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Meaningful Work and Remote Employee Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Monique Foster
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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Monique C. Foster

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Meaningful Work and Remote Employee Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

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MPHIL, Walden University, 2021

MA, Amberton University, 2006

MA, Amber University, 2000

BS, UT Southwestern at Dallas, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

May 2022

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the remote working trend, causing workplace leaders to be challenged and remote employees to feel meaninglessness and lose interest in their work. The subjective nature of meaningful work and enforced remote work is a relatively recent socioeconomic phenomenon, creating a gap in the literature regarding how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment. The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with 10 middle managers who were responsible for managing employees during the shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The critical event approach was used to analyze the data and four conceptual categories emerged: (a) middle managers' personal stories of experience with remote work, (b) middle managers' experiences in leading meaningful remote work experiences, (c) managerial challenges of remote employee engagement during the pandemic, and (d) middle managers' voices on fostering meaningful work for remote employees. The findings in this study have potential implications for positive social change by creating greater understanding of meaningful interventions and meaningful leadership practices that can enhance work engagement. As remote work increases in the future and across industries, understanding factors that diminish virtual employees' work meaning and engagement is essential to improve the well-being of the future workforce.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandparents, Paul H. and Murriel Coumpy, who instilled values in me during my early years that only what you do for Christ will last. My mother, Sharon, believed in her children and said daily, "You can do whatever you want." My dad, James, always told me, "Education is the key to opening up many doors in the future." I know it is possible.

My husband, who is also named James, and I talked about the dissertation, and having someone to talk about the process was supportive; thank you. I dedicate this dissertation to my brothers, my children's and grandchildren's futures, and all the possibilities they wish to achieve. Through Christ Jesus, I want to build a foundation that you hear about and see that all things are possible. So, believe in yourself, your abilities, and your dreams.

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To God be the glory. Thank you for giving me the health and strength to see this goal through and achieve what I believed I could do. Thank you for the opportunities and blessings beyond measure.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vi
List of Figures	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background of the Study	2
Problem Statement	4
Purpose of the Study	6
Research Question	7
Conceptual Framework.....	7
Meaningful Work.....	7
Remote Leadership Competencies.....	8
Nature of the Study	8
Definitions.....	10
Assumptions.....	12
Scope and Delimitations	12
Limitations	13
Significance of the Study	14
Significance to Practice.....	14
Significance to Theory	14
Significance to Social Change	15
Summary and Transition.....	16

Chapter 2: Literature Review	18
Introduction.....	18
Literature Search Strategy.....	19
Conceptual Framework.....	20
Meaningful Work.....	20
Remote Leadership Competencies.....	21
Literature Review.....	23
Rise of the Remote Workplace and COVID-19 Pandemic Challenges	26
Digital Transformation in Remote Workplaces Post COVID-19.....	30
Meaningful Leadership Behaviors	32
Middle Managers	33
Organizational Citizenship Behavior	36
Meaningful Work Practices	38
Research Into Meaningful Work.....	40
Summary and Conclusions	43
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	46
Introduction.....	46
Research Design and Rationale	46
Role of the Researcher	50
Methodology	51
Participant Selection Logic	54
Instrumentation	57

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection	58
Data Analysis Plan	62
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	62
Credibility	63
Transferability.....	64
Dependability	64
Confirmability.....	65
Ethical Procedures	65
Summary and Conclusions	67
Chapter 4: Results	70
Introduction.....	70
Setting	71
Demographics	73
Data Collection	74
Initial Contact.....	77
Semistructured Interviews	78
Reflective Field Notes and Journal	79
Transcript Review	80
Data Analysis	80
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	86
Credibility	86
Transferability.....	87

Dependability	88
Confirmability.....	88
Results.....	89
Accept the Transition to the New, Remote Way of Working.....	91
Strengthen Communication Skills for Remote Work.....	92
Strengthen Technology Skills to Work Efficiently.....	93
Respect for Your Own Work–Life Balance.....	94
Developing Remote Leadership Competencies	95
Building Trust and Teamwork With Remote Employees.....	96
Keep Up With Current Trends and Developments in Remote Work	
Environments	96
Engaging Remote Employees in Relationship-Building Skills	97
Remote Employee Disengagement.....	98
Prioritizing Employee Well-Being	99
Managers’ Work and Stress Overload	100
Respect Remote Employees as People	101
Respect for People’s Daily Life Outside of Work	102
Respect Remote Employees’ Daily Challenges in a Crisis Environment.....	102
Readiness to Give More Time for Fostering Meaningful Work.....	103
Inspire Remote Employees to Work for Their Own Meaningful Goals.....	104
Summary	105
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	108

Introduction.....	108
Interpretation of Findings	109
Middle Managers’ Personal Stories of Experience With Remote Work	110
Managerial Challenges of Remote Employee Engagement During the Pandemic.....	111
Middle Managers’ Voice on Fostering Meaningful Work for Remote Employees.....	112
Middle Managers’ Experiences in Leading Meaningful Remote Work Experiences.....	112
Limitations of the Study.....	113
Recommendations.....	115
Recommendations for Meaningful Leadership Practices	116
Recommendations for Scholarly Research	117
Implications.....	118
Implications for Social Change.....	118
Implications for Theory	121
Implications for Practice	121
Conclusions.....	124
References.....	125
Appendix A: Letter of Introduction and Recruitment.....	142
Appendix B: Interview Protocol	143

List of Tables

Table 1. Participants' Demographics and Characteristics 74

Table 2. Coding and Theme Examples 85

List of Figures

Figure 1. Categories and Themes.....	90
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a rapid digital transformation into the daily workplace (Ouwkerk & Bartels, 2020). Recent labor forecasting analyses show that many who moved to remote work in 2020 may never return to an on-ground office (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021). Researchers have yet to consider whether the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-lasting effects on how middle managers interpret meaningful work experiences for employees (Lee, 2021).

The new remote working space means that workplace leaders are challenged, causing remote employees to be alienated, feel meaninglessness, and lose interest in their work (Bonacini et al., 2021). Middle managers who had more direct contact with employees during the pandemic than any other workplace leader or leadership team recognized employees' needs for meaningful work might have been undermined as a management priority, resulting in diminishing employee disengagement and well-being (Klonek et al., 2021; Kuenzi et al., 2021). Meaningful work facilitates employees' personal growth and contributes to the greater good because it has been linked to job satisfaction and well-being (Allan et al., 2018a). Researchers have suggested that future studies in human resources and management areas should focus on cultivating meaningful work for remote workers in the remote era (Bailey et al., 2019).

Bailey et al. (2019) addressed work-related factors linked to employees' experiences of meaningfulness. Drawing from the job characteristics model of Hackman and Oldham and the empirical literature on meaningful work (71 studies), Bailey et al.

(2019) analyzed gaps in the empirical literature on meaningful work and highlighted critical gaps and shortcomings. The limited research on workplace digitalization, remote employees, and meaningful work has left theoretical and practitioner-based questions unanswered in the management and leadership literature (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Michaelson, 2021). As remote jobs increase in the future and across industries, understanding factors that diminish their virtual employees' work meaning and engagement is essential to driving positive social change in the future workforce (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Çetin, 2021; Klonek et al., 2021). More in-depth empirical research is needed to address how middle managers, who directly supervise remote employees, guarantee meaningful work (Çetin, 2021).

In this chapter, I present the background literature leading to the problem statement formation, including a description of the scholarly literature gap. Following is a presentation of logical alignment between problem, purpose, research questions, and conceptual framework of the study. Finally, I present the significance, assumptions, limitations of the study, and the definition of key terms used throughout.

Background of the Study

Albrecht et al. (2021) studied meaningful work as a critical psychological state within job demands-resources (JD-R) to explain the relationship between the JD-R model and employee engagement. The authors examined how meaningful work was related to JD-R, and employee engagement, drawing from theoretical frameworks of meaningful work, the JD-R model, job characteristics theory (JCT), and Kahn's employee

engagement. Albrecht et al. (2021) found that meaningfulness is a mediator within the JD-R model and the strongest predictor of employee engagement.

Drawing from purposeful work behavior theory, researchers have examined meaningful interventions. Fletcher and Schofield's (2019) found that meaningfulness interventions might broaden perceived opportunities for employee engagement and motivational processes. Frémeaux and Pavageau (2020) studied leaders' activities (n = 42) that contributed meaning to their own and their employees' meaningful work experiences and concluded that within the meaningful work, leadership, and spiritual literature, researchers need to examine the concept of meaningful leadership further.

Göçen (2021) explored a model for meaningful work and leadership and found factors contributing to meaningful work and how leaders give meaning through leadership practices and their impact on employees' meaningful work. The author proposed a meaningful leadership model, and from the findings, 10 dimensions were identified, and a definition of meaningful leadership was proposed. Göçen postulated that meaningful leadership is different from other leadership styles because it focuses on meaning and calling. In contrast, Guldenberg and Langhof (2021) studied digital leadership and technology's role to better understand how digitalization fits leadership. Drawing from leadership and technology literature, the authors defined five challenges to the tasks of leaders in the supervision of remote employees.

Harter (2018) studied the changes in employee engagement and provided information on employee engagement and its impact on organizational outcomes and revealed that employee engagement remains a managerial problem and is only growing in

impact on the organization. The COVID-19 pandemic during various states of quarantine and lockdown, reduced hours for employees, apathy toward the work environment, and counterproductive leadership behavior, the authors have identified possible threats to employees' perceptions and behaviors during the lockdown (Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020).

Tommasi et al. (2020) proposed a review of the existing literature on meaningful work and provided a definition. Drawing from meaningful work and organizational studies, the authors proposed concepts that lead practitioners to identify interventions and align workers' expectations with environmental factors. Tommasi et al. examined meaningful work using a time-based approach. Because the enforced workplace at home is a recent socioeconomic phenomenon, there is a literature gap on how middle managers may foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Michaelson, 2021).

Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic advanced the trend of remote working due to a shift in work demands from quarantines and lockdowns, making the need to commute and work in an office nearly impossible for millions worldwide (Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 17% of U.S. employees worked from home 5 days or more per week; that percentage rose to 44% during the pandemic (Statistica, 2021). During the pandemic, new remote work conditions elevated employees' alienation levels, loneliness, and loss of meaning, causing adverse performance outcomes at the individual and organizational levels (Bonacini et al., 2021). While fully transitioning to a remote work

environment may cause a loss of meaning at work, in recent studies researchers have concluded that employees continue to have a high demand for middle managers. Usually, an employee's direct supervisor considers the importance of meaningful work when designing remote job positions (Bailey et al., 2019; Klonek et al., 2021). The social problem is that, given the challenges many middle managers faced during the pandemic in leading the sudden transition to remote work, employees' needs for meaningful work may have been undermined as a management priority, resulting in diminishing employee engagement and well-being (Klonek et al., 2021; Kuenzi et al., 2021).

Research within the meaningful work domain has increased within the last two decades, in which it has been shown to relate positively to both individual and organizational outcomes (Albrecht et al., 2021; Fletcher & Schofield, 2019). Despite the increased scholarly and practical interest in the meaningful work concept, in many recent studies, researchers have neglected the current trends and developments in remote work environments, which could diminish feelings of meaningfulness among employees (Chaudhary, 2020; Savvides & Stavrou, 2020). Moreover, many researchers failed to capture what middle managers with direct contact with employees did, if anything, to guarantee meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic when a sizeable percentage of the workforce was suddenly thrust into working remotely (Çetin, 2021). The subjective nature of meaningful work and enforced remote work is a relatively recent socioeconomic phenomenon; therefore, a gap exists in the literature on how middle managers may foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Michaelson, 2021). The specific

management problem is that middle managers' experiences fostering meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic remain poorly understood (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Guldenberg & Langhof, 2021; Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative inquiry study was to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. To address the literature gap on fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment and to remain consistent with the qualitative paradigm, I used a narrative inquiry method (Clandinin, 2016) to meet the purpose of the study. Data were collected using the narrative tradition of storytelling by middle managers supervising remote employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researching storytelling is a sound way of understanding human experiences as they are lived in daily life (Clandinin, 2016; Webster & Mertova, 2007). To provide an accurate and data-rich narrative study and meet the Walden University standard for sample sizes in qualitative dissertations, I collected data through online interviews from a purposeful sample of 10 participants, and I used reflective journal notes (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Webster & Mertova, 2007). A critical event approach was used to document important events in participants' narratives to ensure the data's trustworthiness, thus addressing the study's purpose and research questions (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Research Question

How did middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Conceptual Framework

This study was framed by two key concepts that focus on aligning with the purpose of the study to understand how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment: (a) Bailey et al.'s (2019) concept of meaningful work and (b) Avlani and Charalampous's (2021) concept of remote leadership competencies. This empirical investigation aimed to advance research and a deeper understanding of middle managers' experiences fostering meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic initiated a rapid digital transformation in the daily workplace, creating a different work environment where feelings of meaninglessness challenge managers and employees after losing their everyday work conditions (Bonacini et al., 2021; Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020).

