>Number of times referenced</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Isolation/Disconnectedness	18	31.58%
Dissonance/Confusion	14	24.56%
Hope & Happiness	11	19.30%
Exhaustion	7	12.28%
Anxiety	4	7.02%
Trauma	3	5.26%
Total responses	57	

**Appendix D: Use of ICT's**

	<b>Tool</b>	<b># of times cited as being used</b>	<b>% of usage</b>
<b>Synchronous</b>	Zoom	17	20.73%
	Google Hangouts	2	2.44%
	Slack	3	3.66%
	Teams	1	1.22%
	Phone	8	9.76%
<b>Asynchronous</b>	Trello	1	1.22%
	Email	7	8.54%
	G-suite (drive)	1	1.22%
	Flow	2	2.44%
	Interactive Website (company wiki)	6	7.32%
	<a href="#">Monday.com</a>	1	1.22%
	Microsoft Sharepoint	2	2.44%