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# An Exploratory Case Study of How Remote Employees Experience Workplace Engagement

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Aaron M. Lee

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2018

Abstract

An Exploratory Case Study of How Remote Employees Experience Workplace

Engagement

by

Aaron M. Lee

M.Ed., The George Washington University, 2004

BA, The University of Virginia, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

August 2018

## Abstract

In the last 10 years, the number of remote workers has increased by 80%. Remote workers are more productive than their traditional in-office colleagues, cheaper to maintain for the organization because of the major decrease in overhead costs, and drastically increase organizational leaders' hiring options. The problem was that over half of the nation's disengaged employees work remotely, contributing significantly to associated annual costs of employee disengagement to businesses of upwards of \$550 billion. The purpose of this exploratory case study, using a critical incident technique, was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of 14 remote workers nationwide. The data collection method included in-depth interview questions, open and selective coding, and thematic analysis from the data provided by the 14 participants. The 9-step analysis process, triangulation, and member checking consisted of structure and credibility of the findings. The taxonomy derived from this study that strengthens and maintains the engagement of remote workers is directly related to the primary theme of connectedness and organizational culture; the taxonomy derived from this study that erodes workplace engagement is directly related to the secondary themes of organizational fit and disconnectedness. The findings suggested that remote workers experience strengthened and sustained levels of workplace engagement more when working environments where they have a personal connection to the organization's mission and vision and where they feel the work culture is familial. The taxonomy derived from this research could provide organizational leaders with techniques to engage and inspire the talent of remote workers to create positive and sustainable social change.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the future researchers who desire to add to the organizational leadership and management community of practice. This process is challenging, but the reward of inspiring others to add their perspectives and ideas to the greater body of scholars is truly awesome. Thank you to all those who have contributed to this body of work. Your support and interest are greatly appreciated.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

More than 70% of U.S. employees are not engaged in their work (Gallup, 2017). Analysts at Gallup (2017) defined *engaged employees* as those who are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work, team members, and workplace. The data that Gallup has collected over the last 17 years has shown a steady decline in the workplace engagement of employees in organizations across the United States (Adkins, 2015).

Parallel to the decline in the culture of engagement, organizations are experiencing rapid growth in their remote/telecommuting work options (Nickson & Siddons, 2012). Working remotely has become more the norm for organizations than the exception. From 2005 to 2013 the number of U.S. remote workers rose 80% (Tugend, 2014). Organizational culture experts have called this increase in remote work a culture of engagement (Piaget, 2013; Pierce, 2013; Roark, 2013), that is, a work environment where the leaders create a culture defined by meaningful work, deep employee engagement, job and organizational fit, and strong authentic leadership (West, 2013). With this rapid growth and expansion of remote working options, organizational leaders have grown increasingly concerned about their ability to build, manage, and maintain a workplace culture of engagement with employees who they never physically see in the office space (Adkins, 2015; Roark, 2013; Tugend, 2014).

Chapter 1 includes background information and the research problem, purpose of the study, and central and related research questions that guide the study. The conceptual

framework builds on Kahn's (1990) employee engagement theory and Maslow's (1943) motivation theory by identifying the incidents and responses that are critical for influencing the workplace engagement of remote workers. The research methodology and the limitations and assumptions are previewed. The significance of the study is presented in terms of its potential contribution to the management and leadership community of practice.

### **Background of the Study**

Employee engagement is a major focus of leadership and organizational development. Organizational leaders and stakeholders have a growing interest in employee engagement and expect their subordinate managers to do what is necessary to keep employee engagement levels high (Adkins, 2017). Leaders are being measured by their ability to increase their employee engagement levels (Hackbarth, 2017). The literature has identified a number of contributing factors that increase employee engagement practices. Kahn (1990) is often credited as the germinal source for conceptualizing employee engagement. Kahn defined engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). Kahn provided the foundational context for understanding how theories of motivation (Alderfer, 1972; Herzberg, 1968; Maslow, 1943) influence employee engagement.

Since Kahn's (1990) initial work was published, most researchers have focused on traditional factors that influence engagement and the relationship between engagement and organizational goals and outcomes. In his critique of Goffman's (1961) earlier work, Kahn addressed the limitations of studying engagement in traditional face-to-face environments. Kahn argued that Goffman's focus on the social interactions participants had in a face-to-face environment did not capture the dynamic nature of human interaction and reflected only a snapshot in time. Much of the current literature on employee engagement that has borrowed from Kahn has failed to address the emerging phenomenon of remote workplace engagement (Anitha, 2014; Anitha & Aruna, 2016; Crawford, Rich, Buckman, & Bergeron, 2014; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2016; Denison et al., 2014; Eddleston & Mulki, 2015; McTernan, Dollard, & Tuckey, 2016; Solnet, Kralj, & Kandampully, 2012). These scholars connected Kahn's definition of engagement to other employee-related workplace concerns such as impact on performance, production, and retention, but these studies did not address how engagement is increased, maintained, or eroded among remote workers.

Analysts at the Gallup (2017) organization continue to build on the work of Kahn (1990) by partnering with companies globally to further develop data and literature on workplace engagement. In the 17 years that Gallup researchers have examined employee engagement, they have added to the conception of an engaged employee, someone Gallup defined as an individual involved in, passionate about, and committed to his or her work and workplace. To collect data on the levels of employee engagement, Gallup researchers



have surveyed thousands of employees globally using their Q12 survey tool. In early 2017, the scope of this research was expanded to include additional data on the engagement levels of teleworkers, or those who occasionally work remotely. Engagement increases when employees can spend some time working remotely and some time working in a traditional office space co-located with their coworkers (Mann & Adkins, 2017). Employees who experience this blended working arrangement have higher levels of engagement than those employees who do not (Mann & Adkins, 2017). A self-reported delimitation of the Gallup work is that the latest findings are limited to the occasional remote worker (teleworker) and do not address employees who work remotely 100% of their work week (Mann & Adkins, 2017).

An emerging remote employee culture is developing as remote work increases, but researchers have inadequately addressed this phenomenon (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2016; Eddleston & Mulki, 2015). Organizational leaders tend to assume that the organizational culture that exists in the traditional office extends to the virtual work environment. Gallup's (2017) engagement research suggested otherwise; however, there is limited data and literature that addresses this phenomenon.

This study was intended to address these gaps and add to the knowledge of the workplace engagement experiences of remote workers. The results provide organizational leaders the tools and information needed to better understand how to manage the engagement levels of their remote workers. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study, using a critical incident technique (CIT), was to create a taxonomy of

responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of approximately 20 remote workers nationwide who had worked for their organization for a minimum of 1 year. This study was needed to provide context and content to support the growing literature and knowledgebase on employee engagement for remote workers.

### **Problem Statement**

Rapidly changing technology has stifled organizational leaders' ability to manage and lead their organizations (Barton, Grant, & Horn, 2012; Hansen, 2015; Huhman, 2015). Because of mobile device accessibility, many employees want their organizational leaders to integrate those devices into the workplace to increase their remote work options. Traditionally, organizational leaders provided face-to-face oversight and management to employees who worked within steps of their offices; thus, leaders had an opportunity to respond immediately to their employees' needs and concerns (Dukes, 2014). The workplace is now a hybrid working environment that incorporates both in-office and remote employees, but the engagement needs of these employees vary because of their different working environments (Khan, 2015). The general management problem was that the number of remote workers has steadily increased while the levels of workplace engagement have been decreasing (Adkins, 2015; Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015; Bibby, 2015; Greer & Payne, 2014; Van Yperen, Rietzschel, & De Jonge, 2014). Indeed, 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged at work, which costs organizations upwards of \$550 billion annually (Gallup, 2015). The specific management problem was that more

than half the nation's disengaged employees work remotely (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017) and experience a work culture that limits their career development opportunities (Griswold, 2014), minimizes their visibility within the organization (Gajendran, Harrison, & Delaney-Klinger, 2015), and increases their feelings of isolation (Van Yperen et al., 2014). These employees contribute significantly to the associated annual costs of employee disengagement to business of upwards of \$550 billion (Gallup, 2015). Because of the lack of research on remote workers' engagement experiences, I designed this study to explore remote workers' engagement and create a taxonomy of the critical incidents and responses that can strengthen and maintain favorable engagement levels and mitigate against incident that could erode remote worker engagement.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study, using a CIT, was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement.

### **Research Questions**

The central and supporting research questions for this study were based on the conceptual framework and the literature review for this study

#### **Central Research Question**

RQ1. How can responses to the incidents that are critical for strengthening, maintaining, or eroding the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?

### **Supporting Research Questions**

SRQ1. How can responses to critical incidents that maintain the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?

SRQ2. How can responses to critical incidents that strengthen the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?

SRQ3. How can responses to critical incidents that erode the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Research on remote work cultures of engagement and what influences remote workers' engagement levels is limited. The conceptual framework for this study was a blueprint for examining the phenomenon of workplace engagement among remote workers. The concept of employee engagement is often based on how it is being defined, used, and measured. With the proliferation of remote structures and technologies for communication, employee engagement in the modern workplace is difficult to define in the management and leadership community of practice (Eisenberger, Malone, & Presson, 2016). The conceptual framework built upon Kahn's (1990) personal engagement and disengagement theory and served as a foundational construct for understanding the fluidity of employee engagement and depicting and defining how people experience workplace engagement. Maslow's (1943) needs theory was employed to further extrapolate how personal motivation combined with personal engagement may affect

work cultures and create environments that influence employees' commitment to their organization.

Many organizational leaders and stakeholders believe employee engagement drives organizational performance (Pierce, 2013); thus, there is naturally a dual interest in ensuring employees are engaged in their work. Organizational leaders must provide a working environment in which employees feel like the customer, which leads to employees working at what Maslow (1943) called the self-actualized/self-managed level. Engaged employees are often those who work harder, longer, and produce more than their less-engaged colleagues (Alton, 2017; Paris, 2015). Gallup (2015, 2017) has conducted comprehensive research and analysis on employee engagement for the last 17 years and defined engaged employees as those who are personally involved in, excited about, and committed to their work, coworkers, and workplace. Gallup's definition aligns with Kahn's (1990) theory of engagement. Kahn argued those who are personally engaged choose to express themselves cognitively, emotionally, and physically when they involve themselves in activities they believe to be meaningful and safe. The alignment between Gallup and Kahn is also connected to Maslow's needs theory and his later research on what he called *eupsychian management*. Maslow (1965) showed that once employees' lower and higher-level needs are met and they are operating at a self-actualized level, they will work effectively and efficiently at a self-managed pace without the aid of an organizational leader. Maslow's (1965) concept of eupsychian management

is reflected in the ideas and characteristics of what Gallup (2017) and Kahn (1990) deemed to be an engaged employee.

The works of Maslow (1943, 1965), Kahn (1990), and Gallup (2017) clarified the constructs of employee engagement and disengagement. Yet workplace engagement is steadily decreasing (Adkins, 2016), and, as of 2017, approximately 70% of workers reported they are not engaged at work (Gallup, 2017). Remote workers are the least engaged of the disengaged employees (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017).

### **Nature of the Study**

The selected approach to this study was a qualitative, exploratory, single-case study using CIT. A qualitative approach is an efficient and appropriate research method that offers the researcher a probative approach and insight into an existing problem (Richards & Morse, 2012). Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggested a qualitative approach when the research takes place in a real-life context using multiple methods that influence the humanity of the study, investigates a phenomenon based on context, focuses on the interpretive nature of the study, and examines the evolution and emerging ideas that arise from analysis versus a prescribed result. A qualitative exploratory case-study approach is appropriate for investigating how individuals and groups respond to a social problem (Yin, 2013), such as the development of an engaged employee.

The quantitative and mixed-methods approaches were not appropriate methods for this study. The quantitative method is appropriate for examining the relationship between theoretical constructs, variables, or the prediction of research outcomes

(Maxwell, 2012; Yin, 2013). Combining qualitative and quantitative elements as a mixed methods approach is appropriate for some studies (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2006), but no quantitative elements were included in my study; thus, the mixed methods approach was not suitable.

Other qualitative designs were considered. The phenomenological approach is descriptive and inwardly focused on the conscious reality and lived experiences of the subjects, which entails delving into the shared meanings among participants of experiencing the phenomenon (Wilson, 2015). The focus of the current study was external to the individual with the objective of creating a taxonomy of critical incidents attributable to influencing the workplace engagement of remote workers. Grounded theory is designed to develop well-integrated concepts and ideas that provide a comprehensive understanding and explanation of the phenomenon being examined (Charmaz, 2014; Glasser & Strauss, 1999). Grounded theory would have been an appropriate research method to use for this study if there were an explicit goal of building a theory, grounded in the data, through an iterative process of coding and theory generation. Grounded theory was not an appropriate approach because of the insufficient literature on the phenomenon on sustaining the workplace engagement of remote workers to develop a theory. Ethnographic research is designed to define and describe how a cultural group operates and further examines the group's collective behaviors and language (Bryman, 2015). Ethnographic studies require observation over a substantial length of time and investigations of daily behaviors would be required to fully understand

the culture (Hammersley, 2015). According to Yin (2013), the case study method should be used instead of others when the researcher, through the research questions, seek to explain a current situation or social circumstance, when the researcher has limited or no control over the behavioral events, and when the study focuses on a contemporary and current phenomenon (instead of a historical one).

A qualitative exploratory case-study design was employed to collect, interpret, and analyze the data (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). I used the CIT to provide the framework for collecting observed incidents having special significance and meeting systematically defined criteria as recommended by Flanagan (1954). I directly observed human behavior and extrapolated the usefulness of the observations to solve a practical problem and develop broad principles (Flanagan, 1954). The purpose of the CIT is to collect reports of behaviors that make a critical difference between ineffective and effective performance in an observed work experience (Ansari & Baumgartel, 1981). Flanagan defined an incident as any observable self-sustaining human activity that can allow inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the activity. The incident is considered critical if, in the observers' judgment, it relates to a significant aspect of the work and incorporates behaviors that are exceptionally effective or ineffective in relation to the specific situation (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017).

The general management problem was that 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged at work, which costs organizations upwards of \$550 billion annually (Gallup, 2015). The number of remote workers has increased while the levels of workplace engagement have



decreased (Adkins, 2015; Allen et al., 2015; Bibby, 2015; Greer & Payne, 2014; Van Yperen et al., 2014). The specific management problem was that more than half of the nation's disengaged employees work remotely (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017) and experience a work culture that limits their career development opportunities (Griswold, 2014), minimizes their visibility within the organization (Gajendran et al., 2015), and increases their feelings of isolation (Van Yperen et al., 2014). A qualitative exploratory case-study design was employed to address this research problem because of the opportunity to explore the unknown influences of remote work engagement. I employed the CIT to create a taxonomy of responses to incidents that were critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of 14 remote workers nationwide who had worked for their organization for a minimum of 1 year. An exploratory single case study design is deemed most appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon (i.e., remote-based culture of engagement) and where in consequence there is little reliance on theoretical propositions found in the literature (Yin, 2013). Case study research is a useful strategy for studying processes in organizations (Yin, 2013). Critical incident technique was employed to guide the data collection and analysis process as part of the exploratory case methodology. In-depth interviews and discussions with participants and field notes were the essential data. A frame of reference was set up to determine how the data would be used (FitzGerald, Seale, Kerins, & McElvaney, 2008; Flanagan, 1954). A questionnaire I developed was used during the interviews to capture the critical incidents shared by the participants. Incident categories were established to

identify major and subareas to store the collected data (FitzGerald et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954). Once collected, the data were placed into the defined incident categories for coding and interpretation (FitzGerald et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954).

### **Definitions**

*Cultures of engagement.* A culture of engagement is a work environment where the leaders create a culture defined by meaningful work, deep employee engagement, job and organizational fit, and strong authentic leadership. In cultures of engagements employees feel respected as individual's and encouraged and inspired to pursue a common and exciting vision of the future of the organization (Adkins, 2016; deMello e Souza Wildermuth & Pauken, 2008).

*Employee disengagement.* Disengagement is the ability to disconnect or isolate oneself (Georgakopoulos, Wilkens, & Kent 2011). Kahn (1990) described disengagement as the state in which an employee withdraws or becomes cognitively, physically, or emotionally defensive during role performances.

*Employee engagement.* Employee engagement is the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles; engaged workers employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during work (role) performances (Kahn, 1990). Engagements are task-related behaviors associated with an individual's ability and desire to express their passions and opinions honestly at work (Robinson, Wang, & Kiewitz, 2014). Employee engagement is the level of personal commitment and involvement employees make toward the company and its mission, values, and ethics (Dash, 2013).

Employee engagement is also associated with work engagement, which refers to the attitudes employees express and espouse in their job and organization that affects the employees' commitment, discretionary effort, intrinsic motivation, and satisfaction (Schullery, 2013).

*Employee motivation.* Employee motivation is the employees' intrinsic enthusiasm about and passion for accomplishing work-related activities. Motivation is that internal mechanism that causes individuals to decide to act on their own volition (Armstrong, 2015; Maslow, 1943).

*Organizational culture.* Organizational culture is the espoused, shared values, behaviors, artifacts, and assumptions that an organization embodies and is carried out by the employees who work within the organization (Alvesson, 2013; Schein, 1992)

*Presenteeism* is used to describe disengagement and describes a state in which employees are physically present at work but cognitively or emotionally absent, distracted, or disengaged (Gilbreath & Karimi, 2012; Keeble-Ramsay & Armitage, 2014).

*Remote work.* Remote work is a workplace option/flexibility whereby individuals permanently work from an alternate location outside of the traditional workplace housing the organization's offices (Wiesenfeld, Raghurman, & Garud, 2001).

*Sustainability.* Sustainability is the ability to create a stable environment and consistent work culture (Wagner, 2015). Employees who work in a sustainable culture of engagement feel individually supported and encouraged. These employees forge a

commitment to the mission and shared values between the organization and their colleagues (Sullivan, 2014).

*Telework.* Telework is a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of the assigned position and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work but within daily commuting distance (OPM, 2016).

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions undergirded the study:

- The sample comprised a representative, willing set of participants who provided true accounts of their work experiences and reactions to incidents they had encountered as remote workers.
- The engagement levels of the target population mirrored the 70% level of disengagement of the U.S. workforce (Gallup, 2017).
- Each worker had experienced varying levels of workplace engagement, influenced by their relationship with their coworkers and supervisor.
- A potential participant's confirmation of his or her remote work status was one inclusion criterion.
- Participants experienced no personal gains by taking part in the study.
- Participants were not asked or required to share their interview experience with anyone other than the interviewer.

- Finally, the data collected from this study may be useful for organizations that offer or engage in remote work options.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Delimitations are those characteristics that limit the scope and define the boundaries of a study; they are within the researcher's control (Simon & Goes, 2013). To gain an understanding of their engagement experiences, this study focused on the categories and classifications of engagement among the growing number of employees who physically work in isolation (i.e., remotely) and do not share a workspace with any of their work colleagues or organizational leaders. All participants worked completely remotely rather than for only a portion of their work schedule.

Organizations offer employees opportunities to complete their work and fulfill their working hours in varying ways. Some organizations allow employees to telework or telecommute a few days a week or on an ad-hoc basis. Some organizations offer employees irregular schedules or split-shifts; employees are required to come to the home office for a period of the day or week and can work from an alternate location for the remainder of their day or week, splitting their time each day or each week (Golden, 2015). Working a split-shift provides employees with the flexibility to work within the context of the host office as well working from remote locations. Different workplace flexibilities are available to employees across the organizational spectrum, each of which provides its own arrangement of information and data derived from how employees experience it. For the scope of this study, only employees who were completely remote

participated. The estimated size of the general population is 40 million employees, or approximately one third of the nation's workforce (Gallup, 2017).

I employed the CIT to create a taxonomy of the critical incidents and responses needed for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of 14 nationwide remote workers who have worked for their organization for a minimum of 1 year. A nonrandom, purposeful sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. A purposeful sampling strategy is appropriate for finding participants from a target population who can provide an in-depth understanding of the engagement experiences of remote workers (Patton, 1990). Characteristics of the general population include individuals who are full-time employed, work 30 or more hours per week, and work in a location that is physically separate from the headquarters office of their employer.

When employing CIT, the size of the sample frame is based upon adequate coverage of the number of incidents to be recorded and analyzed rather than the number of participants (Flanagan, 1954). Estimates of the number of instances representing adequate coverage vary across the literature. Flanagan (1954) suggested 100 incidents are sufficient, although he asserted the main consideration is that the content domain for creation of a taxonomy is fully captured and described in detail. Imposing a data saturation requirement of 14 participants on the collection of interview data was consistent with Flanagan's recommendation.

The target population comprised employees who worked remotely in a technology company based in the United States. The technology industry ranks among the top

industries offering remote employment opportunities (Shin, 2017). Executive management from one small technology company agreed to provide me access to employees to secure voluntary participants for the study from their base of 30 employees. Participation was voluntary and not tied to a condition of one's employment. An acceptance rate of 33% and nine incidents captured per participant was sufficient for meeting Flanagan's requirement for adequacy of incident coverage.

### **Limitations**

Limitations emerge during a study and may limit the extensity of the findings and affect the results; these limits are out of the researcher's control (Simon & Goes, 2013). The gap in knowledge, research, and data on cultures of engagement is one limitation. The existing literature contains characteristics of cultures of engagement but does not include any compelling unified thoughts around how it is identified or applied to remote work cultures. I conducted this study based on the current constructs of remote work culture. The lack of a unified scholarly thought or definition might limit the future impact and credibility of the study because of the lack of a scholarly basis for comparing the findings to the literature.

The chosen research method and design were limitations. With an exploratory case study design, a researcher cannot determine the causal inference because of limited abilities to exclude or rule out alternate explanations (Handcock & Algozzine, 2015; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). The dependability and transferability of the case study findings are often unclear because the study is reflective of a snapshot in time in a natural

setting and not necessarily a process that can be generally recreated to deliver the same results (Yin, 2013). Case study research methodologies are based on the behaviors of a person, group, or organization, and these behaviors fluctuate from person to person and organization to organization. Thus, their dependability for the study is not always clearly defined (Yin, 2013).