Meaningful Work

Through a systematic analysis of the empirical literature, Bailey et al. (2019) defined meaningful work as a subjective concept with three levels: (a) work seen as significant, (b) work done for a greater purpose beyond oneself, and (c) work aligned with one's own identity and values. Bailey et al. (2019) grounded their empirical work in one of the first theories established to explain meaningful work: Oldham and Hackman's (2010) JCT. Oldham and Hackman (2010) proposed three facets in this theory, one of

which was meaningful work, that should be established for organizations to achieve higher productivity and engagement.

Remote Leadership Competencies

Through a systematic literature review, Avlani and Charalampous (2021) provided an in-depth understanding of the association between remote work and leadership competencies by collating data from 21 research studies between 2001 and 2019. The results of this systematic literature review revealed that trust and relationship-building skills, communication skills, and technology skills are fundamental for effective remote leadership practice. Avlani and Charalampous (2021) grounded their empirical work in Walther's (2015) social information processing (SIP) theory. Under SIP, interpersonal relational development will take longer online than in traditional face-to-face contexts. However, exchanging relational-oriented information through communication technologies can accelerate this process, despite the lack of physical cues (Walther, 2015). The conceptual framework development is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was qualitative; quantitative research methods are outcome based with a tendency to overlook the depth of human experiences, which can lead to ineffective results in their disregard of the significant characteristics of themes and occurrences (Tracy, 2019). A qualitative approach when investigating how managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for complex human issues to be included in the research

data and for further emphasis to be placed on presenting detailed, thick descriptions rather than focusing on testing a priori hypotheses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Social constructivists, such as Gergen (1998), have written that narrative emphasizes the contextual construction of social relations and daily life experiences (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Narrative inquiry allows for a researcher to present detailed participant descriptions through storytelling and can be a valuable research method for developing a detailed understanding of human experiences as they are lived daily (Clandinin, 2016; Mertova & Webster, 2012). Human beings primarily communicate through storytelling, the oldest form of social exchange (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Narrative inquiry researchers inquire into what, how, and why human relationships happen. Although other qualitative methods exist, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, and case study, these qualitative designs omit the important fundamental stages of narrating critical events (Webster & Mertova, 2007). A narrative inquiry approach permits a researcher to present a general picture of a participant's daily experiences, including examining complex data of critical events that influence daily decision making and reactions to such events (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

After completing data collection, I sought to answer the research question through rigorous data analysis using a process Webster and Mertova (2007) recommended. Restorying was the first step of the data analysis. I used this step because it involves a researcher's narrative data analysis method to gather data, analyze the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and rewrite the data (Clandinin, 2016). The critical events approach was the second step of the data analysis, as critical events experiences provided

details on place, time, characters, and significant events essential to the study. A critical event narrative analysis can be used to model the events in narratives to investigate human stories and strengthen the trustworthiness of the data (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

In a final thematic analysis, I organized the co-constructed meanings of stories into themes and ultimately guided the texts' interpretations (Clandinin, 2016).

Traditionally, researchers use triangulation in qualitative research to determine their themes. However, Webster and Mertova (2007) suggested when using critical event narrative inquiry in story-based studies not to employ triangulation because it is not viable, and they believed it is "almost impossible to achieve" (p. 91).

Definitions

To explore meaningful work in remote work environments, leaders' impact on employee performance and work experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following definitions helped establish and clarify unique terms germane to the research.

Absorption: Employees' intensity and engagement within their roles (Mazzei et al., 2019). Absorption determines how employees physically engage in their roles.

Affective commitment: A work-related outcome gained through an employee's emotional attraction, involvement, and commitment to identify with the organizational goals and a strong desire to remain working (Na-Nan et al., 2021).

Continuance commitment: One of three components of organizational commitment in which employees feel satisfied and have no intention of moving or changing jobs (Na-Nan et al., 2021). Employees feel satisfied and devoted to continuing working with the organization.

COVID-19 pandemic: A virus outbreak that affected the world and accelerated the remote working trend, as quarantines and lockdowns made commuting and working in an office close to impossible for millions worldwide (Ouwkerk & Bartels, 2020).

Employee communication: Formal and informal communication among employees, which occurs internally at all levels. A central process by which employees share information, meaning, and emotions to convey messages (Mazzei et al., 2019).

Employee disengagement: An employee's lack of attention and commitment to the execution of their work or devotion of less time and attention to their work (Moyo, 2020).

Employee engagement: An employee's willingness to commit to and participate in the work activities of the organization because they trust and value their leaders (Na-Nan et al., 2021).

Employee participation: A working system by which employees are engaged and influence the decision-making process at all levels (Guinot et al., 2021). Both the organization and employees benefit from a participatory experience within the organization.

Employee trust: An essential condition that creates a healthy work environment and well-being for employees, increasing employee job satisfaction (Guinot et al., 2021).

Job satisfaction: A foundational feeling of emotional pleasure related to work experiences and situations that affect an employee's perceptions of their job (Judge et al., 2020).

Meaningful leadership: Leaders giving meaning through leadership practices and their impact on employees' meaningful work. Leaders create or provide resources that support meaningful activities for their employees while at work (Göçen, 2021).

Organizational commitment: The strength of an employee's relationship that determines if they remain with an organization. Employees are committed, identify, and stay involved because they believe and accept the organizational goals and values (Nan et al., 2021).

Remote work environment: A workplace where employees work remotely away from the on-ground worksite and may present challenges for leadership regarding employee alienation levels, feelings of meaninglessness, and loss of everyday work conditions (Bonacini et al., 2021).

Assumptions

Assumptions are statements that are not provable. Qualitative research has many assumptions, and the variations depend on the complexities. The first assumption in this study was that the participants would feel comfortable enough to answer the interview questions truthfully without prejudice. The second assumption was that the chosen open interview questions would provide enough shared experiences to collect data. The third assumption was that I would take precautionary steps to protect participants' privacy as the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) policy regulates.

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations set the limits and boundaries of a research study, but a researcher may control them. Delimitations require challenging a researcher's assumptions,

exposing potential shortcomings in the research study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). I used the narrative inquiry approach to explore how a purposeful sample of middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study's scope was framed by two key concepts that focus on aligning with the purpose of the study to understand how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment: (a) Bailey et al.'s (2019) concept of meaningful work and (b) Avlani and Charalampous's (2021) concept of remote leadership competencies.

Limitations

Limitations highlight a study's deficiencies and possible weaknesses outside of a researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). A researcher is responsible for presenting all study shortcomings to present accurate findings. Some circumstances may have qualified as limitations within the scope of this study. All participants in this study were volunteers and may not have shared the same views about their daily experiences. Volunteer participants may have been uneasy due to fear or belief of possible retaliation or mistreatment from their organization or supervisors. Insufficient or inaccurate data may have been gathered, which may be a limitation.

A limitation of qualitative research is the use of small sample sizes due to the inability to generalize findings to the target population. Nevertheless, using small sample sizes in qualitative research is an approach to understanding the phenomenon and participants' experiences through in-depth interviews. This limitation can be mitigated when the alignment between the research method using small sample sizes and

philosophical paradigms contributes to data saturation and transferability of results (Boddy, 2016). The availability of participants may have been another limitation, as dates and times may have not been suitable for those who desired to participate in the study. No study participants were paid as possible biases during their sharing would have impacted the study's findings.

Significance of the Study

Significance to Practice

This study is significant because the findings may provide managers insight into fostering meaningful work experiences for employees in remote work environments (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). My research findings could teach middle managers and organizational leaders how to interpret meaningfulness. Additionally, the results may support middle managers in gaining a better understanding of the effects of pandemic conditions on employees working in remote work environments (Bonacini et al., 2021; Statistica, 2021).

Significance to Theory

In recent studies, researchers have failed to report how middle managers' direct contact with employees fostered meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic when a sizeable workforce was suddenly thrust into working remotely (Çetin, 2021). Enforced remote work is a relatively recent socioeconomic phenomenon, and a literature gap exists regarding the management of meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Michaelson, 2021). This study contributes to the management body of literature by helping gain a

better understanding of middle managers' perceptions of meaningful work and leadership practices in the remote work environment (Ouwkerk & Bartels, 2020). This study may be significant in extending the two theories' supporting conceptual framework, Oldham and Hackman's (2010) JCT and Deci and Ryan's (2008) self-determination theory, with data collected on how meaningful interventions enhance work engagement and meaningful leadership practices. Original empirical results address the specific problem of the study and can provide new scholarly knowledge for organizations on retaining employees in remote work environments (Lee, 2021).

Significance to Social Change

The COVID-19 global pandemic has caused employees to reconsider what they want from their careers and employers (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021). In the last few months, multiple business surveys have reported that remote employees are thinking about quitting their jobs (Bonacini et al., 2021). Given the challenges many middle managers faced during the pandemic in leading the sudden transition to a remote work environment, employees' needs for meaningful work may have been undermined as a management priority, resulting in diminishing employee engagement and well-being (Klonek et al., 2021; Kuenzi et al., 2021). Retention of employees in the remote work environment and understanding factors that diminish their meaningfulness resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic experience are essential to drive positive social change for the future workforce (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Çetin, 2021; Klonek et al., 2021).

Summary and Transition

Middle managers who face the continuing challenge of fostering meaningful work in remote work environments affected by the COVID-19 pandemic remain at the forefront of organizational concerns. The specific management problem is that middle managers' experiences fostering meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic remain poorly understood (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Guldenberg & Langhof, 2021; Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using narrative inquiry, I collected critical facts and positions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) through the process of retelling each participant's own stories as captured through personal experience, including their personal and social experiences. To provide an accurate and data-rich narrative study, I conducted virtual audio interviews and recordings of the life experiences of a purposeful sample of 10 participants. Using conceptual frameworks of Bailey et al.'s (2019) concept of meaningful work and Avlani and Charalampous's (2021) concept of remote leadership competencies, I aimed to advance research and a deeper understanding of middle managers' experiences fostering meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this chapter, I presented the nature of the study, the assumptions, the scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance to theory, practice, and positive contributions to social change.

In Chapter 2, I provide the literature search strategy including key terms to conduct a literature review. I also provide details on the conceptual framework used for this research. I present a literature review on specific problems from existing literature on how middle managers fostered meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, middle managers recognized that employees needed meaningful work to minimize employee disengagement and maintain employee well-being (Klonek et al., 2021; Kuenzi et al., 2021). The limited research on workplace digitalization and meaningful work has left theoretical and practitioner-based questions unanswered in the management and leadership literature (Frémeaux, & Pavageau, 2020; Michaelson, 2021). Understanding the factors that diminish remote employees' work meaning and engagement is essential to driving positive social change in the future workforce (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Çetin, 2021; Klonek et al., 2021).

Researchers have yet to capture empirical data on how middle managers guarantee meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, given that a sizeable percentage of the workforce was suddenly thrust into being virtual employees (Çetin, 2021). The subjective nature of meaningful and enforced remote work is a relatively recent socioeconomic phenomenon, creating a literature gap regarding how managers across industry sectors may foster meaningful work for remote employees (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Michaelson, 2021). Further research is needed to fill the literature gap on understanding the effects of pandemic conditions on employees' sense of work meaning and job engagement in the remote work environment (Bonacini et al., 2021; Statistica, 2021).

In Chapter 2, I provide the literature search strategy and the conceptual framework the research is grounded on. I present a synthesis of knowledge within a

narrative literature review on topics related to the study's problem and purpose, including the unique employee issues facing managers across industry sectors operating in a remote work environment. Finally, I offer a critical analysis of the literature this study is grounded on.

Literature Search Strategy

The process of conducting a systematic literature review is a straightforward articulation of the research question and problem statement. This narrative approach is a systematic review of the literature. The objective was to identify relevant studies from various database sources by searching for unbiased research knowledge. This study is critical because a comprehensive database search ensures that the collected literature is pertinent to the study's relevance and prevents bias errors. To do this, I used peer-reviewed or refereed research information and included it in the references list. The search strategy consisted of keywords, Boolean phrases, and terms in various databases to search for articles related to the research topic under review (Yoshii et al., 2009). The end goal was to present the highest quality evidence for review. In this narrative review, the search terms and keyword phrases related to meaningful work in a remote working environment and managerial behaviors associated with supporting remote employees working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. I used the Walden University Library databases. Other online search engines included Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, EBSCOhost, ABI/INFORM Collection, peer-reviewed articles related to the study, Science Direct, SAGE Premier, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, PsycNET, SpringerLink, and Emerald Insight.

Conceptual Framework

This study is framed by two key concepts that focus on alignment with the purpose of the study, which is to understand how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment: (a) Bailey et al.'s (2019) concept of meaningful work and (b) Avlani and Charalampous's (2021) concept of remote leadership competencies. This empirical investigation aimed to advance research and a deeper understanding of middle managers' experiences fostering meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic initiated a rapid digital transformation in the daily workplace, creating a different work environment where feelings of meaninglessness challenge managers and their employees after losing their everyday work conditions (Ouwkerk & Bartels, 2020). The new remote working space meant that employees and their managers were challenged by alienation levels, feelings of meaninglessness, and the loss of everyday work conditions (Bonacini et al., 2021).

Meaningful Work

Through a systematic analysis of the empirical literature, Bailey et al. (2019) defined meaningful work as a subjective concept with three levels: (a) work seen as significant, (b) work done for a greater purpose beyond oneself, and (c) work aligned with one's own identity and values. Bailey et al. (2019) grounded their empirical work in one of the first theories established to explain meaningful work, Oldham and Hackman's (2010) JCT. Oldham and Hackman's (2010) theory has three facets, one of which is

meaningful work, that should be established for organizations to achieve higher productivity and engagement.

The JCT outlines that specific job characteristics—including skill variety, task identity, and task significance—interact with an employee’s developing sense of meaningfulness about their work. De Boeck et al. (2019) noted that in research studies conducted since 2010, researchers have found that meaningful work has higher effects than any other psychological factor hypothesized in job characteristics theory. Furthermore, transformational, ethical, and authentic qualities have emerged in the literature as meaningful leadership behaviors that foster meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). As seen in transformational leaders’ behaviors, employees may align their values when leaders convey clear goals and expectations. Likewise, leaders who subordinate trust are seen as positive contributors who are ethical. When followers view authentic leaders as genuine, trustworthy, and transparent, employees have a more significant opportunity to experience meaning while at work (Michaelson, 2021).

Remote Leadership Competencies

Through a systematic literature review, Avlani and Charalampous (2021) provided an in-depth understanding of the association between remote work and leadership competencies by collating data from 21 research studies published between 2001 and 2019. A combination of using scholarly papers with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs in the systematic literature review revealed that trust and relationship-building skills, communication skills, and technology skills are fundamental for effective remote leadership practice. Problem-solving skills and creating and

maintaining awareness were also observed, but with less significance (Avlani & Charalampous, 2021).

Avlani and Charalampous (2021) grounded their empirical work in Walther's (2015) SIP theory. SIP theory states that interpersonal relational development will take longer online than in traditional face-to-face contexts. However, exchanging relational-oriented information through communication technologies can accelerate this process, despite the lack of physical cues (Walther, 2015). In SIP theory, Walther (2015) proposed that online relationships develop similarly to how they would work in the traditional environment when impressions of one another are enhanced through social information. Furthermore, close working relationships are more likely to emerge when remote leaders decrease spatial proximity with followers, such as through frequent synchronous meetings or non-work-related discussions (Avlani & Charalampous, 2021).

Çetin (2021) addressed the psychological impact of remote working and lockdowns. According to Çetin (2021), leaders faced difficulties adapting to and supporting workplace concerns from remote employees who experienced loneliness, feelings of alienation, and meaningless behaviors toward work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. By doing so, virtual leaders can enhance feelings of co-presence, increase workplace diversity, encourage individuals to connect with similar others in the team, and provide a basis for communication that substitutes for the missing informal conversation that would typically take place in the traditional work setting (Avlani & Charalampous, 2021). Several other researchers corroborated these findings, which suggests that

establishing trusting relationships is a prerequisite to effective remote leadership performance (e.g., Guinalíu & Jordán, 2016; Lukić & Vračar, 2018).

Literature Review

The concept of employees and meaningful work research suggests, unrelated to how the leaders describe their focus on work, that meaningful work has many different meanings. Albrecht et al. (2021) studied meaningful work as a critical psychological state within JD-R to explain the relationship between the JD-R model and employee engagement. The authors examined how meaningful work related to JD-R and employee engagement, drawing from theoretical frameworks of meaningful work, the JD-R model, JCT, and Kahn's employee engagement. Albrecht et al. (2021) found that meaningfulness was a mediator within the JD-R model and the strongest predictor of employee engagement.

Researchers suggested that future researchers focus on how to cultivate meaningful work. Allan et al. (2018a) asserted that having meaningful work facilitates personal growth and contributes to the greater good because research links it to job satisfaction and well-being. Bailey et al. (2019) study addressed work-related factors linked to employees' experiences of meaningfulness. Drawing from the job characteristics model of Hackman and Oldham and the empirical literature on meaningful work (71 studies), the authors examine the gaps in meaningful work. Bailey et al. (2019) analyzed gaps in the empirical literature on meaningful work and highlighted critical gaps and shortcomings.

Both-Nwabuwe et al. (2019) studied the role of autonomy, a work-related outcome, in the seven dimensions of meaningful work. The authors drew from organizational sciences and business ethics literature on autonomy and meaningful work to present the model used in the study. The researchers constructed a theoretical autonomy model relating to meaningful work, individual, group, and professional autonomy. Fletcher and Schofield (2019) evaluated the facilitation of meaningfulness through a workplace intervention. Drawing from purposeful work behavior theory, the study examined meaningful interventions. Fletcher and Schofield's (2019) findings indicated that meaningfulness interventions might broaden perceived opportunities for employee engagement and motivational processes.

Likewise, to Both-Nwabuwe et al.'s (2019) review of the role of autonomy, Deci and Ryan (2009) coined a human motivation theory known as the *self-determination theory*, in which they suggested autonomy as a person's choice and willingness to endorse their behavior. They proposed that people become self-determined when they fulfill their competence, relatedness, and autonomy. The self-determination theory concept is based on all people being motivated to grow and change when the identified three psychological needs are met. Motivational factors, such as intrinsic and extrinsic, are foundational to their theory, and the center of Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory is the what and why of the behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2009). These researchers noted that one way to motivate people to perform tasks is to reinforce behaviors with awards.

Frémeaux and Pavageau (2020) studied leaders' activities (n = 42) that contribute meaning to their own and their employees' meaningful work experiences. The authors

drew from meaningful work, leadership, and spiritual literature to examine the concepts of meaningful leadership. In their study, Frémeaux and Pavageau (2020) expounded on how leaders could pursue meaningful leadership and help their employees give meaning to their work. Research literature showed Göçen (2021) explored a model for meaningful work and leadership and found factors contributing to meaningful work. Göçen examined how leaders give meaning through leadership practices and their impact on employees' meaningful work. The author proposed a meaningful leadership model, and from the findings, ten dimensions were identified, and a definition of meaningful leadership was proposed. Göçen postulated that meaningful leadership is different from other leadership styles because it focuses on meaning and calling.

In contrast, Guldenberg and Langhof (2021) studied digital leadership and technology's role to better understand how digitalization fits leadership. Drawing from leadership and technology literature, the authors defined digital transformation and the five challenges to digital leadership. The researchers examined the five digital leadership challenges and the task of leaders in digital transformation (Guldenberg & Langhof, 2021). The findings suggest that digital leadership will change in the next ten years, but the digital leader will evolve over the next few years, possibly into robot leadership.

Harter (2018) studied the changes in employee engagement and provided information on employee engagement and its impact on organizational outcomes. Harter examined the three not engaged, disengaged, and engaged employees. The researcher's study revealed that the problem with employee engagement remains a problem. This study is essential to my research because it may explain the connection between

employee engagement and meaningful work addressed in the study. Lips-Wiersma et al. (2020) compared three ethical-related antecedents to the dimension of meaningful work. Using literature on meaningful work and ethics, the authors investigated the impact of ethics-related factors on the multidimensional experience of meaningful work. Lips-Wiersma et al. (2020) elaborated on why the employer plays an essential role in creating moral conditions for employees to experience meaningful work.

Ouwerkerk and Bartels (2020) examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees during quarantines and lockdowns. Drawing from organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior, and organizational identification literature, the authors identify possible threats to employees' perceptions and behaviors during the lockdown. Ouwerkerk and Bartels (2020) evaluated the lockdown effects on employees who were not working, partially working, or had reduced hours.

Rise of the Remote Workplace and COVID-19 Pandemic Challenges

Advances in the capabilities of information and communication technologies (ICTs), as well as the increased availability of high-speed internet, have facilitated the growth of remote work (also known as telework, telecommuting, distributed work, or flexible work arrangements), a new mode of work that has grown in popularity over the last several decades. Remote work is typically defined as a flexible work arrangement whereby professional work activities are performed remotely or away from the traditional worksite for a significant portion of the work time. Under these circumstances, information is often processed electronically, and telecommunications are utilized to continue contact with the organization or clients they serve (Fonner & Roloff, 2010).

Four million UK employees and 26 million U.S. employees were either currently working or had obtained previous exposure to teleworking/remote work as of 2019 (Abrams, 2019). Furthermore, a 4% increase across Europe between 2001 and 2019 suggests that the relatively new practice is gaining traction. Therefore, it is believed that working remotely has been an uncommon practice prior to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), which sparked significant teleworking interest in recent months (Eurofound, 2021).

After various states of quarantine and lockdown were imposed, entering the workplace became a threat to health, and thus, companies were provided with no viable alternative but to introduce telework to ensure employee safety and secure business continuity (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020; Forbes, 2020a). Following this exposure, full-time remote employees rose sharply by up to 40% (Eurofound, 2021). Several companies, including Amazon and Microsoft, continued to employ telework for the remaining year, with Twitter offering staff the opportunity to continue working from home permanently (BBC, 2020). This recent upsurge suggests there is a significant possibility that working remotely will increase in popularity in the years ahead and potentially become the norm for some businesses (BBC, 2020). Nonetheless, most workers had little remote experience before the COVID-19 pandemic, and organizations were unprepared to support this practice. Therefore, it is not surprising that supervising at a distance presents increased challenges, particularly within the leadership domain. Scholars recommend that further research be conducted exploring leadership changes in the remote context down to the competency level to support organizations in reaping the

benefits of remote working and successful leadership practice (Avlani & Charalampous, 2021).

Koekemoer et al. (2021) asserted that little research is available about leadership, motivation, and employee performance since the pandemic and associated lockdowns initiated and impacted the workforce. However, the lockdown effect on people's psychological health is not yet understood. The researchers found that during the forced lockdowns, leaders in countries essential around the world, domestic organizations, and government administrations used only workers to work in public places such as hospitals and public service organizations, while other workers remained at home. Workers who made sacrifices, putting their health at risk, continued to work in hospitals and public service organizations were the heroes. Previously, researchers Koekemoer et al. (2021), based on the antecedents' covering lockdowns and other types of pandemics, in different times, showed that this type of situation was a leadership challenge when they provided minimum leadership support. The circumstances impacted remote workers' work engagement and performance during a lockdown scenario. So, relative to pandemic challenges and workplace psychological behaviors.