Additional limitations included my bias as the researcher. Researcher bias could have affected the dependability of the study based on my interest and investment in a predetermined outcome for the study. Following the established CIT process for data gathering, as well as the established interview protocols, minimized that bias. I reevaluated the impressions of the respondents and challenged my preexisting assumptions and ideas. The interview questions were designed to prevent leading the participant to a specific type of response or answer to mitigate any personal bias. Other limitations included the honesty of participants' responses and their preconceived notions of what their levels of engagement should be in compared to those of their in-office colleagues. This study was the beginning of a new area of study focusing on developing effective remote work cultures of engagement, which may support the need for further studies of this type.

### **Significance of the Study**

A relationship exists between employees who sense they work within an organizational culture where engagement is encouraged by the leaders and high levels of employee productivity and work quality, low levels of employee burnout, and low



attrition rates (Truss, Shantz, Soane, Alfes, & Delbridge, 2013). Organizational leaders desire to create work cultures that keep employees engaged (Loehr, 2016). To develop cultures of engagement, organizational leaders have depended on accessible, face-to-face methods that do not incorporate the needs of the growing virtual working landscape (Allen, Adomdza, & Meyer; Keegan, 2016). How employee engagement is defined and experienced by remote employees is still a mystery to organizational leaders (Andrew & Sofian, 2012; Beaton, 2015; Hijazi, 2015). Even with new employee engagement programs and offices, employee engagement continues to steadily decrease amongst U.S. workers (Eisenberg, Malone, & Presson, 2016; Harju, Hakanen, & Schaufeli, 2016; Keegan, 2016; Shuck & Reio, 2014). The results could lead to further research and exploration of the remote workplace engagement phenomenon.

### **Significance to Practice**

The pressure to increase flexible work options for employees has pushed organizational leaders into a role in which they are poorly trained or well-versed (Knight 2015). As such, they make decisions based on the limited experience and knowledge (Lipman, 2014). Organizational leaders struggle to understand how to increase their employees' levels of work engagement in the traditional in-office workspace because workers have unique needs, and a one-size-fits-all approach does not work (Fallon, 2014). When leaders perceive they lack the collaboration, oversight, and awareness of their remote employees' work and whereabouts, they often look to end workplace flexibility options (Manjoo, 2013). The collected data may help organizational leaders

create comprehensive workplace flexibility policies and procedures that support employees' desires to work remotely and managers' desires for remote employee accountability.

### **Significance to Theory**

Past research on employee engagement and motivation has clarified factors that increase the engagement levels of employees (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2016; Denison et al., 2014; Eddleston & Mulki, 2015; McTernan, Dollard, & Tuckey, 2016). Such research has not addressed what influences the engagement of remote employees. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2015) and Schein (2012) examined the traditional models and constructs of organizational culture but did not clarify, identify, or define the construct of remote work cultures. I designed the current study to identify the incidents and responses that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of remote workers.

### **Significance to Social Change**

This research provided information and data to help organizational leaders who are considering remote working options make more informed and data-driven decisions. As technology improvements become available employees seek access to those improvements to enhance and increase their remote work options. This research is useful for those who are strategically considering entering the realm of offering remote work but want to ensure they maintain and sustain high levels of workplace engagement. This

research may be used to develop robust training programs for organizational leaders looking to increase employee morale and engagement.

### **Summary and Transition**

The general management problem was that 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged at work, which costs organizations upwards of \$550 billion annually (Gallup, 2015). At the same time, the number of remote workers has been increasing (Adkins, 2015; Allen et al., 2015; Bibby, 2015; Greer & Payne, 2014; Van Yperen et al., 2014). The specific management problem was that more than half the nation's disengaged employees work remotely (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017) and experience a work culture that limits their career development opportunities (Griswold, 2014), minimizes their visibility within the organization (Gajendran et al., 2015), and increases their feelings of isolation (Van Yperen et al., 2014). The research questions emerged from the study of the phenomenon of remote work engagement and provided scholar and practitioner communities a better understanding of the incidents that influence remote work engagement. I used a qualitative exploratory case-study method to examine the emerging phenomenon of remote work engagement. With the aid of the CIT, I captured and categorized the critical incidents that influence remote workers' engagement. The conceptual framework used in this research provided the basis from which to continue the employee engagement theory-building process started by Kahn (1990) and Maslow (1943) and expanded that theory to remote workers. Chapter 2 is a comprehensive review of the current literature on cultures

of engagement and address how these cultures are expressed and experienced within remote work cultures.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The phenomenon of employee engagement has been a major topic of interest and study within the management and leadership community of practice over the last 30 years (Saks, 2006). The literature on engagement appears to be limited to employees in the traditional office and does not include remote employee engagement (Adkins, 2015; Anita & Aruna, 2016; Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017). Organizations benefit greatly from having engaged employees; research shows that employees who are engaged in their work are more committed to their work and productive and, ultimately increase their organization's bottom line (Albdour & Altarawneh, 2014; Ariani, 2013; Shantz, Alfes, & Latham, 2016). The general management problem is that 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged at work, which costs organizations upwards of \$550 billion annually (Gallup, 2015). The number of remote workers is steadily increasing while the levels of workplace engagement are decreasing (Adkins, 2015; Allen et al., 2015; Bibby, 2015; Greer & Payne, 2014; Van Yperen et al., 2014). The specific management problem is that more than the nation's disengaged employees work remotely (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017) and experience a work culture that limits their career development opportunities (Griswold, 2014), minimizes their visibility within the organization (Gajendran et al., 2015), and increases their feelings of isolation (Van Yperen et al., 2014). In the modern workplace, the number of remote workers has increased (Chokshi, 2017; Vennitti, 2017), and, by 2020, more workers will work remotely than in-office (Shin, 2017; Vanderkam, 2014). The least engaged employees are those who work remotely (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study, using a CIT, was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of 14 remote workers who had worked for their organization for a minimum of 1 year. The literature review is organized around the main constructs of this study: employee engagement, remote worker engagement, and workplace cultures of engagement. The basic approach used to conduct this review was to start from the general knowledge about this topic to specific ideas and assumptions. I began the chapter with a historical review of employee engagement, with the focus on the foundations of employee engagement. The conceptual framework, which was built on the engagement theory presented through Khan's (1990) research and Maslow's (1943, 1965) theory of employee motivation, is examined in relation to their impact on employee engagement. The prominent employee engagement theories, related factors, and studies are then reviewed. The next section of the literature review is an analysis of the influence of organizational culture on employee engagement. I discussed prominent research on cultures of engagement. The chapter concludes with a review of the literature related to the methods for studying employee behavior in remote workplace environments and a discussion of how the present study filled a gap in the literature and extended knowledge in the discipline.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The predominant literature search terms were *engagement*, *employee engagement*, *workplace engagement*, *engagement theory*, *employee motivation*, *organizational culture*,

*engagement culture*, and *cultures of engagement*. The databases used for this search were Google, Google Scholar, ProQuest, EBSCO, Emerald Insight, and SAGE Journals. A qualifier ensured all search results were peer reviewed

To frame the scope of the study, the employee engagement literature was limited to the definition of engagement as defined by Kahn (1990). Kahn's engagement theory was used as the foundation for the conceptual framework. Early work that influenced the development of the concept and definition of engagement were also included. These works included Alderfer's (1972) motivation theory, Maslow's (1943) motivation/need theory, Maslow's (1965) eupsychian management theory, Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, and Homas's (1958) social exchange theory.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Information regarding remote work cultures of engagement and what influences remote workers' engagement levels is limited. The conceptual framework was a blueprint for examining the phenomenon of workplace engagement among remote workers. The concept of employee engagement is often based on how it is being defined, used and measured. With the proliferation of remote structures and technologies for communication, understanding employee engagement in the modern workplace lacks the construction and research needed to be defined and fully realized within the management and leadership community of practice (Eisenberger et al., 2016). The conceptual framework built upon Kahn's (1990) personal engagement and disengagement theory and revealed the fluid nature of employee engagement and how people experience workplace

engagement. Maslow's (1943) need theory suggested how personal motivation combined with personal engagement may affect work cultures and create environments that influence employees' commitment to their organization.

Organizational leaders and stakeholders assume that employee engagement drives organizational performance (Pierce, 2013), so there is naturally a dual interest in ensuring employees are engaged in their work. The dual interest is advantageous for organizational leaders to provide a working environment where employees feel like the customer, which leads to employees working at what Maslow (1943) called the self-actualized/self-managed level. Engaged remote employees are often those who work harder and longer and produce more than their in-office colleagues (Alton, 2017; Paris, 2015). Gallup (2017) has conducted comprehensive research on employee engagement for the last 17 years, and, based on their research, Gallup defined engaged employees as those who are personally involved in, excited about, and committed to their work, coworkers, and workplace. Gallup's definition aligns with Kahn's (1990) theory of engagement; Kahn argued those who are personally engaged choose to express themselves cognitively, emotionally, and physically when they involve themselves in activities they believe to be meaningful and safe, and those where the resources needed are available to complete the tasks. The alignment between Gallup and Kahn is also connected to Maslow's (1943, 1965) need theory and his later research on eupsychian management. Once employees' lower and higher-level needs are met (Maslow, 1943) and they are operating at a self-actualized level, they will work effectively and efficiently at a self-managed pace without



the need or assistance of an organizational leader (Maslow, 1965). Maslow's (1965) concept of eupsychian management reflects the ideas and characteristics of what Gallup (2017) and Kahn (1990) deemed to be an engaged employee.

The work of Maslow (1943, 1965), Kahn (1990), and Gallup (2017) has helped define employee engagement, a phenomenon that is steadily decreasing (Adkins, 2016). Indeed, as of 2017 approximately 70% of workers reported they were not engaged at work (Gallup, 2017), and remote workers were the least engaged of the disengaged employees (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017).

### **Literature Review**

No definition encompasses the nuances of employee engagement; it is an emerging and fluid phenomenon that is expressed and measured in different ways. Khan's (1990) research on engagement has been widely accepted as a foundational context for understanding and defining employee engagement (Albrecht, Bakker, Gruman, Macey, & Saks, 2015). According to Khan (1990), employee engagement is the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles. Engaged workers employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during work performances. The research on employee engagement started and stopped with traditional in-office face-to-face interactions, and more is to be discovered outside of that traditional framework (Kahn, 1990; Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014)

Since Kahn's (1990) early work, the concept of employee engagement has struck a chord with the business (Macey et al., 2009). Employee engagement is distinguished

from the related, though not identical, constructs of its antecedents and outcomes (Bakker et al., 2014; Christian et al., 2011; Crawford et al., 2010; Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Halbesleben, 2010; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Mauno et al., 2010). Despite all the advanced research, low levels of employee engagement continue to be reported in organizations across the globe (Gallup, 2017), which is why employee engagement continues to be a major topic of discussion.

### **Contemporary Research on Employee Engagement**

Although organizational leaders increasingly have tried to increase employee engagement (Anitha, 2014), the rate at which employees are becoming disengaged in their work is also increasing (Gallup, 2017). Most attempts to address employee engagement has been published in practitioner journals and under the advice of management consultants rather than through theory and empirical research (Albrecht et al., 2015). Albrecht et al. (2015) found little academic research conducted on employee engagement; thus, the definition and methods of measuring engagement up to interpretation. Add summary and synthesis to fully conclude the paragraph and section.

**Employee engagement theory.** Two major research streams have provided scholars and practitioners with employee engagement theories (Saks & Gruman, 2014). Kahn (1990) provided the first model, arguably the most notable and widely accepted research theory. Working qualitatively, Kahn explored the psychological conditions that affected employees' personal engagement and disengagement at work. Khan interviewed camp counselors and employees from an architecture firm to identify what caused

employees to be engaged or disengaged. Three characteristics were associated with engagement/disengagement at work: meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Based on his findings, Kahn (1990, 1992) asserted engagement of workers increased in working environments where there was more psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability.

May et al. (2004) conducted one of the few empirical studies that has tested Kahn's (1990) theory and research. Supporting Kahn, May et al. found a positive correlation between meaningfulness, safety, and availability and employees' engagement levels; the strongest correlation existed between meaningfulness and engagement (May et al., 2004). The similarities between May et al. and Kahn are important because they strengthen the validity of Kahn's research on employee engagement, and further solidified his foundational efforts in defining what employee engagement is and how it is experienced. May et al. also found that person–organization–fit and job enrichment were also positive indicators of engagement; familial coworker relationships and supportive relationships with their supervisors were positive predictors of safety. Self-consciousness and adherence to coworkers' norms were negative indicators of engagement. Having resources available to individuals was a positive predictor of psychological availability, while participation in outside activities was a negative indicator (May et al., 2004).

The other engagement model derives from the research relating to burnout, defined as the erosion of engagement in one's job (Crawford et al., 2014), and where employee engagement is described and defined as the antithesis of burnout (Anthony-

McMann, Ellinger, Astakhova, & Halbesleben, 2016; Saks, 2017). Crawford et al. (2014) identified six specific areas of work-life that lead to engagement and burnout: (a) values, (b) perceived fairness, (c) workload, (d) control, (e) community and social support, and (f) rewards and recognition. Crawford et al. suggested employee engagement is attributable to employees being able to have some level of control over the work they are assigned, being recognized and awarded appropriately, and being provided a sustainable and reasonable workload and a supportive working environment/culture. Like burnout, employee engagement is expected to serve as the conduit between the work-life factors and various work and performance outcomes.

**Social exchange theory.** Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) and subsequent models of engagement theory provided the foundation for understanding employee engagement. Although Kahn and Maslach et al. described the psychological conditions and antecedents of employee engagement (as discussed in Saks, 2017; Saks & Gruman, 2014), they did not comprehensively explain how or why individuals respond differently to these conditions with varying levels of engagement. Homans's (1958) research on the social exchange theory (SET) has explained how and why individuals respond differently to changes in working conditions with various levels of engagement. Social exchange theory evolved from Thorndike's (1932, 1935) reinforcement theory and Mill's (1923) marginal utility theory. Homans stated that within SET, obligations are created by a series of interactions between parties who are in a reciprocal interdependent relationship (Homans 1958; Huang et al., 2016). A basic tenet of SET is that relationships grow and

evolve over time into a mutually loyal, trusting, and committed engagement if both parties agree to operate by certain reciprocal rules of exchange (Kamau & Sma, 2016). Parties who engage in this type of relationship benefit from each other by the terms of a repayment rule where the action of one party prompts the reaction of the other (Kamau & Sma, 2016). This relationship exchange idea is consistent with the findings of Huang et al. (2016), who described engagement as a reciprocal relationship between the employer and employee.

Homans (1958) argued that employees can participate in this reciprocal relationship by repaying their organization through increasing their engagement. Employees will adjust their levels of engagement based on what they receive in return from the organization (Saks, 2017; Saks & Gruman, 2014). Schaufeli (2013) stated that when employees receive certain favorable resources from their employers (e.g., good benefits packages, fair compensation, rewards, recognition, and career development opportunities) they tend to reciprocate by repaying the organization by exhibiting an increased level of engagement. Saks (2017) stated employees can display their gratitude (and repayment) to the organization for providing them with their desired resources by committing themselves more fully to their work roles, and by providing their organization with greater amounts of cognitive, emotional and physical resources. Employees often find it challenging to repay their organizations with their job performance because job performance is often measured subjectively and varies depending on the person measuring or the tool used to measure it (Meier & O'Toole,

2013; Pulakos, Hanson, Arad, & Moye, 2015). Employees are better able to exchange their engagement for the resources and benefits their employers provide.

Huang et al. (2016) and Saks (2017) suggested SET is a theoretical framework that explains how and why employees choose to be engaged in their work, which Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) did not directly address. Using Kahn's definition of engagement in the context of SET, employees would feel inclined to be more deeply engaged in their work as a form of repayment to the organization for the favorable resources it provides to the employee. When the organizational leaders cannot or fail to provide these favorable resources to the employees, the employees are more inclined to disengage from their work roles (Kamau & Sma, 2016). The amount of psychological, physical, and emotional energy the employee may give to their work and the organization is dependent upon the resources they receive from the organization (Kamau & Sma, 2016; Saks, 2017).

### **Early Leadership Models and Their Impact on Employee Engagement**

Early theoretical concepts of leadership were exclusionary and accessible only to a select group of men who, at that time, were thought to be predestined to assume the leadership roles in society (James, 1880). The concept of predestined male-patterned leadership became known as the *great man theory* of James (1880), who suggested great men brought about change in society; he believed that great men represented the history of the world and that they set the bar for what leadership looked like (Landis, Hill, & Harvey, 2014). These early ideas of leadership paired well with the earliest forms of

management. In the early 1900s, Taylor (1911) began to formalize his ideas of scientific management. Much like great man theory, in this management model Taylor focused on men's abilities to increase the production and profitability of an organization (Huang, Tung, Lo, & Chou, 2013). Taylor argued great men were predestined to be great leaders and could motivate others to work harder through one basic scientific premise: Men needed money to survive, so offering money as a motivational incentive would increase their work output (Brennan, 2011).

In these early models of leadership and motivation theory, the power lay within the person in the leadership position (i.e., manager/leader). The concept of position power extended the construct of transactional leadership (Pierro, Raven, Amato, & Bélanger, 2013; Vigoda-Gadot & Beerli, 2012). The basis of transactional leadership is twofold. First, there is an economic contract where there is a basic short-term exchange. That is, money is exchanged for the work completed (Pierro et al., 2013). Second is management-by-exception. The leader/manager only intervenes to make correction when the employee makes mistakes (Pierro et al., 2013). Transactional leadership is directly related to the great man theory and scientific management model; the leaders hold the power and make decisions. Employees' needs or individualized motivational indicators were not considered in these earlier theories and leadership models. In early leadership models, there was little to no focus on employee engagement, except when employees began to negatively impact the bottom line and the leader needs to make corrections to minimize the impact (Burns, 1978; Groves & LaRocca, 2011; Ismail et al., 2010).

The early leadership and management models are still evident in some organizations today; these transactional models are in direct opposition of what modern employees say increases their levels of workplace engagement (Gonzales, Matz-Costa, & Morrow-Howell, 2015; Schullery, 2013). A conflict occurs between how engagement is increased by organizational leaders (who practice transactional leadership methods of engagement) and their ability to provide their employees with an environment/culture that supports engagement (Kovjanic, Schuh, & Jonas, 2013). The conflict between increasing engagement through transactional leadership is also displayed in remote work environments. Managers and leaders often support remote work purely because of the benefits to the organization and to themselves (Adkins, 2016). Some of the benefits leaders receive are higher production rates, better quality of work, increased working hours, little to no overhead costs, and employees who seem to be more engaged in their work than traditional in-office workers (Caillier, 2013; Desmarais, 2014; Paris, 2014). If the employee also happens to benefit from the conveniences of working remotely, then the outcome may be considered mutually successful (as previously referenced in the SET). In using these transactional models, the employees' level of engagement is merely a coincidental benefit rather than a direct outcome of managements' efforts to increase their engagement.

### **Employee Engagement and Theories of Motivation**

Early notions of employee engagement were explored through the construct of employee motivation, but motivation does not define employee engagement it is an



element or characteristic of engagement (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2015; Gillet, Colombat, & Fouquereau, 2013). Motivation is known to be a nonunitary phenomenon; the types of motivation and the level at which people are motivated varies (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Viewing motivation as a characteristic of engagement explains why some employees are more engaged than others, and why some employees have higher levels of engagement today and lower levels tomorrow (Breevaart, Bakker, Demerouti, & Hetland, 2012). Employees' engagement levels are affected by the incentive being used to motivate them (Tims, Bakker, & Xanthopoulou, 2011).

Prior to Maslow's (1943) work on motivation, the leadership models and theories of motivation that had existed were more transactional and output driven (Saks, 2016). The transactional models were geared toward the leaders' needs and what they could do to get more work out of their employees (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee 2014; Miner, 2015). Maslow's work in 1943 led to what became known as motivation theory. Maslow identified the five basic needs all humans possess that should be met by a leader or organization to increase employee motivation (Ozguner & Ozguner, 2014). Maslow identified these needs through two levels: the lower level needs (basic needs), which should be met first, and the higher-level needs, which are more advanced, complex, and individualized. Understanding and mastering the usage of Maslow's theory has its limits as well; according to Maslow, once the needs of the employees are met, they are no longer motivated. Applying Maslow's theory is a challenge facing the modern organization (Saks, 2016). Once an employee's lower level needs, like salary and

benefits, are met, the organizational leaders need to provide ways in which to meet the more advanced and individualized needs to keep employees motivated and potentially engaged in their work. Understanding that employee needs are critical to the development and sustainment of the organization was groundbreaking at the time, Maslow introduced his model (Van Wart, 2013). The idea that leaders could increase employee motivation by meeting these varying levels of the individual's needs subsequently increased the responsibility of the leader (Van Wart, 2013).

Once the lower level and higher needs are met, employees can become self-motivated and, therefore, empowered to operate at their peak motivation levels with little to no supervision (Maslow, 1965). The information describing motivation as being a nonunitary phenomenon could help to explain why highly self-motivated employees are also arguably more engaged in their work (Hsieh, 2014; Kordbacheh, Shultz, & Olson, 2014; Shu, 2015). Building on the principles of Maslow's motivation theory, substantial correlations have been made between how one's level of motivation impacts one's levels/degree of engagement. Researchers have connected positive levels of motivation to positive levels of engagement (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014; Selander, 2015; Valentin, Valentin, & Nafukho, 2015), extends the concept that employees' individual needs matter in terms of increasing, maintaining, or eroding their engagement levels.

Herzberg (1959) identified a different dimension of motivation, the motivator-hygiene theory. Herzberg began his initial work on factors affecting work motivation in the 1950s; he surveyed 200 accountants and engineers and to build his theory. Herzberg

studied the impacts of job redesign and its effects on motivation. Job redesign is a theoretical approach that is based on the idea and concept that routine and static jobs and work environments reduce employee motivation, and those that are more dynamic and challenging increase employee motivation (Kopelman, 1985). was built. Based on the results of his survey, Herzberg discovered that employees tend to express their satisfaction with the content of their jobs by the intrinsic factors that impact their position. These factors Herzberg identified were called “motivators” and included characteristics such as achievement, recognition, type of work being performed, and opportunities for advancement. Dissatisfying experiences, called “hygiene” factors, were derived from extrinsic non-job-related factors such as company policies, relationships with coworkers, and the overall corporate culture. Herzberg provided additional information on the concepts Maslow began with need/motivation theory, which provides a foundation for Maslow’s later work and for better understanding how motivation impacts employee engagement.

Maslow (1965) continued his work in motivation theory by analyzing those employees who reach this final stage in his hierarchy of needs called self-actualization. Maslow argued that when a group of self-actualized people come together with a common goal or initiative, they can manage and maintain their positive motivation for their work with no oversight from senior leadership. This eupsychian management is the effort to create a culture or subculture suitable for self-actualizing employees who share

the organization's espoused values and require little to no direction or guidance from the organization (Maslow, 1965).

Prottas (2013) and Sushill (2014) used Maslow's theory to show the importance of investing in the individualized needs of employees, which in turn increases their levels of engagement. The result is a greater return on the organization's investment in human capital (Hoon Song, Hun Lim, Gu Kang, & Kim, 2014; Jaupi & Llaci, 2014; Radda, Majidadi, & Akanno, 2015; Tanner, 2015). Maslow's (1965) description of a motivated employee is an exemplar of McGregor's (1960) Theory Y employee, which assumes most employees are internally and intrinsically motivated, enjoy the work they do, and work hard to do what is needed without constant oversight or direction.

Based on McGregor (1960), Maslow (1960) identified another theoretical concept that exists beyond the Theory Y to explain the individual whose motivation transcends the need-based theories and is fully activated by self-actualization. Maslow's finding is the final stage of his hierarchy of needs but represents so-called B-needs—that is, being needs, as opposed to the D-needs, or deficiency needs, which are in the lower levels in his original hierarchy. Maslow (1971) called his new theoretical approach to understanding employees with B-needs Theory Z.

**Employee engagement and job satisfaction.** Through the research of scholars and practitioners alike, employee engagement has been associated with employee motivation. Motivation can be viewed as an element or characteristic used to describe and define engagement. Another characteristic often closely associated and linked with

employee engagement is employee satisfaction (Sattar & Hassan, 2015). Employee job satisfaction has been defined and described in varying ways, much like employee engagement, but they are not one in the same. Job satisfaction can be defined as the way an employee feels about their job; it is a determination between if they like it or not (Hofmans, De Gieter, & Pepermans, 2013; Locke, 1966). Engagement, on the other hand, is defined through the employee's commitment and passion for their job and their commitment to the organization, connection to their co-workers, and desire to put in discretionary work to meet the organization's mission and goals (Anitha, 2014). Scholars and practitioners who study engagement state that job satisfaction is one of the major contributing factors that impacts employee engagement; there is a strong correlation between high levels of job satisfaction and motivation, and high levels of employee engagement (Abraham, 2012; Biswas & Bhatnagar, 2013; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Nimon, Shuck, & Zigarmi, 2016; Saks, 2006; Warr & Inceoglu, 2012). Scholar-practitioners use the correlation between job satisfaction and employee engagement to show that employees respond favorably to work environments that support their basic needs; once those needs are met they are more likely to be motivated by their workplace (Deci & Ryan 1985; Kahn, 1990; Maslow, 1943). Some of the challenges organizational leaders face when trying to increase employee engagement through job satisfaction is meeting the employees specific and individualized needs, the one-sized fits all approach does not apply when trying to increase job satisfaction (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014).

Research on employee job satisfaction suggests job satisfaction correlates with the type of relationship employees have with their manager (Khan, Nawaz, Aleem, & Hamed, 2012; Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, & Babiak, 2014). Researchers also concluded a positive working relationship between the supervisor and employee increases employees' job satisfaction (Okan & Akyüz, 2015; Poladian, 2014). There is a statistically significant relationship between job satisfaction and workplace relationships, which provides evidence to support the assertion that employees' place personal emphasis on higher level needs (Maslow, 1943) when assessing their job satisfaction. Employees can have their higher-level needs met when managers and supervisors provide support and opportunities for them that are in alignment with reaching self-actualization (Maslow, 1965). This concept provides the foundation for understanding how to create cultures of engagement through dyadic relationships (Malangwasira, 2013). Herzberg uncovered this dyadic dynamic stating that hygiene factors cause dissatisfaction amongst employees. One of the highest-ranking hygiene factors was the relationship with their supervisor (Herzberg, 1966; Hines, 1973; Lundberg, Gudmundson, & Andersson; 2009; Smith & Shields, 2013; Hoseyni et al., 2014). The relationship between the supervisor and the employee is one of the most critical aspects of building cultures of engagement.

**Dyadic relationships and their impact on engagement.** Employees are motivated by various experiences in the workplace, and managers struggle at times to identify what triggers employees' motivation. One of the more general motivating factors that impact employees is their relationship with their direct supervisor and leadership

chain of command (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014). Employees' ability to satisfy their motivation is directly related to their working relationships with their leaders, a phenomenon addressed within dyadic relationships in the theory of leader member exchange (LMX) (Graen & Schiemann, 2013). The central premise of LMX is the assertion that the dyadic relationship between the leader and follower is predicated on the different levels of exchange that occurs between them (Harris & Kirkman, 2014). The ability to use the LMX to increase employee engagement lies within the balance of power that is shared amongst the leader and follower (Chen, Wen, Peng, & Liu, 2016). Where there are increased levels of LMX in work relationships, the employee is more engaged in their work, and is more willing to support the work of their co-workers, which increases engagement and team performance (Afacan Findikili, 2015).

The power in the LMX relationship grows over time through an increase in trust between the leader and follower/member (Graen & Schiemann, 2013; Harris & Kirkman, 2014). Trust is a critical component of the LMX theory; there is a correlation between high levels of trust between the leader and follower and high LMX relationships (Kelley & Bisel, 2014). LMX theorists also conclude that there is a correlation between high trusting relationships and high LMX relations in situations where the leader/member roles transcend their positions and move into a relationship based on a partnership (Štangej\ & Škudienė, 2016). Partnership happens when the leader and follower/member fully commit to the relationship beyond their work titles, and by displaying high levels of

loyalty and support towards each other; which is aligned with McAllister's (1995) research on affective trust.

McAllister (1995) asserted that managers and leaders build strong interpersonal trusting relationships with their employees because of affect-base situations. Affect-base is displayed in the way employees and managers operate through an emotional bond in their day-to-day operations. When trust exists in the relationship people tend to voluntarily invest emotional energy in the relationship, and express and genuine care and concerns for the other person (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). In response to this expressed genuine experience, people also feel as if there is an intrinsic virtue that exists which is reciprocated; when this occurs, trust can be built (Pennings & Woiceshyn, 1987). Interpersonal trusting relationship is critical for improved organizational performance (McAllister, 1995). The LMX highlights a power shift in the evolution of leadership, where the power that was relegated to the manager or leader is now shared with the follower through an exchange that increases the level of engagement of the employee (Chauraisa & Shukla, 2014).

### **Measuring Levels of Employee Engagement**

Researchers and analysts at the Gallup organization have provided years of research on this phenomenon known as employee/workplace engagement. Gallup analysts concluded that organizational leaders misplace their efforts in trying to develop and increase cultures of engagement (Adkins, 2016), and that organizational leaders focus on measuring engagement quantitatively instead of improving it, resulting in a



worldwide engagement crisis (Mann & Harter, 2016). One example of this engagement crisis is with one of this country's largest and most profitable retailers, Walmart. Walmart has consistently increased their sales and revenue year after year, but their employees' attrition/turnover rates continued to increase in this decade (Weber, 2015). To address this engagement challenge, Walmart's organizational leaders decided to provide employees with some workplace flexibilities including a more relaxed dress code. Employees could now wear jeans instead of slacks or khakis. Walmart's organizational development team measured their engagement intervention by their monthly turnover rates and realized that the intervention did not decrease their turnover rates. Because this intervention did not work, Walmart then implemented an additional intervention, increased salaries (Weber, 2015). After reviewing this additional intervention, the attrition rates normalized, but after a period they began to increase again (Pearson, 2015), further expanding the assertion that focusing solely on measuring engagement limits the ability of organizational leaders to improve workplace engagement.

Another example that affects the engagement crisis is the usage of the annual employee engagement survey with which organizations measure their employee engagement. If leaders and stakeholders of organizations base their employee engagement climate on an annual quantitative survey, then an opportunity is missed to positively impact their cultures of engagement (Fuller, 2014). Engagement is dynamic and should be addressed at varying points as it emerges and not only an annual pre-determined point in time (Fuller, 2014). The engagement crisis is further exacerbated by

the lack of a unified definition of engagement, understanding how it is experienced by remote workers and how it is experienced by managers who supervise remote workers (Aon Hewitt, 2015; Custom Insight, 2013). Analysts at Gallup (2017) have provided some of the most robust and relevant employee engagement data over the last 2 decades (Gallup, 2016). Gallup analysts and experts concluded that engaged employees work with commitment and passion and feel a profound connection to their organization (Adkins, 2016). Engaged employees work to drive innovation and move the organization forward (Reilly, 2014). Reilly's (2014) concepts on engaged employees best describes the dynamic nature of employee engagement versus the other factors that are often attributed with engagement, that is, employee satisfaction and employee happiness (Crawford, Rich, Buckman, & Bergeron, 2014).

Organizational culture has been described and defined as something that is experienced by those within the traditional walls of an organization (Alvesson, 2013), but the traditional walls of the organization no longer define what an organization is or can be. Technology has altered the traditional definition of a workplace, because of advances in technology work can be done anywhere at any time, which may also alter the way we define organizational culture (Nickson, 2016). Organizational culture is not limited to exchanges experiences by employees in the traditional in-office environment, or those who work remotely; organizational culture is also experienced by clients or customers of an organization. Thus, culture has widespread impact and implications (Lukas, Whitwell, & Heide, 2013). To further identify the incidents that increase, sustain, or erode the

engagement of remote workers, the engagement research and theory of Kahn (1990) serve as a foundational basis for the conceptual framework for this study.

The complexities of organizational culture are magnified when addressing the ways in which organizational culture is experienced. Interpretations of organizational culture vary, and they are all built off one idea that appears to be universal: Organizational culture is a shared experience, meaning it is best described in terms of those who collectively experience it (Alvesson, 2013). Varying interpretations of organizational culture can lead to an in-depth study and analysis of the cultures and subcultures that exist within the organizational context (Turker & Altuntas, 2015). The element of culture that is examined throughout this study is the culture of engagement. A culture of engagement is one where employees feel like customers in the sense that they work in an empowering environment where they can choose meaningful work to do (Brown, Melian, Solow, Chheng, & Parker, 2015). Within cultures of engagement employees are also provided an opportunity to contribute to the mission of the organization in a way that best suits their skills and are provided opportunities to engage in workplace flexibilities that enhance their work life balance (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Creating this type of culture is something organizational leaders must do deliberately and is not something that is accomplished by happenstance (Parent & Lovelace, 2015). Organizational cultures are driven from the top down (starting with the senior leadership) and are then filtered to and sustained by employees who share in their experience with the expressed culture (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015).

## **Defining Organizational Culture**

Identifying the factors that lead to decreased or increased levels of employee engagement and motivation requires the need to understand the role of organizational culture. Organizational culture comprises the espoused values, behaviors, artifacts, and assumptions that an organization embodies (Schein, 1992). Employees and managers alike assist in the overall composition of the organization's culture, because they are what the organization uses to live out or personify its culture daily (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Organizational culture does not exist without those persons within the organization who are carrying out the mission and vision of the organization (Cummings & Worley, 2014). Organizational leaders may espouse the type of corporate culture they desire to create within their organizations, but they depend on employee orientation and other organizational training programs to serve as the conduit to express their desires to employees (McGregor & Doshi, 2015). Ultimately, the employees must keep the corporate culture alive through their actions and behaviors (McGregor & Doshi, 2015).

The idea of organizational culture is well defined and understood by management and leadership scholars and practitioners. Organizational culture is characterized as a shared and learned system of experiences, beliefs, assumptions, artifacts, and other intangibles that govern how people operate within the work environment (Alvesson, 2012). Much of the literature and research about organizational culture is based on two assumptions. First, organizational culture is derived from organizational leaders in a top-down construct; the other is that culture is related to organizational outcomes (O'Reilly,

Caldwell, Chatman, & Doerr, 2014). The top-down approach to organizational culture vastly affects how employees operate within the organization in terms of their propensity to experience longevity, job satisfaction, and engagement within the organization.

Employees have a higher level of satisfaction and commitment to an organization and lower attrition rates when the organization's top leadership and employees exhibit the same cultural attributes that have been established for the entire organization (Hu, Dinev, Hart, & Cooke, 2012).

Espoused culture and expressed culture are often distinctly different; what organizational leaders espouse is their corporate culture and what is displayed and expressed through their behavior and that of the inhabitants of the organization are not always aligned (Traphagan, 2015). Employees' hidden or masked influences exist within the context of their working relationships with employers, which are representative of what is happening underneath the surface of what is espoused as corporate/organizational culture (Watkins, 2013).

The concept of espoused versus expressed culture is displayed in the recent challenges experienced at Chipotle restaurants. Chipotle leaders claim their organization is a family-oriented, healthy place to work and eat, and they profess to be an organization whose focus is on serving food with integrity (Chipotle, 2016). In 2014 and 2015 a substantial number of customers became ill from eating at Chipotle. Contracting food poisoning from the restaurant that prides itself on providing food with integrity contradicted the messages customers received from Chipotle leaders through marketing

and promotional materials (Ferdman & Bhattarai, 2015). Chipotle's organizational leaders found out through their investigation that employees were the cause of the food poisoning, which presented an organizational culture challenge (Ferdman & Bhattarai, 2015). Chipotle's leadership understood that this issue was hurting not only their bottom line but their corporate culture brand, and a remedy needed to be applied quickly (Smith & Garcia, 2016).

To remerge as a viable entity in the food revolution, Chipotle needed to address its culture challenge. Chipotle leadership responded to its culture challenge by shutting down each of its restaurants for a few days to reorient all the employees to the desired corporate culture of customer service and food with integrity (Smith & Garcia, 2016). This nationwide shutdown sent a strong message to their employees, customers, and stakeholders: Chipotle would not sacrifice its corporate culture brand (Smith & Garcia, 2016). Chipotle leaders and stakeholders were willing to take the financial hit of shutting down more than 1,600 restaurants to ensure the staff understood their commitment to the corporate culture (Smith & Garcia, 2016). Chipotle's leadership response is an example that supports the idea that organizational culture is not solely based on what leaders espouse but also by where the espoused and expressed cultures intersect (Alvesson, 2013).

Azanza, Moriano, and Molero (2013) researched the extent to which authentic leadership (leaders living out what they espouse) increases employee satisfaction and commitment to an organization. Authentic leadership was measured using the Authentic

Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008). Job satisfaction was measured using a seven-item scale version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which was also used and showed good reliability in a similar study (Molero, Cuadrado, Navas, & Morales, 2007). Authentic leaders who promoted and supported flexible-orientated organizational cultures led to higher employee engagement (Azanza et al., 2013). Cultures that better support employees' individual needs provide for an environment that nurtures employee engagement and appears to benefit the employee and the organization.

Management and leadership scholar-practitioners often relate increased performance levels (organizational outcomes) within an organization to a strong buy-in of the intended organizational culture amongst the organization's employees. The relationship between organizational performance and organizational culture is inherently connected to the norms and behaviors that the organization's leadership has created and espoused for its employees. (Chatman et al., 2014). Employees "buying" into the organizational culture also relates to a belief in the organization's mission and values. If employees' mission and values are aligned with those of the organization, the culture likely will be strongly positive; where they diverge, the culture may be strongly negative or counterproductive (Banaszak-Holl, Castle, Lin, Shrivastwa, & Spreitzer, 2015). A positive correlation is present between organizational leaders developing strong positive relationships and developing and maintaining cultures of engagement; these

employer/employee relationships provide the needed foundation to build and sustain strong cultures of engagement (O'Brien, 2014).

The outcomes of these positive employer/employee relationships are mutually beneficial for the employer and employee. The employer often benefits from having a more productive, present, satisfied, and overall engaged employee; the employee often benefits from receiving additional benefits such as a preferred work schedule, overtime options, and other types of preferential work assignments (Colletta, Hoffman, Stone, & Bennett, 2016). Experts on the social exchange theory believe the employee benefits, which are akin to those ascribed to the leader-member exchange, could be categorized as a subculture within the organization, because it is exclusive to those in the dyadic employee-employer relationship (Xerri, 2013). The subculture Xerri (2013) described exists in the traditional face-to-face environment but has yet to be identified in remote working relationships. One important characteristic that makes these dyadic relationships successful is trust (Erturk & Vurgun, 2015; Schilke, Reimann, & Cook, 2015). Trust is the one characteristic that is often lost in remote working relationships, because supervisors and coworkers struggle to trust those they are unable to see in a traditional face-to-face working environment (Pangil & Moi, 2014).

Organizational culture is dynamic; it is not static (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). Organizational leaders should understand that organizational culture changes and are understood differently by employees based on their work experiences both in the traditional and nontraditional office environments (Merrick, 2016). The innovation and



sheer necessity of technology is demanding that organizations reexamine their definitions of what an organization is and what the culture of the organization should be (Peh & Wee, 2015; Strohmeier, 2014). The emerging remote working environment challenges the preset notions and understandings organizational leaders have about how to increase and sustain engagement, which makes understanding organization-person fit a critical factor in examining what cultures engage diverse types of workers.

**Person-organization fit.** The importance of person-organization fit has grown immensely throughout time and has become increasingly popular in the study of the modern organization. Person-organizational fit is commonly defined as the compatibility between the person/employee and the organization that occurs when the fundamental lower and higher-level needs (Maslow, 1965) of both the person and organization are mutually met (Swider, Zimmerman, & Barrick, 2015). The phenomenon of person-organizational fit is critical to the understanding of employee engagement and motivation as it relates to organizational culture. The culture of the organization determines whether an employee feels like he or she is an important and vital member of the team and affects their level of engagement within the organizational context (Matuson, 2012). Chen, Sparrow, and Cooper (2016) found a positive correlation between employees who are “good fits” for their respective organization and their increased levels of job satisfaction. Chen et al. advanced the idea that organizational cultures and person-organization fit are uniquely connected and greatly impact each other within the context of the workplace and the workers. Biswas and Bhatnagar (2013) found a connection between person-

organization fit and increased levels of cultures of engagement and motivation. Biswas and Bhatnagar also concluded that high levels of employee engagement reflect a greater sense of trust the employees have among themselves and organizational leaders. Trust continues to be a common foundational building block for understanding how to develop and sustain cultures of engagement.

Fisher (2013) stated that organizations who can marry their organizational culture with a preponderance of their employees who share those same values, assumptions, and behaviors at the onset of the employee's employment see an increase in their employee retention rates. Employees look for connections to their personal mission and values within potential employers, and when that connection is made, the culture of engagement emerges and said employee's engagement levels are positively impacted (Biggs, Brough, & Barbour, 2014). Gutierrez, Candela, and Carver (2012) stated that if ongoing organizational culture training is offered through staff meetings, team building exercises, office retreats, and so forth, the result will be an increase in employees' commitment to the organization and positive organizational citizenship. The results presented by Gutierrez et al. are outcomes of a positive culture of engagement and reflect a one-dimensional view of organizational culture's relationship with employees. Additional information is needed in relation to how these factors are expressed (or managed) in a remote work environment, and how the engagement levels of remote workers are identified and impacted.

**Cultures of engagement.** An organizational culture of engagement has become a commonly used term in the modern workplace and is widely discussed and accepted as something that separates successful organizations from non-successful ones (Hogan & Coote, 2014). Identifying, increasing, and sustaining cultures of engagement has become important to organizational leaders because current research shows a correlation between increased engagement levels and productivity (Anitha, 2014). The current research on organizational culture and cultures of engagement, is vastly limited to the traditional in-office setting and does not comprehensively address or define the emerging remote/virtual work phenomenon. This literature review addresses the emerging remote/virtual work culture by providing an exhaustive examination of the past and current data, foundational theories and models, and literature available on organizational cultures of engagement. The information examined is juxtaposed against what is yet to be defined in terms of the emerging phenomenon of remote/virtual work cultures of engagement.

Organizational leaders used to attract and recruit employees by offering competitive salaries, benefits, and other work incentives, but that is no longer the best way to entice potential employees. Today, in addition to competitive compensation and benefits packages, career development opportunities, and work-life balance options, an increasing number of potential hires are becoming more concerned about being connected to their organization's mission (Carnegie, 2012). Potential employees today are more concerned about being passionate about the organization's vision, developing

personal friendships/relationships at work and being aligned to their leadership's direction; they want to be engaged in their workplace (Carnegie, 2012). Researchers with Achieve and 15Five concluded that millennials became the largest generation in the U.S. workforce in 2015 (Achieve, 2014; Hassell, 2015). These researchers also surmised that millennials were attracted to organizations that fostered an inclusive and open corporate culture and a mission that was personally fulfilling which, according to analysts at Gallup are characteristics of a culture of engagement (Achieve, 2014; Hassell, 2015; Mizne, 2016). To meet the growing desire of their employees to be engaged in the workplace organizational leaders are attempting to identify, understand, develop and increase an organizational culture of engagement (Shaufeli, 2012).