Akat and Karataş (2020) asserted that pandemics are diseases that cause millions of people to die and have tremendous adverse effects on the psychological health of society, which has now brought on new workplace challenges. Previous studies showed how pandemics affected people's problems associated with psychological behaviors, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, mental stress, and psychological disorders (Chan & Huak, 2004; Tam et al., 2004; Wu et al., 2009, as cited in Akat & Karataş, 2020). Other

challenges that affected businesses, schools, and public service organizations during the pandemic. These challenges are labeled as other challenges because of this current pandemic type (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020, as cited in Zhang et al., 2020). By comparison, the literature showed severe challenges for organizational managers, leaders, and public-school organizations; it impacted higher education leaders also.

The cause and effect showed that leaders in these organizations had limited experience in a shutdown working environment from remote workstations (Brammer & Clark, 2020). Also, due to the forced lockdowns, leaders in higher education organizations were similarly affected by unexpected operational changes. Both academic and business scholars implied that the cause and effect showed that leaders in public organizations and corporations had limited experience in a shutdown working environment from remote workstations prior to the COVID-19 crisis. The outcome of this problem revealed that current leaders were highly challenged in providing the right kind of support employees needed in the previous and current environment of offsite workstations in an asynchronous online platform. Schoolchildren had to learn new learning skills using technologies they normally used for play. Workers and students practiced technical and group coordination and management of time and communication interaction. Challenges entailed intercultural communication and interaction online in a unique teamwork environment using virtual platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Classroom. Moreover, working organizations, hospitals, and individual remote home base workers took wide measures to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, including lockdowns worldwide (Brammer & Clark, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

Digital Transformation in Remote Workplaces Post COVID-19

In Post-Covid-19, the digitalization process of work is becoming implanted as a new form of management practice (Kaul et al., 2020). This phenomenon requires organizations to hire leaders to lead in an online world (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). *The robots are coming* is a folklore story that has been at the forefront for decades related to the future of work. However, just as challenges existed at the onset of COVID-19, so will there be challenges as automation comes to take the burden of tasks and entire jobs once held by humans, vastly creating demands for skill development and learning as people adjust to the new norm (Larsson & Teigland, 2020). The robots will handle the task-oriented jobs while the humans adapt to the new norm of hearts, meaning soft leadership skills. Therefore, employers will need to hire leaders and employees with the abilities that remain exclusively held by humans to adapt to change.

In the current digitized workplace, employers have implemented A.I. technology to make decisions and machine algorithms that predetermine workflows in their organization (Levy, 2018). If this is the case, it will restrict the autonomy of many workers. For this reason, many remote leaders will continue to experience challenges in managing virtual employees and designing meaningful work in a remote workplace. Moreover, there are also challenges related to horizontal lines of communication, all of which require shared leadership styles. Guldenberg (2020) posited that supportive remote leadership tasks should provide employees with the autonomy to grow in their work in a post-pandemic era. However, attention has increased relative to recent radical changes in working environments and work methods as technology increases digitalization and

social distancing at work. This implication supports the idea that managers and leaders must understand the support remote workers need from their leadership staff. Moreover, in another study, Gldenbergl and Langhof (2021) studied the role of remote leadership in a digitized workplace environment to understand how digitalization fits leadership.

According to a survey conducted by the LinkedIn research department, Gomez and Ang (2021) asserted that the learning organizations must master on a larger scale on soft skills such as critical thinking skills, effective communication, and effective leadership skills because these are the skills of the heart. The new skill sets include thinking critically, adapting to change, and communicating effectively in situations revolving around the currency of new economies. According to a survey (4,000 professionals) conducted on LinkedIn, leaders must adapt to soft skill development in modern-day management driven by digital technology transformation in many industries today (Gomez & Ang, 2021; Prokopeak, 2018).

In contrast, a poll study in May 2020 conducted by the Hackett Group consultants showed that three-quarters of executive leaders learned they should expect digital transformation to continue to disrupt their industry. The findings showed that 100% of finance respondents transitioned successfully to remote work and closed the books on time despite substantial disruption. Using lessons learned from this crisis, CFOs are functioning beyond reactive measures of tackling issues and have transitioned toward preparing to meet the long-term implications of the crisis by using five financial service delivery strategies as a new operation model: (a) human capital, (b) cloud-based technology, (c) service partnering and service design, (d) cross-functional crisis response

team and analytics, and (e) information management programming (Hackett Group, 2020).

Meaningful Leadership Behaviors

Göçen (2021) explored meaningful work in leadership practices and their impact on employees' perceptions of leaders and meaningful work. The researcher proposed a leadership model to define leadership practices of meaningful work based on ten dimensions that identified a definition of leader practice from a spiritual and psychological lens that focused on the meaning and calling of different leadership styles associated with the practice of meaningful leadership. Based on a constructivist grounded theory design, the researchers examined the perceptions of 15 teachers using a semistructured interview technique to understand how they perceived leader support of meaningful work. They found ten core dimensions that showed practical behavioral components supporting meaningful work (e.g., life purpose, sharing meaning, understanding, wisdom, sense of ethics, fostering unity, serving others, peacefulness, linking the past to the present, and inner motivation).

Transformational, ethical, and authentic are essential qualities revealed in the literature as meaningful leadership behaviors that foster meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). As seen in transformational leaders' behaviors, employees may align their values when leaders convey clear goals and expectations. Likewise, leaders who subordinate trust are seen as positive contributors and ethical. When followers view authentic leaders as genuine, trustworthy, and transparent, employees have a more

significant opportunity to experience meaning while at work. Lips-Wiersma et al. (2020) postulated that all three leader behaviors are meaningful work dimensions.

Middle Managers

Ayman and Korabik (2010) reviewed the major mainstream of understanding leadership in a cultural and gender environment. The key findings related to gender and culture suggest that gender and culture coexist as they are dependent on each other. However, according to the social structural perspective, different outcomes will be attained by male and female leaders under certain conditions. In contrast, Yahaya (2020) described middle managers as personnel who belong to the intermediate management level and mediate between frontline workers and top managers or leaders of an organization.

Yahaya (2020) asserted that leaders and managers acquire their positions because of their satisfactory performance and leadership perception. However, some lack the training and the development to help them adjust their behaviors and attitudes to lead when the organization experiences abrupt changes. The disconnect occurs when upper leaders at the top do not take the responsibility to promote positive relations and attitudes that engage middle managers to handle organizational change, especially in crises (Yahaya, 2020).

In contrast, Heyden et al. (2020) argued, crises present an opportunity for top and middle managers to rethink assumptions about *who does what* in a radical change situation. This approach suggests a role reversal between middle managers and CEOs. Heyden et al.'s (2020) research associated the role reversal between the sharing of

initiatives between middle management and the leaders. This approach means the leaders take a deliberate back seat in supporting middle managers. Hagenfeldt substantiated the role of middle managers in mediating between upper management expectations and lower staff performance on tasks to accomplish the overall organizational goals. Middle managers add value when they bridge upper management expectations with lower staff perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Hagenfeldt, 2021).

Many recent studies failed to capture what middle managers having direct contact with employees did, if anything, to guarantee meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic when a sizeable percentage of the workforce was suddenly thrust into working remotely from home (Çetin, 2021). According to the finding, managers started to realize the impact of employees experiencing feelings of loneliness, alienation, and a sense of spiritual loss in remote working environments. So, the awareness of these feelings is not new. However, the current demand for enhanced technology (e.g., AI and digitalization) has created new platforms of efficiency for managers, but at the psychological expense of the workers (Çetin, 2021).

Previous research indicated that the digital divide issues had been under investigation for decades. However, there is a digital divide even today. Sanders and Scanlon (2021) asserted that life would be different for people living in communities if the current technology suddenly became unavailable. It showed how people's experiences dealing with the COVID-19 crisis revealed the importance of needing technology and how significant the need to access it is. The workplace and workers are

dependent on technology for basic daily living, accessing goods, maintaining connections with others, and working from home. The crisis also impacted local schools and college students' ability to complete schoolwork. Therefore, the digital divide is a real phenomenon as well. In contrast, Eyrich et al. (2021) studied "Bridging the digital divide to avoid leaving the most vulnerable behind." A study conducted in 2018 showed that more than half-million Medicare beneficiaries in communities showed 26% did not have access to high-speed internet or cell phones (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). Currently, the divide is surfacing in the absence of broadband in low-level income households.

What Did Middle Managers Do?

The subjective nature of meaningful work and enforced remote work is a relatively recent socioeconomic phenomenon, creating a literature gap on how middle managers may foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Michaelson, 2021). For many pre-pandemic researchers, defining meaningful work was a significant challenge; the lockdown created an even larger gap in a uniform definition. Scholars propose that because of the subjectivity of meaningful work and how it differs for different people, middle managers may face challenges in fostering this experience (Michaelson, 2021).

The role of middle managers is to manage the boundaries of employees who operate between the firm and upper leaders by connecting them between the tiers of supervisors in the organization. The top leadership took over the COVID-19 crisis by downsizing the workforce. The leaders selected certain middle managers to oversee remote workers. This approach cuts costs, allowing them to concentrate more on

decision-making processes and running the companies (Heyden et al., 2020). Moreover, all types of costs started to surge.

In contrast, López-Valcárcel and Vallejo-Torres (2021) asserted that the GDP cost of COVID-19 is by far more extensive than all the other components of the cost. The global cost between 2020 and 2021 is estimated at 14% of 2019 GDP. The findings suggested different costs based on the GDP in some world regions. For example, it amounts to 24% of the 2019 GDP in Spain, which is \$397.3M. Only 2.14% of the total cost was spent on healthcare (López-Valcárcel & Vallejo-Torres, 2021).

Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Graham's (1991) *An Essay on Organizational Citizenship Behavior* defined citizenship within the organization into three categories: obedient, loyal, and political participation. Organizational citizenship behavior is the organizational equivalent of citizen responsibilities, of which there are three categories: obedience, loyalty, and political participation. Drawing from organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior, and organizational identification literature, Ouwerkerk and Bartels (2020) examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees during quarantines and lockdowns. The authors identified possible threats to employees' perceptions and behaviors during the lockdown. Ouwerkerk et al. evaluated the lockdown effects on employees who were not working, partially working, or had reduced hours.

During the lockdown, many managers may have experienced challenges managing their resources adequately to achieve their organizational goals (Suryani et al., 2019). Human capital is one of several essential resources managed in organizations,

whether working in-person or remotely. How can organizations adequately manage their remote workers? Remote employees who experience lockdown fatigue due to the COVID-19 pandemic may struggle to demonstrate organizational citizenship behaviors, challenging organizations. Suryani et al. (2019) examined a new perspective that focused on how organizations achieve success when employees perform their duties, which they suggested including extra duties beyond their job description, related to organizational citizenship behavior.

Guinot et al. (2021) studied the impact of trust and job satisfaction on the employer-employee relationship. The findings supported those employees who trusted their leaders and participated in decision-making experienced job satisfaction. Employees who participate and contribute feel valued and may implement good citizenship behaviors, focus on their duties, and work beyond the required tasks without a reward system (Suryani et al., 2019).

Fu Jingtao et al. (2020) proposed that ethical leadership may contribute to anxiety in employees due to the pressures this management style emphasizes for employees to complete obligations and responsibilities similar to organizational citizenship behaviors. In contrast, Guinot et al. (2021) examined the significance of employees' trusting organizational goals and highlighted managers are becoming aware of the value of including employees in the decision-making process. Employees who feel inclusive and empowered may not feel compelled or obligated to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (Judge et al., 2020).

Compensation and commitment were two factors linked to increased organizational citizenship behaviors that employees' attitudes initiated without the need for a reward system (Suryani et al., 2019). A study conducted by Massoudi et al. (2020) yielded consistent findings that supported organizational commitment and job satisfaction positively contribute to changing organizational citizenship behaviors among employees; they specifically studied hotel employees. In both studies, employees' organizational citizenship behaviors were found to be voluntary actions that facilitated organizational success, making them consequently valuable to managers.

Meaningful Work Practices

In contrast to work behavior, Singh et al. (2021) studied the effects of meaningful work practices, demonstrating meaningful work behaviors using a cross-sectional design approach. The findings suggested that human resource practices and decision-making were positively related to innovative work behavior, a functional behavior for meaningful work. However, the results showed that evaluation of current performance-based reward systems was not related to meaningful work. Although not associated in the research with meaningful work, innovative performances are linked to employees' skills, knowledge, and expertise (Singh et al., 2021). Innovative and the application of new ideas were related to purpose, thus serving as a way for employees to obtain meaning. Singh et al.'s (2021) exploration of different human resource practices added value to innovative work practices, specifically related to small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Lee (2021) expounded on understanding how meaningful interventions enhance work engagement and leadership practices with the goal of retaining employees in remote

work environments. How organizations navigate during and after the COVID-19 pandemic presents additional challenges for employers post-COVID. The findings suggest that psychological safety, organizational support, and emotions are vital when creating meaningful work practices during the transition from work to remote working during the COVID-19 crisis (Lee, 2021).