Cultures of engagement is one of the new buzzwords permeating employment surveys and leadership training courses, as well as being interwoven into managers' current performance appraisals (Bersin, 2015). Workplace engagement first surfaced through Kahn's work as he described the difference between personal engagement and personal disengagement. Personal engagement is defined as the "harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Kahn's work provides the foundation for how employee engagement is defined. Over the years, Kahn's definition of engagement has morphed into varying interpretations and expressions making it more challenging to clearly define. As engagement increased in popularity throughout the management and leadership

community of practice, its definition became more ambiguous because it was so closely linked to employee motivation (Gagne, 2014). Today, the most widely used definition of employee engagement is derived from research conducted by experts at Gallup, who described it as the emotional commitment employees have for their work, workplace and people they work with (Graber, 2015). Gallup's definition makes employee engagement more personal for each individual worker and limits the effectiveness of the former one-sized fits all management approach to engaging employees (Greenspun, Scott, Thomas & Betts, 2014).

Now that the operational definition of employee engagement is aligning with Gallup's definition within the management and leadership community of practice, the challenge is agreeing on how it should be measured. Some organizational leaders measure employee satisfaction and think of it as a measure of employee engagement. Like employee engagement, there are many tools that are used to measure employee satisfaction but satisfaction, and these tools are different from those that are used when measuring engagement. (Abraham, 2012). While employee satisfaction is one of the more impactful antecedents of employee engagement there is a clear difference between the two; satisfaction deals with how one thinks about their work and engagement deals with how one feels about their work (Christensen & Micheli, 2013). Measuring employee engagement assesses employees' feelings and emotions as opposed to their thoughts and ideas. In addition to being the leader in defining employee engagement, Gallup is the leader in measuring employee engagement. The company measures engagement by using

their Q12, a survey tool that links 12 actionable workplace elements to proven performance outcomes. This survey has been distributed to more than 25 million employees in over 195 countries and translated in over 70 languages (Gallup, 2013).

Employee engagement was once measured by the management philosophy of “walking around,” meaning the manager walks the floor to stimulate employees to speak freely and engage in the process of accomplishing the work together (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Management by “walking around” gained popularity throughout the 1980s and 1990s but became less popular with the increased usage of remote work. Managing by walking around works in the traditional in-person environment where one can easily and quickly physically see the employees each day but is not as effective with managing remote workers (Gaskell, 2014).

Managers can provide a personalized approach to employee engagement when managing in-person that seems to be missing when managing remotely; a feeling of disconnectedness occurs between the manager and employees that increases with the physical distance (Fallon, 2014). The disconnectedness is often fueled by the inability to communicate as frequently and in the way the traditional in-office relationship allows, which can lead to feelings of distrust on behalf of the manager and isolation on behalf of the employee (Fried, 2013; Wrzesniewski & Wiesenfeld, 2012). If the culture of the organization is not empathetic to the different work experiences the remote worker endures, then the increase in independence and isolation can expand to create a subculture within the realm of remote work culture (Harrington & Santiago, 2015).

**Remote work culture.** Research is limited in terms of defining the apparent emerging phenomenon of the remote work organizational culture—particularly what a culture of engagement looks like (Adkins, 2016). Remote workers are remaining socially connected to their home office through their e-mail, instant messenger chat features or the occasional phone call from a supervisor or colleague that is not strictly work related (Adkins, 2016). What remote workers perceive to be their organizational culture may significantly vary from that of their office dweller counterparts and, more importantly, from what their managers think (Saks 2017). Organizational leaders often have the expectation that the in-office culture follows employees who have moved from the traditional office to a remote work environment, and preliminary data suggest that the culture is not mobile. Organizational leaders make varying assumptions about the mobility of the organizational culture when employees work in a hybrid manner which vacillates between both the traditional office and tele-work environment (Elsbach & Cable, 2012).

A distinction needs to be made for those who are actual remote workers versus those who work in a hybrid environment. True remote workers most often have never stepped foot into the physical office space and, therefore, do not have a frame of reference for what the corporate culture is, let alone their manager's definition or expectation for workplace engagement (Reynolds, 2011). Schein (2010) stated that organizational culture comprises the behaviors, assumptions, and espoused values that

currently exist in the organization, but what are the behaviors, assumptions and espoused values that exist in the remote work environment?

A remote organizational culture needs to be defined and attended to like any other. Organizational leaders should ensure employees are the right person-organization fit to successfully function in a completely remote work environment. The challenge organizational leaders face in the modern workplace is there is no clear definition or method for identifying who would be a successful remote worker, because the environment in which they work has yet to be defined and measured. Research is needed to identify and define what this new virtual organizational culture is, and how it impacts the individual and the organization needs to be explored. Some employees struggle within the traditional working environment to fit in with the organizational culture in their offices, and now they must determine how to fit into a virtual organizational culture that is not yet defined. Recent data exists that employee engagement experts espouse points to the notion of workplace isolation as one of the major detractors of remote work. As leaders in the modern workplace struggle to identify what remote organizational culture is, there is an emerging phenomenon of remote workers having increased feelings of isolation, loneliness and disconnection from their colleagues and office culture (DeGray, 2012; Sutherland, 2015).

**Organizational culture changes and remote workers.** Organizational culture is complex and challenging to define because it is something that is experienced by the individual, and those who experience it define it through their varying experiences (Al



Saifi, 2015). Amid its complexities, scholars and practitioners generally agree that organizational culture is a complex entity of values, beliefs, practices, artifacts, and behavioral norms which are shared by personnel within an organization (Alvesson, 2013; Cao, Huo, Li, & Zhao, 2015; Chakravorti, 2011; Naqshbandi, Kaur, Sehgal, & Subramaniam, 2015; Schein, 2010). The definition of organizational culture is supported throughout organizational history from the pre- to postindustrial eras; what the individual experiences is clearly identifiable within the context of the workplace. In various industries, organizational culture has been a phenomenon that organizational leaders and scholars are able to identify, test, validate, and tweak based on the type of culture the stakeholders and senior leaders seek to espouse (Jordan, Werner, & Venter, 2015).

In the traditional workplace, managers and leaders can physically observe the actions and interactions of their employees and adjust their work and management approach based on their direct observations. When there are changes, that leaders feel need to be addressed within the behaviors of their organization's employees (conduct, performance, morale, etc.), implementing an intervention or making alterations to the organizational culture is often the first option considered (Pinho, Ana, & Dibb, 2014). Leaders desires to fix their employees' behaviors shows the critical nature organizational culture possesses within an organization, and how it is a driving force in sustaining and normalizing the working environment (Nor, Shamsuddin, & Wahab, 2015). When leaders try to implement change in an environment that does not support change, the change will more than likely fail or not be sustained. Kotter (1996) described an overarching principle

of creating a climate for change which is the organizational culture. If there is a corporate culture that supports change, then leaders and managers will have a better opportunity to positively impact performance in that work environment (Benn, Dunphy, & Griffiths, 2014). Developing a culture of change is critical in sustaining the change events the leaders implement.

The fast food restaurant chain, Chick-fil-A is a case in point for this concept of developing an organizational culture that supports change. The Chick-fil-A organization spent years developing its corporate culture because the CEO wanted to ensure that the entire worldwide restaurant chain had one culture (Turner, 2015). The organizational leaders implemented a change to their organizational culture in the early 2000s by introducing and implementing Greenleaf's servant leadership model. Every Chick-fil-A employee is trained on how to not just use the servant leadership model at work but how to live the life of a servant leader (Winkler, 2015) in their daily lives. The inclusion of servant leadership was established by a team of employees and leaders within the organization, and the CEO allowed the employees to participate in the implementation of this new model at their local stores. Customers of Chick-fil-A often comment on the high level of customer service they receive in comparison to other fast-food restaurants (Taylor, 2016). Chick-fil-A's leadership added some small but effective changes to their employees' interaction with customers that have led their culture change efforts. Every Chick-Fil-A employee is required to say "please" when requesting something from the customer and are required to say my pleasure when a customer requests something from

them or when the customer acknowledges something they have done by saying thank you (Taylor, 2016). In addition to the servant leadership model, the organizational leaders have introduced and implemented other customer service initiatives successfully (Taylor, 2016). The new initiatives have been sustainable at all their locations globally because the leaders have built an organizational culture that embraces change and engages employees.

Organizational leaders can be assured that in every type of business they lead, be it for profit, nonprofit, entrepreneurial, or voluntary, they will be required to lead their organization through change, which has great impact on their organizational culture (Abbas & Asghar, 2010). If an organization remains stagnant and immovable, it will either become irrelevant or invisible to its client/customer. But organizations do not resist change; the people who make up the organization do (Bailey & Raelin, 2015). The challenge organizational leaders face is determining why their employees are reacting adversely to the change event, and they then need to understand how to develop a culture where employees embrace change. One of the major reasons employees resist organizational change is because they are not invested in or aware of the reasons for the change event (Rick, 2011). Kotter's (1996) first phase (Steps 1-3) of his 8-step change model addressed the need to create a culture of change, but his second phase (Steps 4-6) addressed the steps leaders need to take to implement the change through a culture of engagement.

Employees typically find out that a change event is occurring within the organization after the decision has been made by leadership, and the leadership is then tasking the employees to buy in to the change event. Buy-in happens after the fact, so the employees' opinions are not accounted for prior to the decision being made. Yet they are expected to carry out the change as a part of their organizational norms (Harris, 2012). Leaders struggle to sustain the increase or spike they see in organizational performance after the change has been implemented because the employees are not connected to the new way in which they are expected to perform.

Organizational leaders who seek to implement and sustain change should do so by creating an environment where employees are encouraged to share their ideas (Kotter, 1996). Employees also prefer to work in an environment where they are a part of the decision-making process prior to the decision being made; rather than buy-in it is "be-in" (Brown & Osborne, 2012). If employees are made to feel as if they are an instrumental part of the decision-making process, then the culture in which the change is implemented will be better prepared for sustainability (Stavros, Nikolaos, George, & Apostolos, 2016). Limited data are available related how the buy-in and be-in process works remotely, because the concepts have only been tested in a traditional face-to-face working environment (Stavros, Nikolaos, George, & Apostolos, 2016).

The current literature and research on organizational culture incorporates data for identifying varying aspects of culture. The shared characteristics of organizational culture are typically limited to what is experienced in the traditional in-office culture but does not

incorporate what is experienced individually for those employees who work remotely (Piaget, 2013). Organizational culture is a concept that is well researched and examined yet the complexities of how it is expressed is greatly dependent upon those who are collectively experiencing it (Al Saifi, 2015).

One common thread sewn throughout the varying definitions of how organizational culture is expressed is that it is a shared experience; this common thread is based on groups of employees simultaneously sharing in the culture of the organization (Pakdil & Leonard, 2015). What the common thread neglects to address is those employees who are not in a group setting with other coworkers in the traditional office but who are experiencing something potentially different as individuals who work remotely. The practitioner literature was out front on this, and there are few peer-reviewed articles at this point.

Organizational culture is often learned through socialization, which organizational leaders accomplish through their orientation and onboarding programs (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013). During onboarding and orientation programs, organizational leaders can impart and socialize their espoused values and beliefs with new employees to ensure they are exposed to how the organization defines their culture at the onset of employment (Klien, Polin, & Leigh Sutton, 2015). During this period, leaders can also share with their new employees how the salient and tangible aspects of that culture should be expressed and experienced in practice (Akdere & Schmidt, 2008; Solomon, 2014). These training/onboarding socialization programs (which typically take place in-

person) are often used as a “rite of passage” for the employee to go from an external entity to becoming a part of the fabric of the organization (Klien, Polin & Leigh Sutton, 2015). Employee socialization programs also assists leaders in visually identifying and getting to know employees so they are better able to communicate with them in informal ways such as when they meet in the hallways, elevators, and in formal meetings (Solomon, 2014).

In the absence of research and literature, some organizations have recognized the need to address the emerging phenomenon of workplace cultures for remote workers. One exemplar is Highfive, an international technology organization that offers innovative technology solutions to assist in enhancing remote work culture (2015). Highfive provides modern communication technology used to empower organizations with the ability to virtual enhance their virtual modes of communication—for example, meetings, instant messaging, and so forth (2015). The Highfive organization has identified that there are differences in the way to communicate effectively with remote vs. traditional in-office employees and have developed innovative communication solutions to increase the engagement levels of remote workers.

Github is another organization that has identified the growing trend of the remote work culture and the importance of addressing the needs of both the remote employee and their managers (Mittleman, 2016). Github employees develop platforms for collaborating on software development; leaders bring their entire team together once a year to address, reiterate, and recommit to their corporate culture (Graber, 2015) and the

expectations they espouse of each team member. As part of their onboarding procedures, Github requires all new employees, regardless of their chosen work location, to come into their corporate office in San Francisco for one full week of orientation to ensure they understand the corporate culture (Graber, 2015). Github also tries to improve the culture of their remote workers by playing varying employee-centric games virtually that include winners and prizes, which they have found keep the remote workers involved in some type of workplace social activities (Graber, 2015).

Another exemplar is Amazon. Amazon started out with a traditional business model, where all employees worked in one of their brick-and-mortar facilities fulfilling orders for customers. As the demands grew from the customers and more employees were requesting flexible work arrangements, the CEO, Jeff Bezos, realized that he could increase his business and his employees' job satisfaction by allowing remote work. Amazon employees are required to complete an intensive 4-week in-person onboarding process during which they learn about the organizational culture receive mobile communication devices be used for work and internal networking purposes (Nisen, 2014). Because of its successful virtual workforce program, Amazon has not only seen an increase in sales and productivity but their virtual customer service centers are growing faster than their physical worksites.

Informal contacts are a powerful aspect and notable characteristic of a culture of engagement (Bowles & Cooper, 2012). When trying to define and determine how to influence an organizational culture of engagement there is a body of literature, which I

discuss shortly, that relates to traditional in-office employees. A minimal amount of literature is available that describes how to create a culture of engagement for remote workers. One of the most popular examples of misunderstanding remote work culture is what is now being called the Yahoo-Effect (Peck, 2015).

Yahoo was one of the world's leaders in globalized technology and Internet-based infrastructure; at one point, Yahoo was a major competitor to Google. Yahoo was credited as one of the innovators of remote work; they were one of the first organizations to not only allow employees to work remotely but to encourage it for work-life balance. Yahoo saw increased productivity and workplace satisfaction from their employees during the era the work at home policy was active (Manjoo, 2013), and it was safe to assume these indicators of workplace engagement would have continued to increase. Marissa Mayer, the CEO of Yahoo, banned employees from working remotely because she felt remote workers were not as productive, creative, or innovative as they could be if they were in the office; Mayer thought that bringing them back into the office would increase a culture of engagement through face-to-face collaboration (Alden, 2014).

Researchers who studied the Yahoo Effect have stated that Mayer had no empirical data that supported her assertion that there was a lack of workplace engagement or collaboration amongst Yahoo's remote workers (Graber, 2015). Employees at Glassdoor.com stated many employees affected by Ms. Mayer's telecommuting ban felt they were more engaged in their work and with their coworkers because of their flexible working arrangement that allowed them to work at their own pace (Glassdoor, 2017).



Organizational management experts have made sweeping assumptions about the impact of Mayer's ban on the culture of Yahoo, but no researchers have examined the culture that emerged amongst Yahoo's remote workers (Peck, 2015). Additional information is needed to provide a framework for understanding managers' assumptions that there is a lack of collaboration occurring with remote workers (Glassdoor 2017). Data and analysis is also needed to identify what intervention is needed to increase collaboration amongst remote workers, prior; this research explored such options.

Best Buy appeared to follow closely in the footsteps of Yahoo by ending their flexible work arrangements (i.e., remote work) in 2013. Best Buy senior leadership developed a results-oriented work environment policy (ROWE) which that allowed their corporate employees who met their production standards to work any hours, from anywhere, on any days they chose (Valcour, 2013). Under the ROWE policy the employee not only was able to work remotely but did not have to work their traditional 40-hour work week if they were able to complete their assignments before the end of their self-described work week (Stebner, 2013), which drastically increased the morale of their workforce.

Best Buy's ROWE policy expanded the common constructs of workplace flexibility (beyond what Yahoo was offering its employees) by creating a work culture that celebrates and motivates employees solely by the merits of their work performance (Valcour, 2013). Best Buy's new policy motivated employees to develop deeper levels of trust and autonomy in their work with Best Buy (Valcour, 2013). Best Buy was starting

the remote engagement revolution with their ROWE program, but quickly ended it due to the new CEO's (Hubert Joly) ideals of making quicker bottom-line improvements over longer-term sustainable ones (Valcour, 2013). In Joly's apparent haste to improve Best Buy's bottom line, he inadvertently negatively impacted the emerging culture of engagement that was developing because of the innovative workplace flexibility program (Lee, 2013).

Reddit is another exemplar of this phenomenon of retracting and removing remote work options and forcing employees to return to a more traditional working environment. Reddit is a technology-based organization that has gained massive popularity over the last five years. Much like its contemporaries, Reddit offered remote work options to its employees, which allowed them the freedom and flexibility to have a workforce all over the world. In 2014, the CEO of Reddit, Yishan Wong, decided to centralize their operations to San Francisco, CA, and gave all remote employees the option of moving to San Francisco or to take a severance package (Rupert, 2014). Unlike Yahoo, Reddit's business ventures and investments were soaring at the time the decision to ban remote work was made (Truong, 2014); so, the decision was not necessarily based on a need to rejuvenate the business. Wong stated that the ban was not a repudiation of remote work but more of a consistency decision, because remote work was working well in some pockets of the organizations but not all (Truong, 2014).

Wong (as cited in Pao & Rosen, 2014) also stated that some remote employees are better than others at self-management, and, to improve the bottom line, it was in

Reddit's best interest to level set the process by bringing everyone back into the office. Wong stated that it was important to have everyone under one roof to better improve the organization's ability to coordinate, communicate and innovate. Wong appeared to be asserting that increased communication and innovation happen best in a controlled face to face environment and not through innovations like technology that allows for virtual communication methods. This retreat from innovative workplace flexibilities back to the traditional methods of how work was defined leaves the worker in a state of influx when trying to determine the future fate of their careers in terms of work-life balance (Graber, 2015). Similarities exist in the approach leaders at Yahoo, Best Buy, and Reddit took in banning remote work, and each appeared to be a decision based out of assumptions and reactions not data or facts. Additional data are needed to fully understand and examine the cultures of engagement remote workers experience.

Organizational leaders are better able to manage their corporate cultures of engagement in the traditional in-office setting. One way organizational leaders do so is through various training and onboarding programs. The programs, services and divisions that organizational leaders have developed within their organizations to assist in building a culture of engagement among employees, are focused on the traditional in-office employee and often exclude the remote workers (Zetlin, 2015). One of the major ways organizational leaders socialize and communicate their desired culture is through new employee orientation programs (Bradt, 2015). Onboarding programs are typically conducted in a face-to-face environment with a group or cohort of newer employees, but

these onboarding programs are not inclusive of the rapidly increasing population of remote workers (Ferrazi, 2014). Organizational leaders find it challenging to ensure their preferred corporate culture is reaching remote workers without the familiar practices that exist with in-person working environments (Adkins, 2016). The familiar cultural practices include things such as impromptu face-to-face meetings, informal communications that take place from the conference rooms to the water cooler, or the casual discussions that occur while riding the elevator down to the garage (Adkins, 2016). Expert analysts who study employee engagement state that as the numbers of remote workers increase, the levels of workplace engagement decrease (Gallup, 2015). A minimal amount of research that explains why engagement decreases amongst remote workers and limited training that assists organizational leaders in addressing the challenge of creating, increasing, and sustaining a culture of engagement among remote workers (Adkins, 2016; Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017).

Many organizational leaders feel pressured to join the virtual work revolution to remain competitive in their respective marketplaces (Petroni, 2015). In doing so, leaders may sacrifice certain parts of the corporate culture to meet the demands of their growing workforce (Petroni, 2015). Because of feeling pressured to offer or increase virtual work options, organizational leaders may not plan for or be aware of the apparent change in the organizational culture dynamics that occurs with remote workers (Ortner, 2015). When leaders enter the virtual working environment under duress, their lack of awareness and

planning could arguably be the cause for them to retract or ban virtual work options; this seems to be the case for Yahoo.

Marissa Mayer, the former Yahoo CEO, banned virtual work options and ordered all of her remote employees to return to daily operations in the traditional office, because she felt there was a drastic decrease in collaboration among remote employees. (Goudreau, 2013). Mayer thought her organization was not receiving the benefits that were once thought to come with advocating remote work (i.e., increased production, self-motivated innovators, engaged employees, etc.), but instead she felt she received the opposite, low productivity and disengaged workers (Carlson, 2013). Employees were flabbergasted by her abrupt decision to terminate their flexible working arrangements (Glassdoor, 2017). Employees said they were demoralized by this decision, and staff also reported increased stress levels due to them having to make equally abrupt changes to their work-life balance to obey this decision (Cohan, 2013; Glassdoor, 2017). Since she made the decision to ban remote work in June 2013, Mayer's idea that moving back to a traditional in-person working environment would increase collaboration and engagement backfired.

As of July 2016, merely 3 years later, Yahoo's sales have plummeted drastically; Mayer is now being deemed a failure and her organization has been bought out by a competitor (Wagner, 2016). Current researchers concluded that there is a correlation between years of service, colleague social influence, and the success of a teleworker (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017; Wagner, 2016). Scott, Dam, Paez, and Wilton (2012) concluded

that employees who have worked for the organization for a long period of time and have developed meaningful relationships with colleagues are better suited for and are more productive remote workers. Mayer could have used these data to assist her in making a more individualized, data driven decision regarding remote work for her organization.

Multiple factors play into what keeps employees engaged in their work, and there is no agreed upon approach for managers/leaders to employ to ensure their employees are engaged (Llopis, 2012). The lack of depth of knowledge and information on how to engage employees (outside of Gallup's Q12) is challenging enough for managers who deal with traditional in-person employees, but this issue is exacerbated for those who manage employees remotely (Breevart et al., 2014; Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014). Analysts at Gallup presented their recent data where they concluded that over 70% of today's workforce is not engaged in their work (Gallup, 2016). This same poll was also used by Gallup analysts to conclude that managers have a higher level of engagement in their work than their employees. In presenting their data, the Gallup analysts point to the dismal relationship between employees and their working environments in terms of engagement; the analysts do not provide explanations for why there is a lack of engagement—especially among remote workers.

The engagement crisis data that experts at Gallup have provided has shed light on the gap they have identified in understanding how engagement is increased, sustained or eroded, and leaders want to be able to address and rectify this issue (Adkins, 2016).

Gallup engagement researchers have been studying engagement since 2000 and they

espouse that the problem with engagement is that organizational leaders are focusing on measuring and quantifying engagement instead of improving it (Mann & Harter, 2016). Gallup's researchers do not focus on engagement for remote workers; however other researchers have identified a significant difference in the engagement needs of traditional "in-office" employee vs remote employee (Davis, 2012). To better understand the needs of remote workers, leaders should develop a working knowledge of the net-centric work environment (Adkins, 2016).

**The net-centric work environment.** The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) has found that 45% of U.S. workers are remote employees, meaning they frequently work in another location other than their office (Brio, 2014). A 2013 report provided by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM, 2014) to members of Congress stated that more than 50% of government employees are either eligible for telework or are teleworking. One of the largest barriers to telework according to employees is organizations that are not telework ready, that is, able to support the necessary telework infrastructure (OPM, 2014). The workplace landscape is changing rapidly; each day brings about new technological advances that also bring about new challenges for managers/leaders, employees and organization alike to work harmoniously together (Piskurich, 1998).

During the industrial period, many organizations were run using the scientific management model. In the industrial model, employees were managed through a production metric and their levels of engagement were often measured by their

production rates (Krenn, 2011). The factory model was also thought to be the way in which to increase employee motivation. Taylor (1911) claimed employees were motivated by their desire and need for financial resources, so providing them with opportunities to make more money would not only increase their motivation at work but also increase productivity for the organization (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007). The new net-centric workforce is not incentivized by the same things the preindustrial and industrial employees were. Employees in the X & Y generations who are quickly becoming a large percentage of the workforce are looking for other intrinsic factors to be met which motivates them and increases their levels of workplace engagement (Adkins, 2016). Employees want more work flexibility that enhance and support their desires for more work life balance (Adkins, 2016). The organizations who can meet the unique and individualized needs of the employees are able to retain them and potentially increase their commitment to the organization (Adkins, 2016). Organizations that are unable to meet the employee needs find themselves dealing with a revolving door and increased attrition rates (Glassdoor, 2017).

**Traditional work cultures versus remote work cultures.** A thorough review of the current literature on remote work culture (Achieve, 2014; Anitha, 2014; Bersin, 2015; Gagne, 2014; Graber, 2015; Greenspun et al., 2014; Hassell, 2015; Mizne, 2016) suggested quantitative research is inappropriate because little is known about the emerging phenomenon. The few quantitative studies focused on workplace engagement used it as one factor relating to a larger measurable workplace outcome, like employee



productivity, employee commitment, and employee attrition rates (Albdor & Altarawneh, 2014; Anitha, 2014; Sattar & Hassan, 2015). In comparison, this study focused on the phenomenon of workplace engagement for remote workers as the sole factor in the research rather than one interrelated to other workplace outcomes.

The current literature is also limited to the context of the traditional working environment and does not explicitly address remote workplace engagement (Fallon, 2015). The lack of a clear definition of workplace engagement for remote workers provides additional limitations because what data should measure is unclear. Thus, an exploratory qualitative research design is most appropriate because it provides the researcher the opportunity to fully explore the emerging phenomena as they present themselves.

The traditional in-office culture has a more widely accepted understanding and definition than its emerging remote counterpart. Schein (1990) provided a scholar-practitioner's perspective on how to identify traditional in-office cultures within organization; they are behaviors, artifacts, and accepted norms of operation amongst the workers. The definition of organizational culture is explicitly expressed in the traditional office workplace because the characteristics of the culture are readily observable (Alvesson, 2012). Organizational culture in the remote work environment, where managers and employees may not have any regular face-to-face interaction, is not explicitly expressed, and there are no defined methods of observing remote work cultures (Anitha, 2014).

Those who operationally defined organizational culture lacked the foresight to predict how technological advances would alter the way people work (Cunningham, 2014) and ultimately alter how we define and understand organizational culture. The abundance of technological communication tools has expanded and redefined how we have traditionally understood the workplace (Ross, 2016), thus forging a new paradigm for managers and organizational leaders to consider when attempting to apply what they know to be ways to engage their workforce. Leaders now must gain a level of understanding of how their remote workers are experiencing their work cultures remotely, assess how and if it is different from in-office employees, and, if so, how can they enhance their experience remotely (Anitha, 2014). Managers are faced with new challenges in the modern workplace with remote workers and seem to have little to no training or tools to assist in their quest to be successful virtual leaders and managers.

The operational definition of organizational culture does not take into consideration how organizational culture is experienced remotely; it is unilaterally associated with the cultures that are experienced in-person (Alvesson, 2012; Schein 1990). This inability to physically and regularly observe the working conditions and behaviors of remote employees leaves managers with limited information about their employees' workplace engagement, which often leads to a lack of trust between the manager and employee (Atwood, 2015). Managers often think employees who work remotely have an unfair advantage over their in-office colleagues because they need not commute or attend impromptu meetings and assignments, and they are affected by the

frequent workplace distractions that plague the traditional office (Chaney, 2016). Remote workers are not impacted by traditional workplace distractions, so their managers often think their work production and quality should be significantly higher than their in-office counterparts (Turmel, 2014). If their work products do not meet the manager's expectations of a remote worker the manager often begins to question and lose trust in their employees' ability to work independently remote (Turmel, 2014).

A disparity between the requirements and expectations managers have of remote workers versus in-office workers who perform the same job functions has grown within the last decade; managers seem to have higher expectations of their remote workers (Fallon, 2014). If the work functions are the same, then it appears that the location where the work is conducted should not predicate a difference in the work expectation (Fallon, 2014). Considering this challenge there appears to be a cultural phenomenon developing that pits managers against remote workers based on their lack of trust, and the employees' inability to meet the manager's high-performance expectations (Fallon, 2014; Adkins, 2016). This cultural paradox exposes the limitations that the current understanding of organizational cultures presents, and the lack of data and information available on the emerging remote cultures. The lack of data and understanding of remote work culture further provides reasons to use the exploratory qualitative methods versus a quantitative design.

The working environment of the remote worker is still being explored and defined but initial research has shown that the needs of the remote worker are different than those

of the traditional in-office employee (Knight, 2015). The remote worker is not in the office, so they often feel forgotten about when it comes to social interactions with their colleagues, which leads to remote workers feeling as if they are not a functional part of the team (Elvekrog, 2015). The remote worker is often left out of the daily communications and ad-hoc meetings that occur in the office; therefore, they feel at an unfair disadvantage when those communications lead to work assignments and developmental opportunities for their in-office colleagues (Elvekrog, 2015). Employees who work in the office have the advantage of knowing the political climate and energy of the office which provides them with information they can use to navigate through their day successfully (Bates, 2013). Remote workers on the other hand only gain that type of information if it is shared directly with them (Bates, 2013). Remote workers experience workplace culture challenges that can also lead to them feeling isolated and targeted for additional work, micromanagement, and fewer chances for promotion and career growth and development (Michaels, 2016). The workplace culture challenges of feeling isolated, overworked and undervalued are just some of emerging challenges remote workers face while trying to maintain and develop their careers in contrast to in-office team members.

Each organizational leader and manager of remote workers is seemingly handling their remote workers differently. Information on how to increase and sustain a remote culture of engagement and applicable policies, procedures, or training devised to centralize the knowledge of how to work most effectively with remote workers currently do not exist (Adkins, 2016). Most of the information available to managers relates to

using technology such as laptop cameras, Skype, and other virtual teleconference tools to enhance their communication with their remote workers, (Flax, 2014). Tools and training offered to help managers understand the work experiences of remote workers is not available (Flax, 2014). For managers to successfully integrate remote workers into their office cultures they must first understand what the work cultures of the remote worker are and how they experience them (Mejia, 2016). When dealing with remote workers managers often depend heavily on technology to connect with their employee, and the more they limit their interaction through technology the less human the remote worker is made to feel (Nevogt, 2015).

The workplace is constantly changing as the needs of the organization changes as well as the needs of employees changed based on the varying options technology provides for workplace flexibilities. Technological options have increased organizational leaders' ability to expand their workforce without expanding their physical workplace footprint, so organizational leaders are able to build virtual teams without the cost of acquiring physical space (Parris, 2015). Although there is a great cost savings in increasing a staff virtually instead of having them physically in the office, there is a cost associated with the rapidly changing remote work environment. Remote employees miss out on the benefits of working in the traditional office yet are treated as if their remote work arrangement is enough of a benefit itself (Birbir, 2017). To counteract the view that many of their colleagues and employers have about their work location being a vacation from the office, remote workers often work much longer hours and during off peak times

(early mornings, late evenings, and weekends) to show their commitment (Alert Media, 2015). Each remote employee experiences his or her working environment differently, which limits the chance of identifying and securing a population that would provide enough data to conduct an experiment for quantitative analysis (Mertens, 2014). Using the qualitative approach offered more insightful information to develop surveys for a larger population which could be used in a subsequent quantitative experiment.

### **Methodology and Methods in the Literature**

The concept of employee engagement has been gaining popularity within the management and leadership community of practice over the last 30 years (Adkins, 2015). Khan's (1990) research is the foundational research that provided comprehensive data and analysis which helped to provide an operational and scholarly definition for employee engagement. Khan used a qualitative design to conduct the research; he employed a grounded theory design where his data collection method was primarily in-depth interviews. Through his research method and design Kahn could capture the data from the participants within their own environment. The data he collected and analyzed assisted him solidify his engagement theory, which is still widely cited as the seminal work for employee engagement (Saks, 2017).

Employee engagement researchers continue to use and reference Kahn's (1990) work as they continue the investigation of employee engagement. Davies and Crane's (2010) exploratory case study examined the role of the corporate social responsibility and how it influences employee engagement. Their two qualitative methods of data collection

were participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The authors concluded that to increase employee engagement organizational leaders must pick the right employees; to ensure that the employees are provided a comprehensive opportunity to be properly socialized into the organizational culture. More recently, Slack, Corlett, and Morris (2015), like Davies and Crane, explored how employee engagement is influenced by corporate social responsibility. Slack et al. used an exploratory case study method that provided an opportunity for them to deepen the theory emerging around the concept of employee engagement. From their participant observations, field notes, and in-depth interviews, Slack et al. found that hiring the right type of employee is critical to sustaining positive employee engagement. Employees noticed a conflict between the organizational culture that was espoused by the leaders of the organization and what employees actual experience in their daily interaction. These studies support the methods and methodology selected for this study and is consistent with the scope of this study.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Chapter 2 included a comprehensive review of the literature on employee engagement and its relation to remote workers over the last 20 years. Each topic addressed in this chapter focused on a review of research literature, theoretical framework alignment, and gap in the current literature alignment. This review of the literature provides greater insight into the origins of employee engagement, the antecedents and consequences of employee engagement, and how employee engagement

influences organizational culture, and it addresses the need for additional data on what influences the employee engagement of remote workers.

Several themes emerged from this review. First, there is no singular definition of employee engagement, although employee engagement has been described and expressed in multiple ways (Shuck, Ghosh, Zigarmi, & Nimon, 2013). Second, Kahn's (1990) work and research on employee engagement has become the seminal research and widely accepted conceptual definition of employee engagement. His work provided a foundation from which most contemporary research on the topic of engagement. Third is the growing gap between the increasing popularity of the phenomenon of employee engagement and the lack of empirical research on the topic (Mann & Harter, 2016). Employee engagement is steadily gaining popularity within the context of organizational excellence and performance (Gerhart & Fang 2015), and more organizational leaders and stakeholders are interested in seeing their subordinate leaders create environments that support employee engagement (de Mello e Souza Wildermuth & Pauken, 2008). The fourth theme that materialized is the lack of understanding and knowledge and sparseness of scholarly literature on remote work cultures of engagement (Mann & Adkins, 2016). The modern organization offers more workplace flexibilities than ever, and more than half of all workers are engaged in some form of remote work (Gallup, 2017).

This literature review revealed the growing gap in the data available on employee engagement. The most relevant and cited qualitative studies on the topic of engagement by Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) provided a strong premise from which to



explore the nature of employee engagement. These authors' research provided no detailed information on how or why employees choose to experience engagement or how to measure their engagement levels. Saks (2006) quantitative research built on the strengths of Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) and incorporated the social exchange. Saks helped to identify the antecedents and consequences of employee engagement, but he did not provide information on how these antecedents and consequences influenced the engagement levels of remote workers. Analysts at Gallup (2017) have conducted the most recent research and analysis on employee engagement and have built on the work of their predecessors to provide current data on the increasing percentages of disengaged employees. The analysts at Gallup have recently begun to study the engagement levels of remote workers and have found them to be the most disengaged of all employees (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017). Gallup's analysts have not been able to ascertain what the antecedents or consequences of engagement are for remote workers and if they are different from what Saks (2006) identified for in-office workers.

In the next chapter the research methodology for this exploratory case study is described. The data collection and data analysis procedures are presented in relation to how the interviews address research questions pertaining to workplace engagement for remote workers.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study, using a CIT, was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of 14 remote workers nationwide who have worked for their organization for a minimum of 1 year. I completed this investigation using the CIT, a set of procedures used to collect direct observations of behavior that are defined by the criteria and have critical significance (Flanagan, 1954). The results were expected to identify which responses to the critical incidents influence the engagement of remote workers and help understand the emergence of remote work cultures (Rai, 2016). The definition of organizational culture is well defined in the context of the traditional office; the phenomenon of remote organizational culture is less clear.

Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and the sample size and sampling technique. Details are provided for the data collection instruments, the plan for recruitment, participation, and data collection, and the plan for data analysis. In addition, strategies for enhancing the trustworthiness of this study and a discussion of ethical considerations are presented.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

Employee engagement and organizational culture in the traditional office environment have been well researched. Kahn's (1990) research on employee engagement has served as the preeminent model. Schein's (1990) study on organizational culture has also been accepted as a foundation for defining organizational culture, and

scholars and practitioners frequently cite Schein along with Kahn. What is not known about these two central concepts is how they are defined and experienced in the remote work environment.

To further explore the phenomenon of remote workplace engagement, I used the exploratory qualitative case study methodology. A qualitative approach is an efficient and appropriate research method that offers the researcher a probative tactic to thoroughly investigate the existing problem (Richards & Morse, 2012). In an exploratory qualitative case study, a researcher collects, interprets, and analyzes the data (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). The CIT was used to collect the responses of observed incidents having special significance and meeting systematically defined criteria (Flanagan, 1954). I also used CIT to gather direct observations of behavior and extrapolate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad human-centered principles (Flanagan, 1954). The case study method is appropriate when the researcher seeks to explain a current situation or social circumstance, has limited or no control over the events, and is exploring a contemporary phenomenon (Yin, 2013).

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

The focus of the study was how scholars, practitioners, managers, and leaders can define, identify, and affect a culture of engagement for remote workers. The general management problem was that 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged at work, costing organizations upwards of \$550 billion annually (Gallup, 2015). The number of remote workers is steadily increasing while the levels of workplace engagement are decreasing

(Adkins, 2015; Allen et al., 2015; Bibby, 2015; Greer & Payne, 2014; Van Yperen et al., 2014). The specific management problem was that more than half the nation's disengaged employees work remotely (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017) and experience a work culture that limits their career development opportunities (Griswold, 2014), minimizes their visibility within the organization (Gajendran et al., 2015), and increases their feelings of isolation (Van Yperen et al., 2014). The research questions identified for this study focus on identifying the responses to the incidents that influence remote workplace engagement.

### **Central Research Question**

RQ1. How can responses to the incidents that are critical for strengthening, maintaining, or eroding the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?

### **Supporting Research Questions**

SRQ1. How can responses to critical incidents that maintain the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?

SRQ2. How can responses to critical incidents that strengthen the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?

SRQ3. How can responses to critical incidents that erode the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?

These research questions are most effectively addressed qualitatively. The qualitative approach is appropriate when a phenomenon takes place in a real-life context

and pulls from multiple methods that affect the humanity of the study, and when the examiner investigates the phenomenon based on context (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The qualitative approach also should be used when a researcher seeks to examine the evolution of emerging ideas that arise from analysis versus a prescribed result (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Through a qualitative approach, a researcher explores how individuals and groups assimilate their behavior to overcome a social or human problem (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013). The qualitative research approach is also the appropriate method for exploring the new work contexts of the modern workplace (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013).

The focus of this study was the human element and behaviors associated with employees' experiences in their working environments. A CIT was used to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of 14 remote workers nationwide who had worked for their organization for a minimum of 1 year.

Qualitative researchers employ several approaches to support a research design. The case study method is used when the researcher seeks to explain a current social circumstance or phenomenon and has limited or no control over the behavioral events (Stake, 1995; Yin 2013). This study addressed the emerging social circumstances employees experience with remote work and remote work cultures of engagement (Yin, 2013). The study as designed to provide not conclusive evidence but data for a more definitive analysis at a later point.

## **Rationale for Exploratory Research**

An exploratory single case study methodology is deemed most appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon (in this case, remote cultures of engagement) when the existing literature is thin (Yin, 2013). Case study research is a useful strategy for studying processes in organizations and for exploratory investigations (Yin, 2013). Other qualitative designs were considered but were inappropriate. The phenomenological approach focuses on the lived experiences of the participants and how they experienced the phenomenon (Wilson, 2015). The focus in this study is participants' current experiences as remote employees in an evolving phenomenon (Yin, 2013). Grounded theory is designed to develop well-integrated concepts to explain a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1999). This research design would have been appropriate had there been an explicit goal of building a theory, grounded in the data, through an iterative process of coding and theory generation (Charmaz, 2014). There is insufficient information and literature on the phenomenon being studied to develop a theory related to sustaining the workplace engagement of remote worker (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Ethnographic researchers seek to define and describe how a cultural group operates and further examines the groups' collective behaviors and language (Bryman, 2015). The group members must have been together for a long period so that the researcher can identify their shared beliefs and language (Padgett, 2016). Ethnographic studies require observation over a substantial length of time, and investigations of daily behaviors would be required to fully understand the culture (Hammersley, 2015).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the case study researcher is an advocate, instructor, investigator, reviewer, and biographer, but, from a constructivist point of view, the role of interpreter and gatherer of interpretations is central (Stake, 1995). Stake (1995) stated “for science to build a universal understanding,” research “construct clearer and sophisticated realities, particularly ones that can withstand disciplined skepticism” (p. 101). To conduct this exploratory case study method employing the CIT process, a questionnaire was developed to collect data from participants. To minimize bias, interview protocols ensured that each participant’s interview would be managed and conducted in like manner. Through member checking, participants were asked to test the data received from the data collection process, reducing bias and increasing the validity of the study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The protocols also provided participants with background information the investigator and the reason for conducting this research. The interviews were recorded for consistency and continuity purposes, and participants were required to provide written consent to allow their responses to be used in future data analysis. Participants had the option of removing themselves from the process at any point, although they were asked to explain why they made that choice. The participants’ identity has been protected as stated on the consent release form.

Once the preliminary interview protocols were followed and written consent was obtained from the participants, the recorded interviews began. Each participant received the same questions and had time to provide a comprehensive response to each question.

Follow-up questions were asked when appropriate. At his or her request, each participant as free to return to a previous response or to clarify or add thoughts and comments. My role throughout the interview was to serve as the moderator/note taker and to ensure the interview stayed on track and within the interview protocols. Interviews were conducted in a systematic and timely manner, and each participant had the same opportunities to respond. As recommended by Yin (2014), I created transcripts were following each interview and then sent them back to the participants to check the accuracy of their responses.

### **Researcher Bias**

Through my experience as a senior leader managing both remote and in-person employees, I have observed vast differences regarding what seems to keep employees engaged. In the traditional office where a manager/leader sees their employees in person on a regular basis, the manager is visibly able to identify what cultures of engagement appear to work for each of their employees. In these instances, the manager can communicate with the person on a frequent, formal, and informal manner, and they are able to witness (in real-time) how the employee responds to and are engaged in the organizational culture. If the manager notices that the employee does not appear to be engaged in their work or within the social aspect of the workplace, the manager can immediately address that concern with the employee within the context of what he or she witnessed. The employee can also observe how the manager reacts to other employees in the traditional office setting, which further advances the employees' perspective of, and



reinforces what type of, culture the manager espouses. This allows the employee to see the organizational culture in action and can determine an employee's desires and motivation to commit to the organization's culture. This example further clarifies and displays how organizational culture can be defined through the shared experience employees have within the context of an organization. (Alvesson, 2013), and how and if they determine to be engaged in their workplace

Applying the same tools, techniques, and tactics to increase and sustain the engagement of in-person employees who work remotely does not appear to have the same level of success. Remote workers seem to value different methods of engaging with their leadership than those employees who work in the traditional office setting, which may cause the erosion of their engagement levels. Employees increasingly are requesting and requiring more workplace flexibilities, including remote work in the modern workplace (Adkins, 2016).

In providing training and speaking engagements across the United States and abroad, I have noticed that managers and organizational leaders struggle to understand how to best engage with their remote workers. Their employees often feel remotely micromanaged, and managers are not aware of training or tools that can be used to successfully engage remote workers. Managers and organizational leaders are left to identify their own methods for engaging their remote workforce which could ultimately lead to inconsistencies within the ways an organization's leadership team approaches engaging its remote workforce.

With frequent technology advancements that provide increased remote work flexibilities, organizations and industries must keep up with the varying changes. Varying opinions exist on how technology has either enhanced or hindered the way in which modern employees communicate. Some people believe technology has substantially advanced humans' ability to communicate more effectively and efficiently (Fennell, 2015). Some organizational leaders think technology has hindered and stifled the ways in which people communicate (Godwin-Jones, 2016). This study was designed so my bias and preconceptions should be minimized.

### **Methodology**

The intricacy of understanding how workplace engagement is experienced remotely requires a research approach that provides an opportunity to examine the phenomenon as it is being experienced. Because minimal data were available directly related to remote workplace engagement (Shields & Rangarjan, 2013), I used the exploratory case study method to discover the responses to the incidents that influence remote workplace engagement. To successfully engage in the qualitative analysis process through the exploratory case study approach, I used the CIT as the research and data collection methodology.