Vermooten et al. (2019) examined the relationship between job crafting, proactive personality, and meaningful work in determining employee engagement and intentions. Employers may utilize job crafting as a workplace practice to improve engagement and intentions. The finding indicated that employees might adjust their work environment with personal initiatives to meet their needs and experience meaningful work (Vermooten et al., 2019).

Frémeaux and Pavageau's (2020) study revealed that leaders who conducted meaningful leadership activities indirectly created meaningful employee experiences. The findings substantiated that ethical leadership practices, self-awareness, empathy, professional support, and a positive attitude toward employees are all characteristics that foster meaningful work practice (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). These scholarly studies corroborated leaders who create self-meaning through meaningful leadership activities create meaningful work environments for their employees. In contrast, Allan et al. (2018b) examined three experiments to determine if manipulating task significance increases meaningfulness. This scholarly study revealed that when individuals focus on others, their work findings are meaningful and add value

to a collection of studies supporting personal development interventions that HR managers may implement.

Riasudeen and Singh (2021) conducted a cross-sectional and non-experimental study on whether spirituality plays a role in mediating leadership effectiveness and psychological well-being. The results showed that when organizations build core values anchored in spirituality as a practice, it leads to greater connectedness and a healthier work environment, which promotes meaningful work. The literature on spirituality in the workplace recently gained momentum, and the study revealed a need to explore this topic relating to meaningful work in greater depth.

Martela et al.'s (2021) longitudinal design study examined the significance of meaningful work for the quality of work-life, such as employee motivation, well-being, commitment, and organizational outcomes. The study results emphasized the importance of cultivating autonomy and beneficence for employees, validating their positive implications when fostering meaningfulness. Bailey et al. (2019) elaborated on the importance of meaningful work as a core domain in human resources development, such as engagement, motivation, and personal development. Key questions remain unanswered in this area, and there is a greater yearning from scholars in human resources development to enhance workplace meaningfulness through learning and development interventions.

Research Into Meaningful Work

Research within the meaningful work domain has increased within the last two decades, in which it has been shown to relate positively to both individual and

organizational outcomes (Albrecht et al., 2021; Fletcher & Schofield, 2019). According to Fletcher and Schofield (2019), the term *meaningfulness* in relation to work may be a calling and job crafting, as opposed to psychological experiences that show significance to work itself. Despite the increased scholarly and practical interest in the meaningful work concept, many recent studies have neglected the current trends and developments in remote work environments, which could diminish feelings of meaningfulness among employees (Chaudhary, 2020; Savvides & Stavrou, 2020).

Bailey and Madden (2020) stated that the subjective nature of meaningful work and enforced remote work is a relatively recent socioeconomic phenomenon, creating a literature gap on how middle managers may foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment. Conversely, Lysova et al. (2019) examined the relationship between underemployment, meaningful work, and feelings of wellbeing. Their findings appear to be contradictory. Meaningful work showed no relationships, but negative feelings showed parallels to the dark side of meaningfulness when they could not employ their best skills. In contrast to work behavior, Singh et al. (2021) studied the effects of meaningful work practices, demonstrating meaningful work behaviors using a cross-sectional design approach. The findings suggested that human resource practices and decision-making were positively related to innovative work behavior, a functional behavior for meaningful work. On the other hand, the study results showed that evaluation of current performance-based reward systems was not related to meaningful work.

In the past, the subject of meaningful work focused on scholars' attention, laying the foundation for their understanding of it as a human endeavor of meaningfulness. Nevertheless, human resource managers have recently started to focus on it as a potential enhancement to employee engagement (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Tablan, 2015; Yeoman, 2014). According to popular belief, meaningful work has been significant to employees, organizations, and society because of its positive outcomes. Nevertheless, from a historical standpoint, meaningfulness has not been established in previous studies because of various beliefs. However, today, in a post-COVID-19 pandemic, it is highly significant and demands recognition.

More importantly, the demand for workers reflects on the well-being of the workers due to potential stress issues they experience working in a new remote workplace. Moreover, there is also the risk that the pursuit of meaningfulness may draw people into harmful working practices for their wellbeing. For this reason, a gap has been incurred, requiring further research and suggesting that the outcome will connect meaningfulness with the new norm of employment as new changes continue to emerge (Bailey & Madden, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, employers experienced unseen workplace challenges that impacted employees' meaningfulness and work attitudes. According to research findings, many employees become depressed, isolated, and unmotivated to participate in work activities during the lockdown. These work-related challenges pressed an exploration of ways to boost employee morale and engagement through meaningful tasks (Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

The COVID-19 Pandemic was an alert that change had arrived abruptly, causing the world to realize that the previous society of work and planning was no longer valid worldwide (Dwived et al., 2020). New work procedures, policies, and methodologies for managing people have proved to be a significant change for society and how life moves forward. The literature review focused on several narrative inquiries that proposed concepts to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Çetin, 2021; Heyden et al., 2020).

Employees working remotely pre-COVID-19 were minimally utilized and, if any, done selectively. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic changed how organizations executed remote work when forced to quarantine employees and lockdown. A small percent of U.S. employees worked from home before the pandemic, and a significantly higher increase for the past 20 months until what we all know now as the *new normal*, post-pandemic (Statistica, 2021).

During the pandemic, employees who had to be quarantined caused organizations to shift their resources to manage and reduce worker alienation, loneliness, depressive feelings, and loss of meaning while working remotely (Bonacini et al., 2021). The transition to remote work environments cost organizations significantly, and unprepared middle managers faced challenges during this unanticipated transition (Bailey et al., 2019; Klonek et al., 2021). Middle managers will face difficult decisions about how to

operate and foster meaningful work experiences for employees in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 2, I presented an expanded review of the nature of meaningful work and meaningless behaviors of employees impacted by the pandemic. A variety of studies included information about previous pandemics of the past, non-similar to the current issues related to the COVID-19 incident, but very relevant to how situations of this nature impacted the world today (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). The review pointed out how this new emerging digitized world will reflect human and technological changes that are challenging for organizational leaders and employees beyond the recent pandemic and emerging into a changing environment (Güldenbergl & Langhof, 2021). The world understands that the pandemic was a devastating event involving the deaths of over a half million people in the United States alone. However, the world is currently experiencing the residual effects of the pandemic, which suggests this is a new philosophy of world change.

World leaders do not know how to remedy this uncharted issue in the workplace because it is a new and emerging problem with unforeseen issues to come. It is with the hope that ongoing research will remedy this change to the point of a positive resolution that life might transcend to a new and better norm. Therefore, an actual remedy is needed to prevent another half-million deaths in the United States alone. Therefore, a remote working environment is a notable change. More importantly, to learn how effectively the current leadership will manage their operations in a remote working environment.

Chapter 3, I described the qualitative narrative methodology of data collection and the pre-planned approach to finalizing the research study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this study's purpose and be consistent with the qualitative paradigm, I used the narrative tradition of storytelling to collect data from middle managers supervising remote employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, a narrative inquiry research design allowed for gleaning detailed participants' voices on creating a meaningful work environment within a remote work environment (Clandinin, 2016; see Clandinin & Connelly, 2009).

In this chapter, I provide thorough information on the research method and rationale for using the narrative inquiry approach. Subsequently, I met the purpose of the study and provided the necessary data to answer the study's central research question. In Chapter 3, I present a rationale for the participant selection strategy, data collection strategies and data analysis, the role of the researcher, evaluation methods for the trustworthiness of data, ethical considerations, and a chapter summary.

Research Design and Rationale

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research design that captures participants' stories to understand the connection between participants' storytelling and daily lived experiences (Clandinin, 2016). Using a context-rich interpretive approach, an investigation of middle managers' daily experiences with fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic offered

recommendations for future research. Aligning with the purpose of this study, the CRQ is: How did middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Given the challenges many middle managers faced during the pandemic in leading the sudden transition to a remote work environment, employees' needs for meaningful work may have been undermined as a management priority, resulting in diminishing employee engagement and well-being (Klonek et al., 2021; Kuenzi et al., 2021). Despite the increased scholarly and practical interest in the meaningful work concept, some recent studies have neglected the current trends and developments in remote work environments, which could diminish feelings of meaningfulness among employees (Chaudhary, 2020; Savvides & Stavrou, 2020). The subjective nature of meaningful work reinforces that remote work is a relatively recent socioeconomic phenomenon, creating a literature gap on how middle managers may foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Michaelson, 2021).

A narrative inquiry approach permits a researcher to present a general picture of participants' daily experiences, including examining complex data of critical events that influence their daily decision making and reactions. By using the narrative approach (Moen, 2006; Webster & Mertova, 2007), I was able to work closely with participants who expressed discomfort when revealing critical events within their organizational setting. Using narrative inquiry, I collected critical facts and positions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) through the process of retelling each participant's own stories as

captured through personal experience, including the individual's personal and social experiences.

Other than narrative inquiry, qualitative research designs were examined for goodness-of-fit, providing data to answer the study's central search question. Narrative inquiry researchers inquire into what, how, and why human relationships happen. Although other qualitative methods exist, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, and case studies, which gather data based on participants' experiences and are often used to communicate common understandings at specific points in the subjects under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), these qualitative designs omit the important fundamental stages of narrating critical events (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry was the most appropriate methodological fit for meeting the purpose of this study by gathering data through storytelling. This qualitative research approach's data collection process aided the narrative interview process and allowed for the emergence of significant, critical life events (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

A narrative inquiry approach provides a narrative researcher the opportunity to work closely and establish trusting relationships with participants who may express feelings of discomfort when revealing critical events within their organizational setting (Moen, 2006). To provide an accurate and data-rich narrative study, I conducted online interviews and recordings of daily experiences related to the phenomena under study with a purposeful sample of 10 participants. The sample population for my study met the following inclusion criteria: adults; employed as a middle manager in a U.S.-based organization for a minimum of 2 years; and supervised employees' transition from on-

ground to a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tracy, 2019).

The inclusion criteria of the study's sample replicated sample criteria from other similar studies of middle managers in the United States (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2020; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Yahaya, 2020).

This study's research design was grounded in a hermeneutic approach focused on how human experience is mediated through storytelling (Clandinin, 2016). Hermeneutics is based on deciphering, interpreting, and translating ideas by examining language and considering multiple meanings that include my perspective. The moving back and forth between a researcher's and a participant's perspectives on stories that uncover inherent meanings is termed the *hermeneutic circle* (Freeman, 2016). Using this approach increased the likelihood of obtaining findings that could become significant research material (Webster & Mertova, 2007). After completing data collection based on what Webster and Mertova (2007) recommended, I answered my research question through a rigorous data analysis process.

Narrative inquiry is used to understand and inquire about the lived experiences of research participants, using temporality, sociality, and places to serve as specific guidelines for extending the conceptual framework (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Middle managers' daily experiences fostering meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic remain poorly understood (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Güldenberk & Langhof, 2021; Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020). This study's original empirical results may address the present literature gap on meaningful work in remote

work environments, such as providing new scholarly knowledge for organizations on retaining remote employees during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee, 2021).

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher was to interview middle managers to understand their daily experiences fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications of these experiences (Çetin, 2021). I documented the study participants' experiences relating to the study's central research question. The participants' replies to the research study question were the only component explored in this study. I offered no incentives to recruit participants for this research study. As the researcher, I did not overemphasize my role in any other way in this research. There were no personal dealings or professional affiliations between the participants and me. At no time did I express any authority or management over the study participants. To diminish potential research biases and establish trustworthiness, I used journal notes and disclosed any biases during the transcription and analysis stages to minimize any effect on participants' shared stories. As the researcher, I established trust with the participants to gain accurate data and build professional collaboration.

The research methodology used to conduct the study impacts a researcher's role. For this study, I used a qualitative method; in this case, I was the data collection instrument (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Researchers use the Belmont Report as their ethical guidelines in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). The Belmont Report outlines the research of human participants, respect for a person, beneficence, and justice as the three principles addressed in the report (U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). To follow the guidelines from the Belmont report, I respected the individuals who agreed to participate in this study or who exercised their right to withdraw from the study. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1979), my responsibility as the researcher was to safeguard the welfare of all participants. Furthermore, I obtained permission from the IRB before conducting any interviews or data collection.

For qualitative research studies, the role of the researcher is to conduct interviews and collect, analyze, and interpret the data. In this study, I performed the duties as the researcher. Besides the above-listed tasks, I addressed any personal biases that may have affected the reliability of the study during the data collection and analysis process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). To reduce potential biases, I used a journal to track all the actions I performed related to my study. During the interviews, I asked for clarification and verified meanings and statements; by doing so, I was able to prevent biases and interjections of personal opinions. Some scholars use bracketing to identify and set aside personal biases and opinions. The bracketing method helped to ensure I set aside personal biases and opinions (Moustakas, 1994).

Methodology

Narrative inquiry is well suited for this study because it is a process by which, through the stories that participants share, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of their specific human and social challenges through the individual perspective of their daily experiences, transactions, and relationships (Clandinin, 2016; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Humans have always been storytellers. Throughout generations, told

stories defined human experiences. The strong suit of the narrative inquiry approach lies in the epistemological premise that individuals will innately strive to make sense of their experiences through storytelling. Stories are perpetually being restructured within the timeline of recent events as they do not exist in a static environment. Participants' narratives are influenced by what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) termed the three aspects of narrative analysis, which include personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); and place (situation) (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In the narrative inquiry design, the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, I used this approach to better understand participants' personal experiences through stories of their interactions with other people.

When I re-told the story of the participants in my data analysis, the theme and all the rich details of the setting were included to share the context of the interview about the participant's personal experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Webster & Mertova, 2007). As expressed through storytelling, perception is a vital element in a narrative inquiry and defines how participants reconstruct their memories through the worldview of the specific reality taking place within a given context (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In this study, I used the context and culture of the remote work environment as the participants' worldview of their workday reality.

To provide for an accurate and data-rich narrative study and meet the Walden Ph.D. standard for sample sizes in qualitative dissertations, I conducted data collection through online interviews with a purposeful sample of 10 participants with the phenomena under study, and I kept reflective journal notes (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990;

Webster & Mertova, 2007). The final sample size in this qualitative study was determined by data saturation evaluated from the interview transcripts (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The sample population for my study met the following inclusion criteria: adults; employed as middle managers in a U.S.-based organization for a minimum of 2 years; supervised employees' transition from on-ground to a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic; and, able and willing to provide in-depth information on the phenomena under study (Tracy, 2019). The inclusion criteria of the study's sample replicate sample criteria from other similar studies of middle managers in the United States (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2020; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Yahaya, 2020).

After data collection, I answered my research question through a rigorous data analysis process. Restorying was the first step of the data analysis. I utilized this step because it involves the researcher's narrative data analysis method to gather data, analyze the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and rewrite the data (Clandinin, 2016). The critical events approach was the second step of the data analysis, which provided details on place, time, characters, and significant events essential to the study. A critical event narrative analysis was used to model the events in narratives to investigate human stories and strengthen the trustworthiness of the data in this study (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Finally, I used thematic analysis to organize the meanings of stories into themes and ultimately guide the texts' interpretations (Clandinin, 2016). Traditionally, researchers use triangulation in qualitative research to determine their themes. On the contrary, Webster and Mertova (2007) suggested that when using critical event narrative inquiry,

story-based studies do not utilize triangulation since it is not feasible; besides, they believed it is “almost impossible to achieve” (p. 91).

Participant Selection Logic

In this qualitative narrative study, the researcher explored the challenges and middle managers’ daily experiences of fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 17% of U.S. employees worked from home five days or more per week, rising to 44% during the pandemic (Statistica, 2021). By capturing leaders’ experiences who managed remote workers during the pandemic experiences, organizations will develop an understanding of the challenges and implement post-pandemic responses. Many scholars have stated that more research is needed to provide knowledge and insight on employees working in remote locations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Michaelson, 2021).

The sample population met the following inclusion criteria: adults; employed as middle managers in a U.S.-based organization for a minimum of 2 years; supervised employees’ transition from on-ground to a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic; and, able and willing to provide in-depth information on the phenomena under study (Tracy, 2019). Purposeful sampling is appropriate for researchers to identify and select how they will implement their study (Imran & Yusoff, 2015). For this study, I conducted semistructured online interviews using audio only and recordings collecting data from middle managers supervising remote employees’ daily experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic from a purposeful sample of 10 study participants using the

narrative tradition of the storytelling approach (Clandinin, 2016; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Criterion and Snowball Sampling

I utilized criterion sampling to select participants for this study; in this process, participants with the same inclusion criteria supported the collection of the target sample given in a population group (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). A purposeful sample based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria described in this research can be used to launch a snowball sample, if necessary. With snowball sampling, the researcher identifies individuals who meet the established criteria to propose relevant and valuable views to enlarge the sample (Tracy, 2019).

Researchers utilizing qualitative methods intend to collect and record data from their participants to determine sample size through theoretical, categorical, inductive, thematic, or data saturation. is reached, but most importantly, for the sample size in the context of narrative inquiry research (Guest et al., 2020). The purposeful sample for this narrative inquiry consisted of middle managers' daily experience fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study shared lived experiences by presenting them through the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) conducted the American Time Use Survey, which revealed a vast characteristic difference between education and occupation. About 37% of college graduates were remote workers, as were only about 15% of high school graduates. The pandemic presented challenges in the workplace

where leaders had to implement changes due to the lockdown immediately, and post-pandemic staff shortages present a new challenge for organizations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). In this study, a sample size of 10 participants were used in this narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2016; Guest et al., 2006). Researchers validate utilizing a narrative inquiry when exploring participants' perspectives to tell a story when telling stories. To achieve the goal of this research study, I told the stories of my participants, and each story comprised a universal shared lived experience using critical reflection (Clandinin, 2016).

The unit of analysis for this study was middle managers supervising remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. I used the purposeful selection process in this study to establish criteria related to the research topic. The inclusion criteria were similar to other studies, including managers who supervised employees' transition from on-ground to a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bailey & Madden, 2020; Çetin, 2021; Michaelson, 2021). The research study's candidates were prescreened to ensure they meet the participation and inclusion criteria and possess knowledge and experience related to the research topic. Besides knowledge, participants demonstrated the ability to communicate their daily lived experiences. To resolve the narrative inquiry, the target population was the researchers' inclusion criteria (Tracy, 2019).

This study's researcher obtained the participants' consent before any interviews. Through conversations and perceptions, I utilized an exploration method to identify candidates with rich lived experiences of managers who supervised employees' transition

from on-ground to a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. To reach saturation, I solicited and obtained additional participant consent, if necessary. The researcher reaches data saturation when no discoverable new data is present and redundant.

The researcher used network and snowball sampling to recruit participants, prevent potential bias, and increase actual in-depth data. The researcher asked all participants the same interview protocol questions to ensure transparency and data saturation. Storytelling is the core of narrative inquiry; in-depth experiences are more essential than sample size (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). In this study, the researcher used journal notetaking to capture verbal and observed non-verbal expressions to gain inclusive insight into universal shared experiences.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, interviews are the primary data collection tool. For this study, semi-interviews were utilized as a tool to gain insight into the participants' daily experiences for universal shared field experiences, utilizing a narrative approach. In this study, the interview protocol addressed the study's purpose and answered the CRQ: How did middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

A preliminary field test was conducted to analyze and determine whether the study's interview questions, grounded in the conceptual framework and scholarly literature reviewed in Chapter 2, produced results that can answer the central research questions and undergo a quality audit (Tracy, 2019). The field test auditors included the

Dissertation Committee Chair and two subject matter experts to determine the credibility, dependability, and applicability of the interview guide's questions and the interview procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Aside from the Dissertation Chair, the two field test auditors, Dr. Daphne Halkias, the Dissertation Committee Member, and Dr. Marcos Komodromos, Associate Professor at the University of Nicosia, Cyprus, have co-published papers and an academic book related to employee issues during times of change (Halkias et al., 2017; Komodromos, 2014; Komodromos et al., 2019). This field testing established trustworthiness and credibility in the study's qualitative findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

The qualitative data collection within narrative inquiry research often offers rich, in-depth data reflecting the human experience (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Stake, 2010). Critical event analysis is a method that provides details of exclusive data that is significantly framed when collected through videoconferencing. By incorporating the critical event approach, the researcher concentrated on a specific audience that effectively meets the needs of the qualitative study due to the volume of data being generated (Mertova & Webster, 2012). Before the interview process, the participants agreed that their contribution of information would not be compromised and be used for research only. Their identities will be kept entirely confidential, followed by the destruction of the data after five years.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

For this research study, I sent 120 recruitment invitations to potential study participants through the LinkedIn Professional Network platform, and 19 recruits who

received a study invitation expressed interest in learning more about the research study process. Fourteen recruits expressed interest in being a study participant; however, only 11 consented to participate. I conducted a keyword search using “director,” “middle manager,” and “senior leadership” for potential recruits. I requested to connect with a general message of who I was and the purpose of the research study since the section was limited to 300 words. Upon connecting, I posted a message with the approved IRB recruitment invitation letter to the ones who accepted my request.

I initially selected 10 to 15 middle managers using LinkedIn Online Professional Network recruiting. I had 11 participants’ consent to participate. However, one of the participants did not schedule an interview, which left me with 10 middle managers to understand their daily experiences supervising remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling for this study’s tools was network and criterion sampling. The researcher utilized a snowball effect to recruit additional participants until there were no new themes or redundancy to achieve data saturation. The snowball effect caused me to select four of the 10 interview candidates. I reached data saturation at participant number 10, and I collected data through a virtual audio recording using Zoom videoconference. Interviewing is an acceptable research tool for qualitative studies (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Unstructured, semistructured, and structured are three types of interviews. For this study, I conducted 10 semistructured interviews using open-ended questions through Socratic questions to provoke thoughts and obtain in-depth responses. The reason is that the unstructured interview format provides researchers with little control over the

interview process. In contrast, structured interviews may restrict the response flow of participants, similar to the form of a questionnaire.

In comparison, semistructured interviews provide researchers some control while permitting participants an opportunity to respond freely to open-ended questions (Yin, 2018). There are advantages and disadvantages to using a semistructured format; one advantage is that it allows researchers to capture a significant amount of information in a small amount of time. Semistructured is time-consuming, which is a disadvantage for researchers. However, I elected to conduct interviews in a semistructured format.

The researcher created a teleconference schedule and set a time for interviews and provided information regarding the consent form before the scheduled interviews. I scheduled 30 to 40-minute interviews with willing participants individually, asking thought-provoking questions to gain insight from the daily living experiences of middle managers supervising remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, all interviews lasted less than the planned 30–40 minutes, providing rich and consistent data. I conducted interviews once, except I conducted a follow-up with one participant to clarify and gain further insight to obtain data saturation.

I recorded virtual audio interviews using Zoom videoconference and a digital recorder. Due to a lack of participants, I used the follow-up plan, the LinkedIn professional network, and snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. I verified recordings at the end of each interview. I downloaded the virtual audio interview from Zoom videoconference recording and digital audio to Word and another subscription

document reader and saved them. I also used Word to dictate and transcribed typing to capture participants' responses.

I performed member checking of transcribed information with the participant to confirm accuracy. I offered an opportunity to review and inspect a summary of their responses to make any necessary revisions to ensure accuracy and validity. I used a two-step process to capture the interview participants' narrative storytelling themes. (a) restorying each story to provide a description or categories for each event or single case, and (b) cross-checking each case with event category themes for comparative purposes (Clandinin, 2016; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Participants had an opportunity to share responses through a storytelling format utilizing a narrative inquiry approach. The initial interview questions consisted of demographic questions to ensure participants met the inclusion criteria.

During debriefing, I provided a statement informing interviewees of the study title and that I am the principal research investigator. I addressed the research study's goal, why it was developed, and what I hoped to learn from the study. I included the research question and withdrawal procedures to allow participants to withdraw. The study results thus far and when and how participants may be informed of the study results Ethical concerns and information on their rights as research participants are included in the debriefing statement, as is researcher contact information to direct questions in the future. The debrief statement consisted of a couple of research references for participants who wanted to learn more about the topic and a thank you note for participating in the research.