The CIT procedure has five steps. Step 1 is to identify the general aims (FitzGerald et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954). Pertinent research questions must be established prior to conducting any research (Flanagan, 1954). Throughout this stage the researcher should design questions that assist them in gaining a greater understanding of

how organizational adaptability and employee socialization influences employees' learning in the work environment (Flanagan, 1954). Step 2 is the planning stage, when the researcher addresses the situations to be observed, the observers, the data collection and data analysis method, as well as the International Review Board requirements and guidelines (Flanagan, 1954). Step 3 is the data collection process. During this step incidents are observed and collected through one-on-one interviews, group interviews, questionnaires, or through record or field notes (Flanagan, 1954). The choice of the data collection method should be based on the phenomenon being observed, time available to conduct the observations, and other factors that affect the researchers' ability to complete the collection (Flanagan, 1954). During Step 4 the research is summarized and the data are described for other related purposes (Flanagan, 1954). To analyze the data gathered through CIT, the researcher selects a frame of reference to determine how the data are used (FitzGerald et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954). Incident categories are then established to identify major and subareas to store the collected data (FitzGerald et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954). Once collected, the data are placed into the defined incident categories to be coded and interpreted as they are reviewed (FitzGerald, et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954). Step 5 is interpreting and reporting the data. During this step, any potential personal bias that arose during the first four steps is addressed (FitzGerald, et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954). When the researcher reports the findings, the data collection and analysis methods must be completely transparent (FitzGerald et al., 2008; Flanagan, 1954).

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Currently working remote employees, as defined in Chapter 1, in a technology-based industry were solicited for participation. These individuals worked permanently from an alternate location outside of the traditional centralized workspace (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). The profile of the remote worker for this study was someone who worked remotely as a full-time employee for their organization for a minimum of 1 year. I located participants through the organization's office of human resources. The human resource manager sent a message soliciting for volunteers for this study via e-mail. A sample size of 20 participants was expected to be adequate, although fewer interviews would take place if saturation was reached.

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, described by Patton (2002) as sampling that focuses on selecting data rich cases that provide clarity to the questions being examined. Patton espoused that studying data-rich cases provides insights and a comprehensive understanding rather than an empirical generalization. Purposeful sampling was used to provide the richest data possible that relates to the engagement experiences of remote workers. All participants

- were remote workers, permanently working from a remote location other than the traditional workspace of their organization;
- met their organization's definition of a full-time employee;
- were able to participate fully in the study at the appointed times outlined in their participation agreement; and

- volunteered to participate in this study as participants and not as a condition of their employment.

All potential participants were vetted through their office of human resources to ensure the criteria were properly met. Once interested respondents provided written confirmation of their participation, they participated in individual phone calls, and the purpose and context of the exploratory study were explained.

### **Review the Letter of Understanding**

I sent each participant the letter of understanding in advance of our formal interview process. During this conversation, I reviewed the letter with all participants in detail to ensure they understand what they were being asked to do in this research process, and they had time to ask questions about the letter.

### **The Researcher's Role**

Participants were clear about my role as the researcher and data collection instrument. I explained how I planned to collect, code, and analyze the data. The participants were given an additional opportunity to clarify any concerns or questions they might have had about the study.

### **The Participants' Role and Interview Protocols**

Through the letter of understanding, participants had a detailed understanding of what their role was as participants. Questions were addressed during the initial conversation, along with concerns and assurances about anonymity and interview

protocols in detail to ensure the participants understand the data collection procedures and how the conversation would be executed.

The initial phone conversations ended with a detailed overview of the consent form that each participant must review and sign prior to moving forward with the formal interview. Consent forms were electronically prior to the conference call. After the call, an interview date, time, and location were confirmed. All participants were reminded they could withdraw their participation at any point.

### **Instrumentation**

An oral questionnaire that had been uniquely designed and developed for this study was the research instrument. This questionnaire was used to conduct the initial and follow-up interviews with the remote employee participants. The instrument is explained in the following section.

The questionnaire was based on Merriam's (2009) guidelines for conducting effective interviews. Merriam espoused that "interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them," and that it "is sometimes the only way to get data" (p. 88). Researchers should determine the amount of structure they desire to use for the interviews; the interviews can be highly structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (Merriam, 2009). The interviews were semi-structured using the flexibility allowed in the CIT method to ask probing questions when appropriate to elicit more in-depth responses from participants (Merriam, 2009). The semi-structured interview questions were closely aligned to the central and supporting

research questions for this study. The interview questions were inspired by the Q<sup>12</sup> interview questions developed by Gallup (2017). The Q<sup>12</sup> was developed using the iterative process. The first version of it emerged in 1990, and the tool has been updated over the last 2 decades (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Asplund, 2008). Analyst at Gallup conducted decades of research writing, testing, and refining thousands of question items to find the ones that best measured employee engagement (Gallup, 2016). In 1996, Gallup finalized the 12 question items that consistently and powerfully link employee engagement to business outcomes, including profitability, employee retention, productivity, safety records, and customer engagement (Harter et al., 2008). From 1996 to 2012, nearly 25 million employees in almost three million workgroups from 195 countries completed Gallup's Q<sup>12</sup> survey (Harter et al., 2008). As discussed in the literature review, this tool is the premier instrument used to collect and measure employee engagement. Researchers who developed this tool assumed that engagement of in-office and remote workers could be assessed using the same tool. The basis of my instrument development is to address this assumption that remote and in-office workers' levels of engagement can be collected using the same tool. To address and maintain content validity, I used the validated Q<sup>12</sup> tool. The questionnaire specifically addressed the engagement experiences of remote workers.

### **Field Test of the Instrument**

I conducted a field test to validate the questionnaire. A panel of remote work experts reviewed the tool to verify that the questions did what they were intended to do

and that the instructions were clear and understandable. Participants in the field study were not a part of the dissertation data analysis.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

The participants were recruited voluntarily through their human resource office or appropriate official solicitor. Potential participants were contacted via e-mail requesting they volunteer for this study. The participants must meet the participant selection requirements discussed above. Upon completing the interview, each participant had a chance to ask questions or offer further comments. The participants were reminded as part of the exit procedures their information, interview responses, and any additional related information shared will be kept confidential and their identities will remain anonymous. Once a time was agreed upon to conduct the follow-up interview, the same interview protocols were followed that were previously established.

Collecting data for a case study is different from most research processes because the interviewer must cater to the interviewee's availability, limiting the interviewer's ability to control the environment (Yin, 2014). The interview is somewhat open-ended in a case study data collection process and requires flexibility (Yin, 2014). For these reasons the data collection process can be complex, and the interviewer needs to develop coping mechanisms that assist them in maintain themselves during the data collection process if a participant becomes unexpectedly unwilling to continue (Yin, 2014).

The data collected from the interviews were strictly related to the experiences and knowledge of the participants related to remote work cultures of engagement. The



interview questions addressed the emerging phenomenon of remote workplace engagement, and the interview protocols helped me keep the interview in alignment with the focus of the research. The central research question and supporting questions were addressed through the oral questionnaire/interview. The data collection is explained in the sections below.

### **Interviews**

Each participant was asked to participate in an initial and potential follow-up interview to discuss their engagement experiences as remote workers. Each interview was scheduled for approximately 90 minutes and recorded to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. The data were collected over a 4-week period. The interview was conducted virtually via video, Skype, or telephonically, depending on which method was most convenient for the participant. After each interview the recordings were transcribed, reviewed, and annotated with the notes taken from the interviews to ensure there was fullness of data (points of emphasis, relationship to other themes, etc.). The participants exited the study by a formal closeout procedure. Once the participants had a chance to answer any final questions, they were thanked for taking part in the study. Follow-up interviews were scheduled as necessary and conducted with the preestablished interview protocols. Once all interviews were conducted and recordings were reviewed, the data were coded and analyzed to identify any themes.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

Case studies are typically used when examining complex behaviors occurring within a complex dynamic real-world context (Yin, 2014). The majority of the data collected during a case study are derived from verbatim records of interviewees' responses (Stake, 1995). Once the data are collected, the researcher should then move the data around in various vantage points to identify patterns, insights, or concepts that might emerge through data manipulation (Yin, 2014). Varying manipulations could include creating data matrices and categories for targeted data placement, developing visual data displays and graphics for examining patterns or themes, or placing information in a chronology by interview question of each participant to observe emerging patterns (Yin, 2014).

The CIT method was used to create a categorization scheme that provided a relevant summary and description of the data being collected to properly analyze it (Flanagan, 1954). Flanagan's (1954) three-staged data analysis guided the analysis. The first stage was determining the frame of reference for evaluating the data based on the central (and supporting) research questions related to understanding how remote workplace engagement. The second stage was formulating categories that housed related groups of data for further analysis and identifying themes. The final stage was determining the level of specificity or generalization used to report the findings of the data analysis, which extended the transferability of the information derived from the data analysis.

The data collected through the CIT were coded using the open and selective coding and coding approaches, which are a proven and widely used method for qualitative research and analysis (Patton, 2002). The open coding approach was employed first. During the open coding process, I noted the similar words and phrases used by the participants as they described their incidents to further establish and clarify the patterns in the data (Mills et al., 2010). After the open coding process, I had a list of descriptive codes, categories, and characteristics in addition to notes that supported how the codes were established (Mills et al., 2010). I analyzed the data according to steps prescribed by Patton (2002), Mills et al. (2010), and Yin (2014):

1. I completed the recorded interview.
2. I read and reviewed interview notes and recording and transfer the data into a verbatim transcript.
3. I completed an open-coding process to prepare themes and categories that were associated in the interview responses, and the selective coding process to narrow the data into code categories until the data fit the defined set.
4. I conducted a pattern matching process.
5. I built an explanation about the case.
6. I examined the data for common phenomenon and experiences until there was saturation and confirmed the themes against the completed record of the participant to confirm there is transferability.

7. Developed an understanding of the common thread(s) of the phenomenon and developed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the participants' experiences, which would represent the entire group of participants.
8. Repeated the process until a complete understanding from the participant's experience was obtained to confirm the data was dependable.

### **Discrepant Data**

Discrepant data were evaluated to determine the effect of the discrepancies on the results (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005). The discrepant data were not ignored or discarded but were presented to allow readers to draw their own conclusions (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

To address issues or concerns with the credibility of the data, member checks were conducted. Member checks are the most critical provision that can be made to increase a study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants were given the opportunity to review the accuracy of their interview transcripts and had a chance to discuss the interviews and provide additional insight and clarification.

#### **Transferability**

To address issues or concerns with transferability, the findings were presented and explained in thick descriptions (Koch, 1994) and showed clear similarities in the

experiences of the participants. Readers can make educated decisions about the transferability of the findings assess their ability to apply them to their organization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Dependability**

To ensure others can make the transfer on their own, a substantial amount of descriptive information was provided on the organization that participated in the study (Firestone, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), including the size, industry, and mission of the organization. The principles uncovered in the study might be usable for managers and leaders who currently or plan to offer flexible working arrangements such as remote work and help leaders develop, increase, or sustain a positive culture of engagement for their remote workers. To address issues or concerns related to dependability, the process and method by which the study was conducted was reported in detail so that others can repeat it and its effectiveness can be evaluated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Confirmability**

To address issues and concerns of confirmability, data triangulation was applied to reduce any of my own bias. I collected information from multiple sources to strengthen the construct validity of the case study (Yin, 2014). One of the key objectives in addressing confirmability is showing that the results of the study are a direct reflection of those who participated in the study rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Confirmability is addressed at length in Chapters 4 and 5.

## **Ethical Procedures**

As noted earlier, during the initial meeting potential participants received detailed information about the research process, my role, their role, and any questions they might have that pertain the entire interview process. They received a letter of understanding about the voluntary nature of the study and the interview protocols. After the initial conference call, no interview commenced without a prior signed written consent form from the participant. The consent form acknowledged the interviewee fully understood the process in which they participated. The voluntary and anonymous nature of the interview was stated clearly in the interview protocols as well as the consent form. No identifiable information was shared with anyone at any given time during this research process.

## **Summary**

This chapter included a rationale for and detailed description of the qualitative design method. I conducted an exploratory case study approach using the CIT method. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that were critical for maintaining, strengthening, and eroding the workplace engagement of 14 full-time remote workers who had worked for their organization for a minimum of 1 year. The protocol for the design was to (a) interview a minimum of 20 participants, until saturation was reached; (b) code the transcripts and recordings and gather them into ideas and themes; (c) analyze the data and provide a data-supported perspective on the responses to the incidents critical for maintaining,

strengthening, and eroding the workplace engagement of remote workers; and (d) develop categories of responses to the critical incidents, attributable to influences on increasing, sustaining, or eroding the engagement for remote workers

Identifying the responses to the incidents that are critical for influencing (maintaining, strengthening, or eroding) the workplace engagement of remote workers is critical for the future of remote workplace engagement. This was accomplished best through exploratory research that gave me the foundation needed to address the unknowns that exist with an emerging phenomenon related to remote workplace cultures of engagement. The goal of this study was to identify the incidents and responses that are critical for influencing (maintaining, strengthening, or eroding) the workplace engagement of remote workers, and to provide organizational leaders a better understanding of how to create, enhance, and sustain a positive workplace culture of engagement.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study, using a CIT, was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement. The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the study. This chapter includes discussions on the field test, setting demographics, data collection, data analysis, results and evidence of trustworthiness concluding with a summary.

In this study, I examined the problem of the gap in knowledge and understanding about the steady decrease in the workplace engagement levels of remote workers, by evaluating an organization whose entire workforce is comprised of remote employees. The central research question and three supporting research questions developed to evaluate remote workplace engagement were as follows:

- RQ1. How can responses to the incidents that are critical for strengthening, maintaining, or eroding the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?
- SRQ1. How can responses to critical incidents that maintain the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?
- SRQ2. How can responses to critical incidents that strengthen the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?
- SRQ3. How can responses to critical incidents that erode the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy?



### **Field Test**

The study included a field test to ensure the reliability and validity of the interview questions. The field test included a group of experts in remote work management who analyzed the interview questions to ensure they were sufficient to answer the research questions. Three of the experts analyzed the interview protocol, interview questions, and abstract. Two of the managers suggested that I group my interview questions into categories, which they felt would make the interviews flow more smoothly and provide a methodical and sensible way of conducting the interview. Based on this expert feedback, I took their advice and reorganized the interview questions into categorical groups. One of the experts suggested that I spend a moment with each participant at the beginning of the interview briefly describing what workplace engagement and workplace disengagement is to ensure they have a clear framework for the questions being asked. I took this expert's advice as well and implemented it into my overall interview process. The experts all agreed that my revised questions were appropriate and would derive the information and data needed to answer the stated research questions. They also felt that my questions would invoke data that would be critical for remote workers as well as managers of remote workers. The experts did not have any additional recommendations.

### **Research Setting**

I recruited participants from one organization that employs remote workers with the permission of their chief executive officer (CEO). The CEO was very interested in

and supportive of serving as the host site for my study and provided me with permission and access to directly contact all his staff. All potential participants were contacted directly by me and were not under any obligation to participate. I contacted the employees via e-mail using the invitation to participate document (see Appendix A). I blind copied each employee on the invitation to participate e-mail so all employees remained anonymous. In my invitation to participate I asked the employees to contact me directly if they were interested in volunteering to participate in the interview. Once they confirmed their interest in participating, I contacted them directly and sent them a consent to participate form. In accordance with the established protocols, I did not conduct any interviews until the participant completed and signed the consent to participate form.

The setting of this study was remote; all the participants are remote workers so the interviews were conducted via teleconference. Using an Internet-based teleconference service allowed for optimal concentration for me and the participant, as I conducted the interviews at times that were convenient for the participant. I made myself available during and after normal working hours to include weekends, which allowed the participants to minimize their potential work and personal distractions so they could solely focus on the interview. The interviews took between 30-45 minutes to complete on average. Once the transcripts were completed, I sent them to each individual participant to review to increase the strength, validity, and reliability of the study. The participants identified no change in their working environments or personal well-being that would influence the interpretation of the data or study results at the time of the study.

### Demographics

This study focused on the workplace engagement experiences of remote workers, so demographical information did not play an integral role in this study. I did notate some basic demographical information and ensured the participants met the requirements to participate in the study. I interviewed 14 participants, and all participants met or exceeded the minimum qualifications to participate, which were to be a full-time, remote employee, who has worked for the company for 1 year or more. All the participants came from the same organization, which is an executive background screening service. All the organizational employees are remote and the organization operates as a virtual entity. I could identify themes and patterns, in addition to levels of experience based on the participants' interviews. See Table 1 for a summary of the participant demographics.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics and Characteristics (N = 14)*

	<i>n</i>	%
Males	7	50
Females	7	50
Junior-level	3	21
Mid-level	6	43
Senior level	5	36

### Data Collection

Walden University granted approval for this study (01-25-18-0506092). In preparation for this study I confirmed with the CEO of the host organization that I could

move forward with soliciting for participants. Once I reconfirmed the CEO's approval I sent the invitation to participate letter to the director of human resources, who then sent it out to the employees. The employees who volunteered to participate followed the directions on the invitation letter and contacted me via my Walden University e-mail to confirm their interest. Participants who contacted me completed and signed the consent form and returned it to me. The next step entailed scheduling the individual interviews, which is also coordinated via e-mail. Once a date and time was confirmed the participants were sent a calendar invitation via e-mail that provided the date, time, and dial-in information for the interview. The interviews were conducted via a secured computer-based conference line, which required a unique pin code to access. Prior to the interview, each participant was reminded of the purpose of the interview and was reminded that they did not have to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering. The participants were also reminded that they could end the interview at any time and their request would be honored immediately. The participants were also reminded that their interview was being recorded to validate the interview notes. Participants acknowledged their understanding of the interview protocols and affirmed their desire to move forward with the interview. I reiterated the confidentiality agreement stated in the consent form and confirmed that their names would not be used and would instead be coded using a numbering system.

Interviews took place after all the procedures and protocols were completed. The computer-based conference service used to record the interviews provided quality voice

recordings. The service recorded effortlessly, and, as it was computer-based, I was easily and immediately able to access the data. Each interview was conducted in the same consistent method, by asking a series of nine questions based on the CIT process. The interviews took less than 60 minutes, which was in alignment with the interview protocols discussed with each participant. The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word and provided to the participants for member checking.

After verifying the 14 interviews through member checking, I systematically organized the data onto the Interview Data Collection Template (see Appendix C). I followed an algorithm of organizing data; the responses from the participants were housed on one spreadsheet and a separate worksheet was labeled and used to capture emergent themes and patterns. Using the RDAW allowed for the process of coding and analysis to be an uninterrupted fluid process, uninhibited by preconceived ideas themes. This process also aided in the process of continually minimizing my bias.

### **Data Analysis**

A nine-phased process was used to conduct the study. The nine-phased process provided academic rigor, order, structure and interpretation from the data collection as described in Chapter 3. Following the identified nine-phased process the analysis was conducted by (a) recording the data, (b) reviewing the data, (c) conducting open coding, (d) conducting selective coding, (e) conducting pattern matching, (f) providing explanations, (g) conducting an examination, (h) preparing a composite description, and (i) repeating the process.

### **Recording the Data**

Each participant was provided with detailed instructions of their role in the research process along with interview protocols. A key portion of the interview protocols was the section on how the data would be collected. The interviews were conducted using a secured computer-based conference system. This system recorded all the interviews in their entirety. During each interview, I captured detailed notes based on the participant's responses to the questions. I used an interview collection template (Appendix C) to capture the notes from each interview. The tool made the verification and member-checking process simple and methodical because it provided a systematic way to capture responses from each question. The recorded data are stored on a secured hard drive and can be easily accessed or deleted by me as mentioned in the interview protocols.

### **Reviewing Interview Notes**

After each interview, I immediately reviewed the recording to verify the interview was recorded properly and then I listened a second time to verify and validate the interview notes taken. The recording also provided an opportunity to include additional data in the notes that might have been missed during the interview discussion. There were a few occasions where I notated something I thought I heard and the recording assisted me in correcting my error. The recording proved to be a vital tool to assist in the review and verification of the interview notes.

### **Conducting Open Coding**

To conduct open coding, I reviewed the data multiple times to assess the totality of the data collected. After conducting multiple thorough reviews of the data, I began to create labels within my data analytics tool to capture large groups of data. Using this coding method provided me with the opportunity to summarize what I generally saw emerging at this early stage of analysis. The open coding process provided me with the foundation needed to construct a descriptive, multidimensional preliminary framework to be used for future analysis.

### **Conducting Selective Coding**

Using the framework provided by the open coding process allowed me the opportunity to identify the core variable that connects all the data. Once the core variable was identified, I read and reread the interview data transcripts and began selectively coding data that related to that core variable. Then, I began to analyze the data by drawing connections from the core variable to other related and interrelated variables by using properties and dimensions. Connecting the core variable to other variables validated the emergence and selection of the core variable, and provided an opportunity for more in-depth analysis, and for the emergence of themes and patterns.

### **Conducting Pattern Matching**

To conduct the pattern matching, I did a comparative analysis of two patterns to determine whether they match. I took my idea of what I thought was occurring in the data, based on the prior coding process, and compared it to what I observed was taking

place operationally. I then tested the empirically-found pattern against the predicted one, which provided a basis for exploratory explanations and developing research outcomes.

### **Exploratory Explanations**

The pattern-matching process provided a foundational framework from which to begin to build thematic explanations for what was emerging. The patterns presented in the data allowed for the opportunity connect the participant data together in a way that began to tell a story. With the emergence of the patterns I was able use the participant data to begin to provide an explanation for story what was emerging.

### **Conducting an Examination**

Using the exploratory explanations as a guide, I could conduct an in-depth analysis of the data to further explore and examine the emerging phenomenon. I began to look for common phenomena and experiences through the data until saturation was reached. When saturation was reached trends in the participant data became more apparent, and I could capture the trends in a translatable and transferrable manner. Upon further examination of that data I was also able to identify some commonalities and patterns between the trends and begin to develop some final conclusions.