Data Analysis Plan

Restorying was the first step of the data analysis. I utilized this step because it involves the researcher's narrative data analysis method to gather data, analyze the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and rewrite the data (Clandinin, 2016). The critical events approach was the second step of the data analysis, as those critical events experiences provided details on place, time, characters, and significant events essential to the study. A critical event narrative analysis was used to model the events in narratives to investigate human stories and strengthen the trustworthiness of the data in this study (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

For each event, I provided a description or categories and cross-checked each case with the event category and themes for comparative purposes. Finally, a thematic analysis organized the co-constructed meanings of stories into themes and ultimately guided the texts' interpretations (Clandinin, 2016). Traditionally, researchers use triangulation in qualitative research to determine their themes. Nonetheless, Webster and Mertova (2007) suggested when using critical event narrative inquiry in story-based studies not to apply triangulation since it is not practicable, and they believed it is "almost impossible to achieve" (p. 91).

Issues of Trustworthiness

To produce reliable results in qualitative research, it is my responsibility to meet the established criteria for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bernard & Bernard, 2013). The researcher is the primary data collector for qualitative research; thereby, they are responsible for analyzing and interpreting information gained

from the interviews, journal notes, and document reviews. Scholars demonstrate reliability and validity for their work to be reputable.

Credibility

This study aimed to explore how middle managers foster meaningful work experiences for remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers establish credibility when participants find the study results plausible. As Davis and Maldonado (2015) conveyed in their study, credibility is the wealth and depth of data collected rather than quantity.

Data saturation is essential in qualitative research as the goal is to ensure the researcher obtains sufficient information to answer the research question and no new themes surface. I conducted audits and transcript reviews to establish credibility in the study's results, which is a process of member checking to enhance the credibility of the research study findings and avoid potential biases. Methodological audits support credibility because researchers have an opportunity to present data from different viewpoints (Patton, 1999). I used methodological audit trails by gathering data from interviews, journal note-taking, and document reviews. The audit trails supported the research credibility when the research presented the truth and views of participants' interpretations and personal experiences with confidence in the information obtained during the interview.

Member checks safeguarded an accurate representation of participants' experiences and ideas congruent with the researchers' interpretations (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Interviews and journal note-taking of participants' experiences

enriched the data and affected the quality of the research study. I recorded participants' thoughts and feelings and observed audible non-verbal gestures to capture a complete picture. After the data collection process, I compared the analysis results, and no triangulation was necessary from this narrative inquiry.

Transferability

Transferability transpires when the results from one study are relevant in other settings. Researchers ask additional questions and compare participants' responses to other studies when checking for transferability (Baillie, 2015). Research designs and interview protocols are two methodological techniques scholars can use to improve transferability (Noble & Smith, 2015). Researchers who are transparent in their study procedures and demonstrate trustworthiness achieve transferability through detailed studies of context, location, and people. The narrative inquiry study is the research design through which I created interview protocols to demonstrate study transferability.

Dependability

This study explored middle managers' daily experiences fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers establish dependability when the research study is logical and clear (Tobin & Begley, 2004, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). I provided an opportunity to replicate this study through detailed steps and procedures. I used audit trails and transcript reviews to establish credibility and dependability in the study's results. Readers can examine this study's process as an opportunity was created to determine dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017).

Methodological audit trails support credibility and dependability because researchers have an opportunity to present data resulting from a member checking process. (Patton, 1999). I used methodological observations and journal note-taking to demonstrate dependability by gathering data from interviews and transcript reviews. After the data collection process, I effectively compared the analysis results to support this research study's dependability.

Confirmability

Scholars establish confirmability when findings and results derive from participants' responses instead of bias (Yin, 2018). With confirmability, the researchers' study findings are corroborated or confirmed by other research studies (Papakitsou, 2020). Data triangulation is one strategy researchers can employ to increase the study's confirmability (Noble & Smith, 2015). Using audit trails, transcripts of interviews, and reflective journal note-taking strategies, I ensured confirmability by employing these steps. Research studies that successfully achieve confirmability have a clear plan and steps for other scholars to replicate or test to see if they can achieve similar results.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical procedures are essential in the research process, and researchers have a moral and social responsibility to their participants (Miles et al., 2013). Research scholars need to be familiar with the different requirements they must follow under government agencies, professional and university standards (Yin, 2018). I reviewed the National Institute of Health (NIH) information to understand my responsibility and protect participants under the Human Research Participants. Furthermore, researchers need to

understand the Belmont Report as addressed under the Role of the Researcher section of this study. There are different areas for researchers to address. However, consent, participant withdrawal, participants' rights, and confidentiality are a few necessary items to address.

Each participant received a consent form when they first agreed to participate in the study. The participants' consent form is derived from the terms of Walden University's Participant Form for doctoral study. All study participants returned consent via email with their reply, *I consent*. Participants received study withdrawal information when they signed their consent, which they could have withdrawn at any time. Since participants volunteered to participate in the study, if they withdrew, replacements would have been selected using the established recruitment process outlined in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Participants did not receive any incentives or other financial rewards for this study. I affirmed to participants the availability of the study, and I made available a copy to participants after I completed the study. The data collected in the study is fixed in a locked file cabinet to ensure reliability and availability for five years. I only have the login and password to access the information, and any data saved on a thumb drive or cloud software requires a password to access.

Confidentiality is essential in research, and I addressed it when participants signed their consent forms. The purpose of confidentiality is to protect the rights and identify participants' shared information and prevent any negative repercussions (Tracy, 2019). I followed IRB policies and procedures and coded all documents to protect the identities of

participants. When I conducted a final review of the interviews and journal note documents, the study's findings were reviewed and refined.

To prevent potential ethical issues, the research guidelines of Walden University IRB and government agencies were followed throughout the research process. Clear explanations, forms, and documented study consent ensure participants' rights are protected and maintained confidentiality (Stake, 2010). Participants' privacy was applied to any information collected in this study's research process.

Before researchers can conduct their research study, they must obtain IRB approval. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1979) Belmont Report, respect for others, benefits, and justice are core ethical principles for human treatment when conducting research. Respect for others is the basic principle for individuals to acknowledge autonomy and the requirement to protect the vulnerable population. In this study, I safeguarded participants by utilizing pseudo names, such as participant 1, participant 2, and so forth, to achieve the core principle of respect for the participants. Beneficence is the core element that describes the unjust treatment of others and the disrespect resulting from others' decisions. The ideal is to decrease participant harm and maximize participation in the study. Beneficence is essential for participants to experience fair treatment. Justice is the ethical principle essential to protecting a sense of fairness and equal distribution (Anabo et al., 2019).

Summary and Conclusions

This section included the detailed research process, the role of the researcher, the participant's role, method, design, and population. Chapter 3, I addressed essential

research topics, such as the ethical procedures, data collection process, data analysis, and maintaining reliability and validity. The population recruitment and data collection processes provided an accurate outline of the criteria and selection process. Using purposive sampling, I conducted virtual audio interviews with 10 middle managers selected from the LinkedIn Professional Network platform to understand their daily experiences supervising remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The selected participants all lived in the U.S., sharing the same experience as the study's research topic.

I conducted snowballing sampling and recruited 4 out of the 10 participants since data saturation was not initially achieved. The sample population met the following inclusion criteria: adults; employed as a middle manager in a U.S.-based organization for a minimum of 2 years; supervised employees' transition from on-ground to a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, and who were able and willing to provide in-depth information on the phenomena under study. I conducted semistructured open-ended questions to foster in-depth responses reflecting participants' personal, shared experiences related to the study's phenomena.

Narrative storying-telling addressed in Chapter 3 under Methodology provides an underpinning rationale for the narrative inquiry design, which supports the study's goal to understand participants' daily experiences. The research design and rationale outlined the narrative inquiry approach and how it aided in answering the research question and achieved what the researcher hoped to learn from the study participants' daily lived experiences. Participant selection logic and instrumentation were essential to this study,

and in Chapter 3, I provided information on the selection, recruitment, data collection, and analysis plan. Additional key research terms addressed were trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability, dependability, and ethical procedures.

In the final section components, the researcher ensured reliability and validity, such as participants' consent and member checking. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1979), the core ethical principles of respect for others, beneficence, and justice were addressed in the study's ethical procedures in this section. Chapter 4 presents the research study's findings and results from the middle managers lived daily experiences.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative inquiry study was to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon completing a comprehensive literature review, I designed a central research question to address the literature gap on fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment. The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the work environment for many organizations worldwide, impacted employees' meaningful work experiences, and created new challenges for middle managers (Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020).

By sharing in-depth personal stories, middle managers facilitated my discovery of invaluable insight into their daily experiences of fostering meaningful work and engagement for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, organizations experienced quarantines and lockdowns beyond their control and revolutionized their employees' everyday working conditions (Bonacini et al., 2021). The current study results could be important to professional practice by informing middle managers and organizational leaders on how to interpret meaningful employee experiences in a remote work environment. Additionally, the study results may assist middle managers in better understanding the effects of a pandemic or any regional emergency conditions affecting employees working in remote work environments.

I used a critical event approach (Webster & Mertova, 2007) to capture and analyze participants' narratives, addressing the study's specific management problem and purpose. I used thematic analysis of the collected data to record the primary themes throughout the participants' stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A hermeneutic narrative approach was used to capture the meaning of the participants' stories (Polkinghorne, 1988). Carefully and systematically following the data analysis and thematic analysis procedures, I developed an understanding of the daily challenges for middle managers to create meaningful work experiences for remote employees.

The study results presented in this chapter were revealed through narratives directly from the voices of middle managers supervising remote employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this chapter, I present critical details about the research setting, demographic data, data collection and analysis procedures, evidence of the qualitative data's trustworthiness, and a composite of the study results.

Setting

I gathered data for this narrative inquiry study using semistructured interviews with 10 middle managers working for organizations in the United States. All interviews were conducted using the Zoom meeting platform, a virtual audio conference, and a digital recorder. I received IRB approval (02-15-22-0094398) prior to recruiting participants or beginning data collection. I initially sent out the IRB-approved recruitment letter through LinkedIn to recruit study participants. The invitation included the study's inclusion criteria and the purpose of the study

I conducted a keyword search on LinkedIn using job titles such as vice president, director, middle manager, and senior manager leader to acquire potential recruits who met the study inclusion criteria. I requested to connect using a general message in which I explained who I was and the purpose of the research study; such messages through the LinkedIn platform were limited to 300 words. Upon connecting with each recruit, I posted a message with the approved IRB recruitment invitation letter to the recruits who accepted my connection request. Nineteen potential study recruits expressed interest through LinkedIn during the initial recruitment, but only 11 of the 19 consented to participate. Of those, seven initial recruits confirmed their interest through LinkedIn; six scheduled their interview, and one did not schedule. The remaining four study participants were obtained through a network and snowballing sampling technique (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

I posted a follow-up message on LinkedIn with my university email address so that interested participants could send a reply via email. Upon receiving interested participants' email responses, I replied with a formal introduction and attached the approved IRB consent form to review and return consent. All student participants who agreed to participate reviewed the approved IRB consent and then responded with an electronic consent to the study, except for one consented participant who did not schedule an interview.

I followed up with participants by requesting available dates and times to schedule interviews once I received the electronic consent. Participants emailed their availability, and I scheduled the interview and sent a calendar invite with the Zoom

meeting details. I sent calendar reminders 1 day prior and 2 hours before the scheduled meeting to allow participants an opportunity to reschedule if necessary.

Demographics

All 10 middle managers who participated in the research study met the study's inclusion criteria and had knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under study in this narrative qualitative study. The study participants provided rich and valuable in-depth data with management experience ranging from 7 to 27 years including supervising remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Middle managers who participated in this study supervised remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic for 18 to 24 months and shared daily experiences fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The demographics information gathered from study participants consisted of age, highest level of education, industry sector, total years of experience as a middle manager, months or years of experience supervising remote employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, and total employees under their supervision. The unique study participant identifiers for this research consisted of a letter and numeric combination of P for participants and a number code: P1, P2, etc. The participant demographics are outlined in Table 1.