### **Developing a Composite Description**

After my thorough examination of the data, and once saturation was reached, I could confirm the emergent themes against the completed record of the participant to confirm transferability. I used the confirmation of information as the textural description



for each participant. I included verbatim examples from participant's responses throughout this phase of the analysis process to assist in the verification process.

### **Repeating the Process**

To enrich my research, I repeated the nine-step process, until a complete understanding was obtained from the experience to confirm the data is dependable. I ensured that the process I used could be replicated by another researcher to yield similar findings, interpretations and conclusions about the data. Creating a repeatable process also establishes that the findings are consistent, which is critical in proving the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

During the data collection process, some participants provided more information about their experiences than others. To obtain substantial evidence, I asked additional probative follow-up questions to ensure accurate comprehensive data was collected. There were no deviations made from the proposal stated in Chapter 3. Member checking was a critical process used to validate the data. Member checks are the most critical provision that can be made to increase a study's credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants were given the opportunity to review the accuracy of their interview transcripts and were provided with an opportunity to discuss the interviews and provide additional insight and clarification. An additional form of credibility used was

triangulation, as it is used to mitigate bias. I applied data triangulation by using additional comparative data collected from field experts during the field test.

### **Transferability**

Using Khan's (1990, 1992) engagement theory provided the foundation for the research question: How can responses to the incidents that are critical for strengthening, maintaining, or eroding the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy? I provided a comprehensive description of the data collection process and the nine-phased analysis process to strengthen research transferability to the reader, stakeholders, scholar-practitioners, and future researchers.

### **Dependability**

To address issues of dependability I used data triangulation and member checking to ensure transferability. The research process included the data collected from the participants during the in-depth interviews, which was cross-referenced with the data collected from the field experts during the field test, and a dual process of identifying themes and codes. Documenting and taking rich notes during the interviews were vital procedures used in aligning my findings with the emerged themes.

### **Confirmability**

Assuring confirmability provided me the opportunity to interpret the data without bias. It was critical for me to illustrate the transparency of the data, while understanding my role in the research and data collection process. I served as the instrument that collected the data by asking the interview questions and taking notes. The findings are

written to extrapolate the participants' experiences and interpreted with a probable conclusion.

### **Study Results**

The purpose of this exploratory case study, using a critical incident technique (CIT), is to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of remote workers. The data collection process included data from 14 participants who work remotely for an executive background screening organization. Each participant voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and expressed a desire to share their lived experience as remote workers. Saturation was reached after the seventh participant interview. This study is comprised on one RQ: How can responses to the incidents that are critical for strengthening, maintaining, or eroding the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy. To answer this RQ I analyzed each interview question (IQ) proffering answers to the RQ from the perspectives and experiences of the participants. The following information are results of each interview question as they relate to the research question; there were nine interview questions (Appendix B).

### **Open Coding**

To begin the coding process, I reviewed the transcripts and began to organize the data based on large groupings of data to capture emergent codes and themes, and possible categories that might develop based on data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After thoroughly reviewing the data and identifying common trends in the transcripts, I began to code

recognizable inductive concepts (Glaser, 1978). The open coding analysis derived 15 distinct emergent codes and seven themes listed in Table 2.

### **Selective Coding**

The open coding process provided a comprehensive listing of the emergent codes and themes, and once that process concluded the second cycle of coding took place. In the selective coding process, I further integrated and abstracted the central core categories that have merged. Two central core categories emerged during the selective coding process, engagement and disengagement.

### **Raw Data Analysis**

The 14 participants were each given an opportunity to respond to the nine questions and were given the same instructions and protocols. The participant's responses to the individual questions were closely aligned, in a number of instances the participants responses were close to verbatim of one another. This alignment is important to note because all the participants are remote workers, and work from each of their individual homes. An analysis of the raw data was completed in three phases, which are represented by Tables 1-3. The code analysis below should be used to interpret all three tables. Table 3 is the analysis of each question and the associated score of the response provided by each participant.

Table 2

*Themes and Codes*

Theme	Code	Code Type
Connectedness	Personal Connection	Emergent
	Personal Satisfaction	Emergent
Business Acumen	Taking Initiative	Emergent
	Professional Satisfaction	Emergent
Organizational Management	Leadership	Emergent
	Onboarding	Emergent
Organizational Culture	Familial working environment	Emergent
	Social Interaction	Emergent
	Team Work	Emergent
Organizational Fit	Personal Engagement	Emergent
	Feeling Disconnected	Emergent
Disengagement	Feeling Isolated	Emergent
	Unhappiness	Emergent
	Work-Life Balance	Emergent
Workplace Flexibility		

Table 3

*Coding Legend*

Code	Code Explanation	Numerical Assessment
SC	Strong Connection	3
MC	Moderate Connection	2
FC	Faint Connection	1
NC	No Connection	0

Table 4 shows that there is equal alignment (100%) from each participant for IQs 1-4 and a strong alignment with each participant for Questions 5-6 (93% and 98%, respectively), which are all related to workplace engagement. Table 5 is an isolated analysis completed for incidents of workplace engagement for IQs 1-6.

Table 5 shows that 12 out of the 14 participants (86%) reported incidents of a strong connection to feelings of employee engagement (each calculated at 100%). The remaining two respondents scored well over the 80% mark, with 83% and 94%, respectively, in terms of incidents relating to employee engagement. Table 6 displays IQs 7-9 which are more in line with capturing incidents of employee disengagement. Most of the participants scored at or below 56% for questions related to incidents they have experienced that are connected to employee disengagement, which is 13 out of 14 (93%).

Table 4

*Comprehensive Raw Data Analysis (CRDA)*

Participant	IQ-1	IQ-2	IQ-3	IQ-4	IQ-5	IQ-6	IQ-7	IQ-8	IQ-9
1	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	MC	MC	MC	SC
2	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	NC	FC
3	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	MC	NC
4	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	FC	FC	NC
5	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	MC	MC	SC
6	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	MC	MC	NC
7	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	FC	NC	NC
8	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	FC	NC	NC
9	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	FC	NC	NC
10	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	FC	NC	MC
11	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	MC	MC	FC
12	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	FC	FC	NC
13	SC	SC	SC	SC	NC	SC	MC	NC	NC
14	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	NC	NC	NC
Score	42	42	42	42	39	41	22	12	10
Max Total	42	42	42	42	42	42	42	42	42
Percentage	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	93.0	98.0	52.0	29.0	24.0

Table 5

*Employee Engagement Data Analysis*

Participants	IQ-1	IQ-2	IQ-3	IQ-4	IQ-5	IQ-6	Ind. Score	Max. Score	%
1	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	MC	17	18	94.0
2	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
3	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
4	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
5	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
6	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
7	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
8	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
9	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
10	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
11	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
12	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0
13	SC	SC	SC	SC	NC	SC	15	18	83.0
14	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	SC	18	18	100.0



Table 6

*Employee Disengagement Data Analysis*

Participants	IQ-7	IQ-8	IQ-9	Ind. Score	Max Score	%
1	MC	MC	SC	7	9	78.0
2	SC	NC	FC	4	9	44.0
3	SC	MC	NC	5	9	56.0
4	FC	FC	NC	2	9	22.0
5	MC	MC	SC	7	9	78.0
6	MC	MC	NC	4	9	44.0
7	FC	NC	NC	1	9	11.0
8	FC	NC	NC	1	9	11.0
9	FC	NC	NC	1	9	11.0
10	FC	NC	MC	3	9	33.0
11	MC	MC	FC	5	9	56.0
12	FC	FC	NC	2	9	22.0
13	MC	NC	NC	2	9	22.0
14	NC	NC	NC	0	9	0.0

**Thematic Analysis**

Once all the data were collected, analyzed, and coded, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify patterns emerging from the data. Once the selective coding process was complete, I was then able to further organize the data into two categories, four themes and six codes. Table 7 displays the findings of the thematic analysis.

Table 7

*Categories, Themes, Codes and Incidents Analysis*

Category	Theme	Code	# of Incidents	Percentage
Engagement	Connectedness	Personal Connection	71	30.0
		Organizational Culture	67	17.0
	Organizational Fit	Familial Work Environment	41	28.0
		Contentment	30	13.0
Disengagement	Disconnectedness	Feeling Isolated	15	6.0
		Unhappiness	15	6.0

Table 7 displays the two categories, four themes, and six codes derived from the thematic data analysis. In 239 incidents, the theme and its associated category were referenced by the participants, which was factored into Table 7. Based on the data analysis out of those 239 incidents, 71 (30%) were related to the participant's experience with a personal connection to the organization, 67 (28%) of their incidents were related to experiencing work-life balance, 41 (17%) were related to them experiencing their workplace as one that is familial, 30 (15%) were related to their experiences of workplace contentment, and 15 (6%) were related to feelings of isolation and experiences of unhappiness. Reviewing the data categorically, the category of employee engagement makes up 88% of the incidents reported by the participants in the study. Therefore, these data indicate that only 12% of the incidents reported were related to employee disengagement.

## **Emergent Themes**

In review of the emerged themes based on the percentage of which they were discussed by the participants, the two top coded themes are connectedness and organizational culture. Connectedness involved word phrases such as personal commitment, taking the initiative, connection to mission and vision, engaged and being a part of the bigger picture. Organizational culture involved word phrases such as work-life balance, flexible working hours and arrangements, open and friendly, and working with family and friends. The other themes organizational fit and disconnectedness were not mentioned frequently but were discussed in a few of the participant's interviews. An interpretation of the findings is provided in Chapter 5.

Nine questions were used in the interviews to exhaust as much data as possible from the participant interviews. Questions 1-6 were the primary IQs used to determine for contributing to the typologies derived from the connectedness and organizational culture theme. Questions 7-9 were geared towards collecting data for the emergent theme of disconnectedness; however, the data derived from those questions inversely assisted in providing a more in-depth understanding of how remote employees experience workplace engagement and were used in determining the predominant themes.

## **Connectedness Theme**

The connectedness theme included word phrases such as personal commitment, taking the initiative, connection to mission and vision, engaged and being a part of the bigger picture. This theme emerged from questions 1-6, primarily from questions 1, 2, 4,

and 6. In calculating the number of participants who used the word phrases associated with connectedness 14 out of 14 (100%) of the participants used similar phrases when responding to the interview questions. One-hundred percent of the participants felt the company they worked for does an outstanding job of making them feel connected to the organization and their clients and their colleagues.

A summary of the data provided shows that the participants felt the organization provides an opportunity for all employees to take the initiative to make decisions (without leadership approval) that they feel is in the best interest of the client and company. The organization's leadership team empowers employees to make the right decision when they need to without waiting for approval from leadership, and they encourage employees to collaborate with their peers to gain a better understanding of how to operate in their organizational culture. Employees are provided with the tools they need to be successful and are also encouraged to speak out when there are needs they have that are not being met.

Data also show that 100% of the employees offered responses to IQs 1-4 (Table 5) that supported the connectedness theme. Several participants made comments about the positive experiences they have had in feeling connected to the organization. Participant #10 described how she started in one position with the organization but it was not working out in the way she originally hoped, and she was not engaged in the work like she wanted to be. She spoke with the leadership team and they empowered her to take the initiative to identify and ultimately create the work and role she wanted to do

within the company. She stated, “The team supported me and allowed me to explore until I found something I really wanted to do.” This is one of the many examples reported from the participants that alludes to patterns of positive connections associated with feelings of engagement and connectedness.

### **Organizational Culture Theme**

The theme of organization culture has the highest number of incidents associated with it. The word phrases that are related to this theme are such as work-life balance, flexible working hours and arrangements, open and friendly, and working with family and friends. This theme emerged from IQs 1-6, and each question uniquely adds to the framework that is the organizational culture; however, the bulk of the theme emerged from IQs 3-6. The related IQs as previously mentioned with the connectedness theme, all exhibit patterns of strong connections to workplace engagement, which is a vital part of understanding organizational culture (Kahn, 1990; Schein, 2010).

In review of the data analysis, the organizational leaders are providing employees with opportunities and tools to be successful in their own unique ways. IQ-3 is a question that asks respondents to provide incidents where they felt like they were working in an environment where their co-workers felt like friends and or family. All the respondents (100%) provided multiple incidents where they felt like their working environment was familial. In speaking with the CEO, one of his desires was to create a corporate culture where he and his team felt like they were a family. His plans and vision appear to be working based on the data, and on the varying responses the participants provided to this

regard. All of the participants provided multiple incidents where they felt like their working environment was more like a place to hang out with your family or friends who also happen to be your coworkers. This part of the organizational culture seemed equally if not more important to the participants than the leadership team.

Participant #3 provided a detailed account of what it meant to him to feel like he's working with his family. He shared with his colleagues that his wife was going to be traveling to Las Vegas with her friends. Her trip was around the time of the most recent Las Vegas terror attack. His wife was not harmed and made it back home safely; however, his co-workers, management team and the CEO all personally contacted him to see if he and his family were ok. His wife also returned home to a bouquet of roses from the organization to let her know that she was in their thoughts during that ordeal. Participant #3 said he was moved to tears by this gesture and mentioned that he received more concern from his work family than he did his relatives.

The family-like working environment extended beyond what Participant #3 shared. There were many respondents who mentioned how they are encouraged by senior leadership to recommend people for vacant positions instead of the traditional job postings. The CEO stated he finds the best employees through his best employees, and he encourages them to be internal recruiters for their business. He also encourages them to recommend their family members and friends if they feel they would be good fits for the company. Participant #5 stated the environment is very much like a family to her, so much that she has adopted a work-husband. She said that her work-husband is her

motivation for each day and keeps her “engaged, excited and entertained.” She also mentioned how everyone in the company knows about their relationship and supports it, because many of them have found value in similar relationships.

There was a 100% unanimous response for each respondent when asked IQ-1- IQ-4, and one of the tools mentioned repeatedly through those IQs was the organization’s “hip chat” feature. This feature is chat room/instant messenger application that allows employees to converse with one another throughout their workday and is available 24 hours a day. Every respondent mentioned this tool and how it keeps them socially engaged with each other throughout the day, every day. Participants discussed how powerful this tool is and how they use it for everything like sharing personal stories, family related updates, sad news, daily trivia games, and just to make jokes and poke fun at one another. Respondent #8 said that the hip chat feature “is our virtual watercooler, so we use it just as we would if we were in a traditional office.” Many of the respondents repeated the point that the hip chat feature, structure and content are all employee driven and managed. Every employee has access to the tool but are not required to participate. However, every employee is voluntarily engaged on the feature and each respondent commented on its vitality to the culture of the organization.

The concept of work-life balance was consistently referred to throughout most of the participant’s responses. When describing incidents from IQ-1 (personal connections to the work), many of the participants mentioned how accommodating the organizational leaders were with providing employees with workplace flexibilities. The flexibilities

mentioned were all related to work-life balance, and that concept is evident in 14 out of 14 participants (100%) who expressed a strong connection to having a personal connection to their work. The results from IQ-4 pushed this work-life balance concept a little further in terms of revealing participants' personal experiences with workplace engagement. IQ-4 refers to incidents that participants have experienced that have assisted in maintaining and sustaining their desired levels of workplace engagement and 13 out of 14 participants (93%) shared positive incidents related to work-life balance. Respondent #11 discussed in detail how the workplace flexibilities are critical to her personal survival being a single mother. She mentioned how her children have a lot of activities and needs throughout any given day that she may need to attend to and in a normal "9-5 office job" she would not be able to take care of her family as she can with her current role. She stated, "This job gives me the opportunity to do what I need to do when I need to do it because I have no set hours or office where I need to be. This means I can take care of my family and be there for them when they need me. I am so grateful for this type of flexibility."

The annual Christmas/office party was also mentioned by every participant as a key to the organization's employee engagement success. Every respondent spoke highly of this annual event and believed it to be the most impactful social and interpersonal event of the year. Participants felt that this event alone brings all the hip chat conversations to life and gives everyone the opportunity to engage face-to-face.

Respondent #7 mentioned how they started with the organization at the beginning of one



year, so they had over ten months to engage with everyone on hip chat before meeting them in person at the annual party. The participant stated, “by the time the annual party started I felt like I knew everyone personally like we’d be friends for years. I was so comfortable with all of them. These people are my family now.” Several participants commented how this event solidified and confirmed their decision to work for this organization. Participant #5 stated that the annual party brings everyone together as a family like an annual family reunion. This respondent also commented passionately on how personally gratifying this annual experience is because the CEO not only covers all costs associated with travel, food and other related expenses, but he also takes the time to address each individual employee. Participant #5 stated that, “during his annual speech the CEO speaks about each individual employee and describes the contributions each of us have made to the organization throughout the year. It means a lot to us that he takes the time out to do something like that.” This sentiment was shared by all of the respondents and similar stories were echoed throughout the data collection phase.

### **Secondary Themes**

The two themes that received the least amount of mentions are organizational fit and disconnectedness. The theme of organizational fit included word phrases such as being a part of the organization, fitting in, finding my place, and good fit. It was discussed 30 times (13%) by respondents. The theme of disconnectedness included word phrases such as, feeling disconnected, isolation, on an island, not with the popular crowd and the new kid. Disconnectedness was mentioned 30 times (13%) by respondents.

Although these two themes were the lowest ranking themes the data collected from them was vital and used throughout the research analysis process. The theme of connectedness is captured under the category of employee engagement and provides a point of reference for those remote workers who are either feeling they are in the right organization or potentially in the wrong one. Organizational fit is a concept that both employees and organizational leaders experience when determining if an employee is working in, for or with the right organization; this concept is thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2.

The theme of disconnectedness is captured under the category of disengagement and provides a point of reference for those employees who are dissatisfied with their workplace and/or workplace relationships. In reviewing the data analysis provided in Table 5 there are two participants who have a strong connection to feelings of disconnectedness (12%). Disengagement is comprehensively defined and addressed in Chapter 2 and is further discussed in relation to my findings in Chapter 5.

### **Research Question Analysis**

One central research question was, how can responses to the incidents that are critical for strengthening, maintaining or eroding the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy? The results of this study indicate that organizational leaders should consider how their organization can best meet the needs of their employees to understand how to strengthen, maintain and avoid eroding their employees' workplace engagement. The in-depth interviews and thick descriptions provided the means to

explain the engagement experiences of the participants and discover the emerging phenomenon that could be subsequently coded and categorized thematically.

The responses to the critical incidents that maintain the engagement level of remote workers were derived from IQs 4-6. Through the iterative cyclical process of comparing the data provided from the participants, connections within the codes were made. The connections made with the identified codes assisted in further identifying the emergent phenomenon, and the taxonomy that supports maintaining the engagement level of remote workers. The codes that emerged were social interaction, team work and personal engagement. The connection between the three groups of codes became more apparent as these codes continued to emerge throughout the majority of the respondents' interviews. Through the process of comparative analysis, the connection between the group of codes became more apparent and patterns in the data emerged leading to the identification of themes. The themes that were derived from the coding comparison and pattern matching were organizational culture and organizational fit. The themes of organizational culture and organizational fit in conjunction with the codes of social interaction and team work are foundational terminologies for developing a taxonomy. Through a thematic analysis, additional terms and phrases emerged that should be added to the foundational construct of the taxonomy. The theme of organizational culture included words and phrases such as work-life balance, flexible working hours, flexible working arrangements, and open and friendly working environment. These words and

phrases further develop the taxonomy for understanding how to maintain the workplace engagement of remote workers.

The responses to the incidents that strengthen the engagement level of remote workers originated from IQs 1-3. Through the iterative cyclical process of comparing the data provided from the participants, connections within the codes were made. The connections made with the codes assisted in further identifying the emergent phenomenon, and the taxonomy that supports strengthening the engagement level of remote workers. The codes that emerged were personal connection, personal satisfaction, taking the initiative, professional satisfaction, leadership, onboarding, and feels like I'm working with family and friends. These codes were repeated throughout most of the participants' interviews, and through inductive reasoning and analysis, connections between the codes were made leading to the identification of patterns. The pattern matching was identified at the point where saturation was reached and became more pronounced as the comparative analysis continued. The themes that emerged from the patterns were connectedness, business acumen, organizational management and organizational culture. The emergent themes and codes are terms that make up the foundational construct of a taxonomy for understanding what strengthens the workplace engagement for remote workers. In addition to the identified themes and codes, the frequently used words and phrases that were identified in the thematic analysis are critical terms to add to the taxonomy. The frequently used words and phrases are personal

commitment, connection to the mission and vision, engaged, and being a part of the bigger picture.

The responses to the incidents that erode the engagement level of remote workers were derived from IQs 7-9. Through the iterative process of comparing the data provided from the participants, connections within the codes were made. The connections made with the codes assisted in further identifying the emergent phenomenon, and the taxonomy that supports eroding the engagement level of remote workers. The codes that emerged were feeling disconnected, feeling isolated, unhappiness, an inflexible. Throughout the data collection process, the participants continued to repeat similar incidents that described how their workplace engagement decreased, which increased the connections emerging through the coding process. The group of emergent codes led to the identification of patterns in the data, which served as the basis for identifying the emergent themes. The themes that emerged were disengagement and workplace inflexibility. The coding language in addition to the emergent themes are all terms that build the foundational structure for the taxonomy, which assists in understanding how the workplace engagement of remote workers can be eroded. The words and phrases that were repeatedly used by the respondents when describing incidents where they felt the erosion of their workplace engagement are critical terms to add to the taxonomy. The frequently used words and phrases that describe workplace engagement erosion were feeling disconnected, isolation, on an island, not with the popular crowd, feeling like the new kid, and workplace inflexibility.

## Summary

The purpose of this exploratory case study, using a critical incident technique (CIT), was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of remote workers. Following the interview protocols established in Chapter 3, the participants provided sufficient data relating to the research question. The fundamentals of Chapter 4 were revealed by the data collection process, the data analysis process, evidence of trustworthiness, and results of the study.

Several themes and relevant categories from the coding process resulted from the analysis of the data. The results case study were two primary themes and two secondary themes; the primary themes were connectedness and organizational culture. These final themes emerged and developed from repeated word phrases which culminated from 179 incidents (out of 239). The secondary themes were organizational fit and disengagement had repeated word phrases in 30 incidents (out of 239). The results revealed methods organizational leaders can use that increase, maintain, or decrease the workplace engagement of remote workers. Chapter 5 includes further discussion of the interpretation of these findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications for positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The general management problem was that the number of remote workers is steadily increasing while the levels of workplace engagement are decreasing (Adkins, 2015; Allen et al., 2015; Bibby, 2015; Greer & Payne, 2014; Van Yperen et al., 2014). Indeed, 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged at work, which costs organizations upwards of \$550 billion annually (Gallup, 2015). The specific management problem was that more than half the nation's disengaged employees work remotely (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017) and experience a work culture that limits their career development opportunities (Griswold, 2014), minimizes their visibility within the organization (Gajendran et al., 2015), and increases their feelings of isolation (Van Yperen et al., 2014). Because of the lack of research on remote workers' engagement experiences, this study was designed to explore remote workers' engagement and create a taxonomy of the critical incidents and responses that can strengthen and maintain favorable engagement levels and mitigate against incident that could erode remote worker engagement.

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study, using a CIT, was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of remote workers. The study included in-depth interviews with 14 voluntary participants from the executive background search industry. Data were collected with computer recorded conference call interviews and there were nine semistructured interview questions. Data were also collected and analyzed using hand coding and computer assisted analysis (via Excel) to identify word and phrase usage

and to store the data. This chapter includes the interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, my recommendations, implications, and the influence of positive social change.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The research method and design used for this study was a qualitative exploratory case study to gain an in-depth understanding of what maintains, strengthens, or erodes the workplace engagement levels of remote workers. Yin (2014) explained that qualitative methods would provide comprehensive descriptions of the emerging phenomena. The development of these explanations progressed by the data provided by the participants' transcripts.

This study was anchored by a central research question, how can responses to the incidents that are critical for strengthening, maintaining or eroding the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy? The results from the study indicate that there are daily incidents that occur that have major impact on the workplace engagement of employees. These incidents are often more pronounced with remote workers because the manager and employee do not have the communication and real-time conveniences of the traditional face-to-face working environment. The respondents felt their workplace engagement was strengthened and maintained when they were provided with tools to communicate with one another in real-time, when their leadership provided them with the authority to make decisions on their own, when they had the freedom and flexibility to set their own work schedule, and when they felt like their colleagues were more like friends



and family than just coworkers. The participants thought their workplace engagement eroded when their organizational leadership was not allowing for workplace flexibilities like setting their own work hours, when their colleagues made them feel like an outsider, and when they felt isolated and left out of the social communication loop. The taxonomy was further developed through coding, pattern matching, and data and thematic analysis.

During the data analysis stage themes emerged from the coding process based on the frequency of words, word phrases, and incidents. The results of the coding process produced two primary themes and two secondary themes. The primary themes were connectedness and organizational culture. The secondary themes were organizational fit and disconnectedness. The themes were divided into primary and secondary themes based on the frequency of the word and word phrases within the incidents that were presented by the participants from the data on the transcripts. Calculating the data from the nine interview questions concluded in three categories of scores; primary scores were 31 times or higher, the secondary scores ranged between 15 and 30. Any scores below 15 were considered inconsequential. The following information presented in this section is the interpretation of the findings in comparison to the literature review.

### **Connectedness**

During this study, I conducted 14 interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of the workplace engagement experiences of remote workers. All participants (100%) confirmed they had a personal connection to their organization, colleagues, and the work they were doing, which aligned with the strong connection to the engagement category.

When responding to the IQ related to personal connection participants provided incidents that included words and word phrases such as personal commitment, taking the initiative, connection to mission and vision, engaged and being a part of the bigger picture. These findings are in line with the research provided in the literature review. According to Khan's (1990) study, employees who experience increased and sustained levels of workplace engagement feel personally connected to their respective organization. This connection is often experienced through a symbiotic relationship with the organization's mission. These findings are also aligned to the results of studies conducted by researchers at Gallup (2017). Based on 17 years of research experience, the Gallup (2017) researchers concluded that employee engagement is directly tied to a personal connection the employee has to their respective organization.

The participants in this study unanimously agreed that the organizational leaders provided an opportunity for them to create their own destiny within the company in terms of professional career growth and development. Most participants (86%) mentioned in some way that they felt like they were a part of the bigger picture and vision for the organization. They provided several incidents that described how the work they were engaged in was not only personally gratifying, but also was professionally satisfying. The respondents stated their colleagues, managers and senior leaders encouraged them to make decisions and gave them permission to do what they felt was best for the client and the overall organization. When asked, 14 out of 14 participants (100%) said they felt the organizational leaders support them in taking the initiative to do what they feel is best

and necessary to move the organization forward. There are similar incidents provided by the participants that are aligned with this concept of empowerment, which was also expressed by feeling like they were a part of the bigger picture. The participants all felt like their leadership team helped them to see how their individual contributions have a direct effect on the organization's overall success.

### **Organizational Culture**

Throughout the study there were many references made by participants in relation to the theme of organizational culture. The organizational culture theme involved word phrases within the incidents provided such as work-life balance, flexible working hours and arrangements, open and friendly, and working with family and friends. When asked, all the participants (100%) provided several incidents where they have experienced high levels of engagement, because of the organizational culture. In comparison with the literature review and conceptual framework based on the research of Maslow (1943), Kahn (1990), and Schein (2010), the findings of this study are in alignment with their findings. Researchers at Gallup (2017) used the research results of Maslow, Kahn, and Schein to design and develop their study on workplace engagement and their general understanding of the impact organizational culture has on employee engagement or disengagement. The findings of the researchers from Gallup are also in alignment with the findings of this study. The Gallup researchers concluded that employees are more engaged at work when they feel they have workplace flexibilities and when their working

environment feels like they are working with their family and/or friends. This concept of working in a familial setting is a concept that is addressed in more detail in Kahn's work.

When asked about their experience in working in an environment where they felt is if they were working with their friends and/or family (IQ-3), 14 out of 14 participants (100%) provided multiple incidents that supported this experience. The participants' responses were unanimous in affirming that the success of their organizational culture is directly tied to their sense that they have a familial relationship with their coworkers. Many of the participants discussed how they are encouraged to recruit their friends and family for open positions at the organization. The CEO shared that his vision was to create an organizational culture where people felt like they were working with their best friends, which he felt would provide high levels of engagement and productivity. The data analysis confirms that the CEO's desired state for the culture of the organization is aligned with what his team members have experienced.

When participants were asked about their experience with achieving their desired state of engagement (IQ-6) 13 out of 14 (93%) participants shared multiple incidents that related to workplace flexibilities. This finding supports the findings the researchers at Gallup (2017) reached, that employees who are provided with flexible workplace schedules and nontraditional workspaces (e.g., telework, remote work, etc.) experience increased and sustained levels of workplace engagement. The respondents use the phrase "work-life balance" consistently when describing how and why their desired workplace engagement level is met and sustained. The participants overwhelmingly (93%) felt that

their organization provides them with the flexibility they desire to make them feel like they can reach their personal level of balance between their work and home lives. The participants consistently mentioned how the workplace flexibilities are unique to this working environment and they are grateful and feel indebted to the organization for the opportunity to have individualized work-life balance.

### **Secondary Themes**

During the coding phase two secondary themes emerged: organizational fit and disconnectedness. The themes were mentioned between 15 and 30 times in the incidents provided by the participants. The theme of organizational fit encompassed common phrases found in the incidents such as being a part of the organization, fitting in, finding my place, and good fit. Organizational fit was discussed 30 times (13%) by participants. The theme of disconnectedness included word phrases such as feeling disconnected, isolation, on an island, not with the popular crowd and the new kid. Disconnectedness was discussed 30 times (13%) by participants. These findings are consistent with the literature in Chapter 2. In conducting an exhaustive research on workplace engagement, the secondary themes were factors that affected employees' levels of engagement.

Organizational fit is a critical component when determining employee motivation and engagement (Khan, 1990; Maslow, 1943). The literature review provided the foundational context for understanding how organizational fit impedes organizational leaders' ability to engage and positively impact employees. If employees do not feel as if they are a part of the organization, then their engagement level begins to erode and

employees feel less connected to the organization. The data from this study were aligned with this foundational context. Data derived from IQ-6 contained responses from participants in relation to incidents where they felt consistently unhappy at work. The respondents who provided incidents where they felt unhappy questioned their organizational fit and appeared to struggle with the idea that their current role within the organization might not be the best fit for them. Employees who do not feel they fit in the organization exhibit low levels of engagement and productivity (Kahn, 1990; Supeli & Creed, 2014); this finding also aligned with the findings of Gallup's (2017) employee engagement study.

Disconnectedness is also a critical component to consider when determining employee motivation and engagement (Kahn, 1990; Maslow, 1943). Kahn's (1990) study and theory ascribed that when employees lack connectedness to the organization's mission, vision, and do not feel a sense of connection to their colleagues, their engagement levels decrease and erode. The findings presented in the Gallup (2017) study aligned with Kahn's findings as well and introduced the factor of disengagement because of disconnectedness. The results from IQ-7, which directly related with this concept of disconnectedness, are also in alignment with the conceptual framework and findings of Maslow (1943), Kahn, and Gallup. The participants who provided incidents where they experienced strong or moderate connections to feelings of disconnectedness also experienced a decrease (or erosion) of engagement in their work and work environment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations to this study. The first being the limited amount of research and data related to the workplace engagement of remote workers. While the literature and data on the workplace engagement of traditional office workers was available, very little information was available in relation to the workplace engagement of remote workers. Remote workplace engagement is a concept that has not been thoroughly studied, hence the need for this current study. The literature on traditional workplace engagement was used as a foundational principle to build out the concepts and workplace engagement experiences of remote workers.

The scope of this exploratory single case study encompassed participants from an organization in the executive background service industry. A limitation of this study was the usage of a single case study. All participants were employed by the same organization from the same industry, and that could have affected the way in which the participants responded to the interview questions. A total of 14 participants confirmed their desire to participate. If a multi-case study was conducted a larger number of participants could have been secured, which may have produced greater results or opposing results of the findings. These possibilities may have influenced the results of this study.

A limitation of this study included the data collection method of in-depth interviews. Participants may have responded to the questions based on what they either wanted the interviewer to hear or what they felt their organizational leadership would expect them to say. There was no evidence that this limitation was present in any of the

participants' interviews or transcripts, as participants were provided their transcripts to check for accuracy. Member checking captured the responses of the participants accurately. Each participant's response was unique to their interview and there were no signs or instances of a generalized or pre-approved response. As evidence of trustworthiness, a methodological triangulation mitigated bias, and thick descriptions of the data and a conceptual framework augmented transferability.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations for future research include further examination of the different workplace engagement experiences of remote workers. The primary themes of connectedness and organizational culture and secondary themes of organizational fit and disconnectedness were thoroughly examined and analyzed; however, there were additional emergent themes mentioned in Chapter 4. The themes of business acumen, organizational management, workplace flexibility and organizational fit warrant further investigation to examine how they affect workplace engagement.

The purpose of this exploratory case study, using a critical incident technique (CIT), was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of remote workers. In conducting an exhaustive review of the literature in Chapter 2, it was revealed that there was limited literature and research on the workplace engagement of remote workers. This qualitative study provided a taxonomy of responses that begin to add to the scholarly information available on the topic of remote workplace engagement. Future research



could include a quantitative exploratory multi-case study that could be used in conjunction with the result of this study to provide a more complete analysis of the experiences of remote workers.

### **Qualitative Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the emerging phenomenon of remote workplace engagement. Using a qualitative centralized research question derived a nine-question in-depth interview tool. After the study two primary and two secondary themes emerged, which are all supported by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. This process inductively added absent data and literature to the scholarship of the organizational management community of practice, but using the qualitative method provided one view of the data used to understand this phenomenon. Further research could include a quantitative multi-case study that surveys varying industries to further explore and potentially explain the phenomenon of remote workplace engagement (Mertens, 2014). Using a quantitative method could also provide statistical data that might be used to further explain the emergence and future of remote organizational cultures.

### **Ethnographic Study**

The case study method provides a methodical framework to explore and potentially explain the emergence of a phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This current study has added scholarly data and literature about the phenomenon of remote workplace engagement that did not previously exist. Using the qualitative exploratory method assisted in inductively providing a taxonomy of terms that aid in understanding

what incidents strengthen, maintain and erode the workplace engagement of remote workers.

However, there are different types of personalities that workers possess that are not taken into account in this current study. There are certain personality types that work better in groups and teams and get energy from those environments (extroverts). There are also some employees who work better and prefer to work alone because they gain energy from themselves (introverts), and these personality types could greatly impact the success of a remote worker (Maslow, 1943; Mathieu et al., 2014).

During this study personalities were discussed in some of the participants' responses to the IQs. Some participants asked the interviewer if there were certain personality types that worked better in remote environments than others. Some participants also stated that they were introverts and the remote work environment and the hip chat tool allowed them to engage socially with other colleagues and co-workers at their own choosing and pace. The self-identified introverts felt the remote work environment allowed them to control their level of engagement at a pace they felt was manageable and comfortable. This option of engaging socially with colleagues and co-workers at one's own discretion is not necessarily offered in the traditional in-office environment.

This concept of using personality types as a factor for future research adds to the value of expanding this research. In using an ethnographic method, a researcher could gain a realistic perspective of the participant's lived experience as a remote worker based

on their personality type, because they would be spending a substantial amount of time observing them (Hammersley, 2016). This process could produce in-depth and detailed accounts of the participant's behaviors and attitudes which could be used to further assist organizational leaders in determining what type of employee would be an effective remote worker.

### **Implications**

The general management problem was that the number of remote workers is steadily increasing while the levels of workplace engagement are decreasing (Adkins, 2015; Allen et al., 2015; Bibby, 2015; Greer & Payne, 2014; Van Yperen et al., 2014). Indeed, 70% of U.S. workers are not engaged at work, which costs organizations upwards of \$550 billion annually (Gallup, 2015). The specific management problem was that more than half the nation's disengaged employees work remotely (Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017) and experience a work culture that limits their career development opportunities (Griswold, 2014), minimizes their visibility within the organization (Gajendran, Harrison, & Delaney-Klinger, 2015), and increases their feelings of isolation (Van Yperen et al., 2014). In addition to the general and specific management problem, there is also a gap in literature that addresses remote workplace engagement, which made conducting this research study both possible and needed. The research findings included useful information for stakeholders and future scholars researching remote workplace engagement. In this section are implications for social change, theory and practice.

## **Implications for Social Change**

The modern workplace is changing each day and is becoming more globalized. The millennials who are saturating the current workplace (and generation Z who are the next generation to enter the workforce) are more interested in having work-life balance than they are concerned with moving up a corporate ladder (Ashgar, 2014). This concept and desire of work-life balance has also become important to the current older workforce. Managers and organizational leaders alike have struggled with finding the balance between meeting their personal work-force goals (having people in the office) with embracing the needs of the modern worker by offering remote work (Ashgar, 2014; Gallup, 2017). This study provides managers and organizational leaders with data and a taxonomy of incidents that show what behaviors strengthen, maintain and erode the workplace engagement of remote workers. This data helps in demystifying the myth that remote workers are impossible to manage and develop.

The information provided based on this study may assist organizational leaders and managers who are either struggling with the current engagement levels of their remote workers, or with those planning to offer remote work as a possible flexible workplace option. There are more employees looking for flexible working arrangements than in prior generations (Gallup, 2017), and this study can assist organizational leaders with understanding the needs of a remote worker to ensure they can provide the support needed to make the transition to a remote work environment successful.

The results of this research can also be used in the planning and preparatory phases of building organizational cultures that support remote work. As organizational leaders, managers, and their stakeholders plan for their organization, implementing corporate policies and procedures is a critical part of that process. Organizational decision makers can better manage the risks associated with implementing new processes like remote work to their organizational practices when they are armed with that data derived from this study. This study has provided data that managers and leaders can use to design and develop onboarding programs, training and other supporting initiatives that prepare managers and employees for managing a remote working relationship together successfully.

### **Implications for Theory**

The exhaustive review of the literature in Chapter 2 revealed a gap in the literature in terms of finding information on the engagement of remote workers. The phenomenon of employee engagement has been a major topic of interest and study within the management and leadership community of practice over the last 30 years (Saks, 2006). The literature on engagement is limited to employees in the traditional office and does not include remote employee engagement (Adkins, 2015; Anita & Aruna, 2016; Dvorak & Sasaki, 2017). This research contains an in-depth analysis of data provided from the participants which describes what remote workers need to strengthen and maintain their desired workplace engagement levels. This research also contains information that can be used to gain a better understanding of what types of behaviors

negatively impact and ultimately erode remote workers' workplace engagement. Kahn's (1990) engagement theory does not directly consider the experience of remote workers, most likely because remote work was not as pervasive as it is now during the time of his work. The findings from this research provide enough data for the researcher to expand on Kahn's engagement theory or to allude to the possibility and the identification of a new emerging remote engagement theory.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings presented in this study filled a gap in the literature regarding the workplace engagement of remote workers. The findings also produced data that can be used by future researchers to further study, analyze and identify remote work cultures. This study provided a framework from which to identify the workplace engagement principles of remote workers, and how they differentiate from those of traditional in-office workers. This study produced evidence that shows remote workplace engagement is an emergent organizational culture that is distinctly different from that of the traditional organizational culture.

The problem that initiated this study was thoroughly examined, and I could provide evidence that leaders, managers and stakeholders can use to improve the engagement levels of remote workers. The findings provided can be used in daily management operations within organizations that employ remote workers. The results from this study can also be used as best practices in managing and leading remote employees and in strengthening their workplace engagement.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this exploratory case study, using a critical incident technique (CIT), was to create a taxonomy of responses to the incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding the workplace engagement of remote workers. Data were collected using the detailed interviews and transcripts of the 14 participants. This study was anchored by a central research question, how can responses to the incidents that are critical for strengthening, maintaining or eroding the engagement of remote workers be classified into a taxonomy? The results from the study indicate that there are daily incidents that occur that have major impact on the workplace engagement of employees. These incidents are often more pronounced with remote workers because the manager and employee do not have the communication and “real-time” conveniences of the traditional face-to-face working environment. The participants felt their workplace engagement was strengthened and maintained when they were provided with tools to communicate with one another in real-time, when their leadership provided them with the authority to make decisions on their own, when they had the freedom and flexibility to set their own work schedule, and when they felt like their colleagues were more like friends and family than just co-workers. The participants felt their workplace engagement eroded when their organizational leadership was not allowing for workplace flexibilities like setting their own work hours, when their colleagues made them feel like an outsider, and when they felt isolated and left out of the social communication loop.

Two primary and two secondary themes emerged based on the coding process. The two primary themes were connectedness and organizational culture, and the secondary themes were organizational fit and disconnectedness. The participants unanimously agreed that though there are engagement challenges in the remote working environment, there are methods leaders and managers can employ to strengthen and maintain remote workplace engagement. Investing in interactive communication tools, promoting employee managed social events, and hosting recurring face-to-face team engagement meetings are ways organizational leaders and managers can strengthen and maintain remote workplace engagement.

This study may reduce a gap that existed in the literature in relation to scholarly research on remote workplace engagement; however, the results of this study have potential implications for further research and additional positive social change. The data provided in this study can be used to continue to explore the phenomenon of workplace engagement and the overarching phenomena of remote organizational cultures. Although the findings of this study confirm ways in which remote workplace engagement can be strengthened, maintained, or eroded, some of the recommendations include conducting additional research on how personality types affect one's workplace engagement. Using personality types as a factor in examining remote workplace engagement could provide an added layer of data that could increase the scholarly understanding of remote organizational cultures. The modern workplace is becoming more globalized and virtual



each day, and more research needs to be conducted to provide relevant data to the organizational leadership and management community of practice.

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## Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in a Research Project

### Invitation to Participate in a Research Project:

#### “An Exploratory Case Study of How Remote Employees Experience Workplace Engagement”

Dear Employee,

I am conducting interviews as part of a research study to increase my understanding of how remote workers experience workplace engagement.

As a remote worker you are in an ideal position to give me valuable first-hand information from your own experience and perspective. The interview takes approximately 60 minutes. I am simply trying to capture your experience and perspective on being a remote worker. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to my research and findings could lead to greater public understanding of remote workplace engagement.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me directly via e-mail. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thanks,

Aaron M. Lee, Researcher

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### Remote Employee Engagement Oral Questionnaire

Workplace/Employee Engagement: Employee engagement is the level of personal commitment and involvement employees make toward the company and its mission, values, and ethics

Workplace/Employee Disengagement: The state in which an employee withdraws or becomes cognitively, physically, or emotionally defensive during role performances.

1. Think of an incident or a situation when you felt personally connected to the work you were doing. What happened that made you feel this connection?
2. Think of an incident or a situation when you took the initiative to do something to move your organization forward. What made you feel inspired to do so?
3. Think of an incident or a situation when you felt like you were working with your friends/family. What made your work environment feel like this?
4. Think of an incident or a situation when you felt emotionally balanced at work. What occurred that made you feel balanced?
5. Think of an incident or a situation when you felt content with your working environment. What happened to make you feel content?

6. Think of an incident or a situation when you felt your desired workplace engagement level was supported and sustained. What happened that made you feel this way?
7. Think of an incident or situation when you felt disconnected from your working environment. What occurred to make you feel disconnected?
8. Think of an incident or situation when you felt consistently unhappy at work. What happened that made you feel unhappy?
9. Think of an incident or situation when you felt isolated or withdrawn from your organization's work environment. What was occurring that made you feel isolated or withdrawn?



## Appendix C: Interview Data Collection Template

**Participant #1:**

<b>1. Think of an incident or a situation when you felt personally connected to the work you were doing. What happened that made you feel this connection?</b>
<b>Participant's Response:</b>
<b>Additional Notes:</b>