The participants' ages ranged from 37 to 57; all had earned master's degrees except for one participant who had an earned bachelor's degree and extensive years of management experience. The industry/sector varied, with four working in education, two in nonprofit, two in government, one in mental health, and one in finance. The range of

employees supervised was three to 440 employees, and during the months of COVID-19, time of supervising remote workers ranged from 15 to 24 months, offering a diverse perspective and in-depth personal stories.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics and Characteristics

	Age	Highest academic degree	Industry/ sector	Total years of experience as a middle manager	Months of experience supervising remote employees during the COVID-19 pandemic	Total employees under supervision
P1	42	Master's	Nonprofit	7	22	3
P2	55	Master's	Education	23	23	14
P3	37	Master's	Nonprofit	14	23	42
P4	45	Master's	Education	16	23	91
P5	53	Master's	Mental health	9	17	25
P6	44	Master's	Education	16	23	440
P7	57	Bachelor's	Government	27	23	74
P8	44	Master's	Education	44	15	85
P9	38	Master's	Government	8	23	60
P10	50	Master's	Finance	20	24	25

Data Collection

I began the data collection phase on February 15, 2022, after receiving an IRB approval. I completed my interviewing process of middle managers who supervised remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 10th interview reached data saturation. I concluded that data saturation was met once no new themes emerged from the interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015). All semistructured interviews were conducted using the same questions to ensure alignment and consistency with the research topic. I occasionally asked probing questions whenever clarifications were needed to provide sufficient research data (Guest et al., 2006). Qualitative research studies generally consist of a minimum of five participants (Guest et al., 2020). I continued beyond the minimum

required to obtain a sufficient number of interviews to ensure the saturation of concepts and obtain comprehensive data for this study.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study results, I noted that all study participants had not taken part in any research similar to the topic. Furthermore, I noted that study participants did not obtain specific information or experience in the research topic area, which would diminish the trustworthiness of the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1994, as cited in Polit & Beck, 2010). Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and member checked with participants. I implemented scholarly recommendations consisting of direct communication with all participants and asking probing questions as needed for clarity, which strengthened the data collection process and enabled data saturation.

There was no variation in the proposed plan, except the semistructured interviews were conducted from 14.48 to 33.13 in duration, and no participant interviews went beyond the initial proposed plan of 30 to 40 minutes. However, a few fell under the 30-minute planned timeframe. Key themes merged from the interviewing process, such as challenges in fostering meaningful work for remote employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, daily experiences supporting staff during the transition from on-ground to remote work and engaging remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated the evidence of obtaining data saturation.

The data collection process consisted of three weeks. I recruited and prescreened study participants, obtained consent, scheduled interviews, transcribed interviews, and reviewed and member-checked transcriptions with participants. The interview process

began on February 23, 2022, and continued until March 7, 2022, with 10 virtual audio interviews using the Zoom videoconference platform and a digital recorder, lasting the planned 2-week period. I allocated the remaining time to completing the data collection process, member checking, and organizing for data analysis. For audio purposes, all participants' cameras were turned off, as outlined in the IRB-approved consent form. Initially, 19 of the 120 recruits who received a study invitation through the LinkedIn Professional Network platform expressed interest in learning more about the research study process.

A total of 14 expressed interest in being a study participant; however, only 11 consented to participate, of which one did not schedule an interview. The study participants did not have any problems scheduling and keeping their interview date and time, except for one participant who consented but did not schedule an interview. I emailed a follow-up message and received no reply, stating the participants' right to withdraw or continue the study as outlined in the IRB-approved consent form.

The study participants did not have any problems scheduling and keeping their interview date and time, except for one participant who consented but did not schedule an interview. I emailed a follow-up message and received no reply, stating the participants' right to withdraw or continue the study as outlined in the IRB-approved consent form. All study participants either replied accepted as is, no changes needed, or did not respond with any revisions or changes during the 48-hour member checking period, except one participant who replied with a couple of edits to the transcript. I used the study participant-edited transcript during the data analysis process.

As planned, I used a reflective journal throughout the interviewing process to make notes of interpretations and insights gained from the study participants' personal stories of daily lived experiences fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. I used Zoom videoconference and a digital recorder to capture participants' responses and transcribed all interviews using Word Dictate and typing using the voice-to-speech feature. During each scheduled interview, I informed all participants when the recording began and ended. And during member checking, I reminded participants that there were no names or identifiers in the study.

All study participants shared in-depth personal stories related to daily lived experiences fostering meaningful work for remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants defined meaningful work for themselves as remote workers and shared daily experiences engaging remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. I gained insight on some challenges of providing meaningful work experiences during the pandemic and daily experiences that stood out for supporting their team/staff with transitioning from on-ground to remote during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initial Contact

I made initial contact with potential study recruits with a request to connect on the LinkedIn Professional Network, which read as follows due to limited word restriction: "I am a doctoral student and am inviting you to participate in my research study. This study aims to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic." Once

recruits accepted the invitation to connect on LinkedIn, I posted a follow-up message as follows:

I am a doctoral student at Walden University, and I am inviting you to participate in my research study. It would be 30 to 40 minutes of your time, virtually. This study aims to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is important as the findings may inform middle managers and organizational leaders on how to interpret meaningfulness. Additionally, the study results will assist middle managers in gaining a better understanding of the effects of a pandemic or other emergency condition on employees working in remote work environments. I believe your experience would be a significant contribution to the study. If you would be interested in being a part of this study, the signed consent needs to be returned to the researcher via email or indicate your consent by typing *I consent* to the researcher via email.

Once the participants expressed interest, I conducted prescreening with recruits to ensure interested participants met the study inclusion criteria. I emailed the approved IRB recruitment introduction letter with the approved consent form to the participants once I received an email reply from them. There were two participants who provided their emails in a LinkedIn message to obtain the consent form directly.

Semistructured Interviews

I emailed the approved IRB recruitment invitation letter and consent form to participants who replied via email after connecting through LinkedIn with an interest in

participating in the research study. After reviewing the IRB-approved consent form, all recruits who responded with an electronic consent as *I consent* received a follow-up message via email requesting available dates and times to schedule their interview. Participants responded with their available dates and times, and I scheduled their interview through a calendar invite, including the Zoom videoconference details and link.

I sent a calendar reminder to consented study participants one day prior and two hours before the scheduled interview. All interviews were conducted in a private area to create a noise and distraction-free environment needed to produce clear interview recordings. I began each participant interview using the interview protocol (Appendix C), including an introduction of preliminary actions, such as the definition of key terms related to the study, check-in to ensure privacy and a comfortable location, and whether the participants were ready to begin the interview. The interview questions followed the researcher-participant format and concluded with a closing epilogue for participants.

Reflective Field Notes and Journal

Reflective field notes and journaling throughout the interview process allow researchers to capture essential information, audible observations, and any situations in the interview process that create trustworthiness and take precautions against potential bias (Webster & Mertova, 2007). When researchers incorporate reflective field notes and journal entries with audio recordings, they can reflect on the participants' responses, reduce interview biases, and perform audit trials to ensure credibility and reliable data (Clandinin, 2016). My reflective field notes and journal entries consisted of the researcher's wonders, thoughts, and feelings about something heard, and questions that

led to probing or follow-up questions for clarity. I gathered in-depth responses from my reflective field notes and journal entries that generated passion and emotions from participants, specifically inquiries related to challenges and supporting staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transcript Review

The member checking process consists of transcript review with participants to ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). For this process, all participants were allowed to review their transcribed virtual audio recordings to inspect, correct, or edit them to improve the accuracy and credibility of this study. Participants had 48 hours to review and respond with any edits or change requests, and no response from participants indicated agreement with the transcript as stated on the approved IRB consent form. Nine participants accepted their transcribed transcript with no reply requesting changes or an emailed statement agreeing with it, except one participant who emailed an edited transcript.

Data Analysis

This research study's data collection and analysis process conveyed rich information from participants' personal stories of critical moments of their daily lived experiences, fostering meaningful work experiences for remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic through a narrative inquiry lens (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Through narrative inquiry, scholars gain a more in-depth understanding of human and social experiences and challenges through individuals' viewpoints on their daily experiences, interactions, and relationships (Clandinin, 2016). I conducted semistructured

virtual audio interviews as the instrument to obtain data I gathered from sharing participants' personal stories.

To ensure the accuracy of a qualitative study, Boyatzis (1998) substantiated using a flexible approach for qualitative data analysis. By adopting the thematic analysis approach, I could use theory-driven, inductive, and prior-data or prior research-driven codes as coding methods involved in the thematic analysis approach. Theory-driven codes are drawn from existing theories; inductive codes are obtained from my understanding of the data results that were developed into research-driven codes (Boyatzis, 1998).

As the researcher, I was the instrument utilized in this study's data analysis process by interpreting the data and making judgments about the codes and themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Using the thematic analysis approach, I gleaned 16 themes from this narrative inquiry. I read through participants' transcripts to identify patterns across the data to derive and organize the meaning of personal stories into themes. By doing this, I used a flexible approach that allows different ways to interpret data and generate new insights and concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Upon completing the data collection process, I analyzed the data obtained from the semistructured virtual audio interviews and journal entries of the participants' personal stories. I utilized restorying as the first step in the data analysis process derived from Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative data analysis approach. In restorying the original data, theme coding was the second step utilized in this study, consisting of production and description, cross-referencing, categorizing, and linking themes for a

comparative purpose (Clandinin, 2016). I analyzed the interview transcripts' themes for patterns revealed by the participants' stories, which I combined into descriptive coding categories. Then, I applied the narrative's data structure analysis, focusing on how the narrative is conveyed and grounded in the study's conceptual framework (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Through the storytelling and critical event approach, I gained invaluable insight into the middle managers' experiences through their lived daily experiences supervising remote employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The four coding categories were established as follows: for the first coding category, *Middle managers' personal stories of experience with remote work*, the formed themes were: (a) accept the transition to the new, remote way of working; (b) strengthen communication skills for remote work, (c) strengthen technology skills to work efficiently, and (d) respect your own work-life balance. For the second code category, *Middle managers' experiences in leading meaningful remote work experiences*, the themes were (e) developing remote leadership competencies, (f) building trust and teamwork with remote employees, (g) keeping up with current trends and developments in remote work environments, and (h) engaging remote employees in relationship-building skills. The themes for the third coding category, *Managerial challenges of remote employee engagement during the pandemic*, themes were (i) remote employee disengagement, (j) prioritizing employee well-being, and (k) managers' work and stress overload. In the fourth coding category, *Middle managers' voices on fostering meaningful work for remote employees*, themes were (l) respect remote employees as people, (m) respect for people's daily life outside of work, (n) respect remote employees'

daily challenges in a crisis environment, (o) readiness to give more time for fostering meaningful work, and (p) inspire remote employees to work for their own meaningful goals.

The critical event analysis was the second step utilized to paradigm the events in the narrative and categorize them as critical, like, or other. A critical event is deemed significant when the individuals involved are majorly affected by it and is illustrative and confirmative (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Whereas like events occur when the content, processes, and resources are repeated or confirmed, the critical event involves different people. Researchers utilize like events to establish or extend concerns addressed in the critical events. Other events present minor and circumstantial information that reveals the same issues associated with critical and similar events (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Using the two-step approach to narrative analysis allowed me to analyze data within the boundaries of the descriptions of the processes, the presentation of results, assumptions, risk, and negotiation associated with the study participants' narratives (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This study was grounded in a hermeneutic approach that focuses on how human experience is mediated through storytelling (Clandinin, 2016). A hermeneutic narrative approach targets meaning within stories, even when these stories may not be sequential (Polkinghorne, 1988). This approach obtained findings that could likely become significant research material (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Applying the critical events data analysis method to the primary data allowed for a deep understanding of how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. (De Fna &

Georgakopoulou, 2019; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Table 2 represents how I combined the themes with similar characteristics into a single category. I verified interpretations and themes continually during data collection, and the four coding categories were grounded in the two key concepts that focus on how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment: a) Bailey et al.'s (2019) concept of meaningful work and b) Avlani and Charalampous's (2021) concept of remote leadership competencies.

Data trustworthiness is essential in a research study. The critical event approach used in this study adequately achieved this process because the study participants' openness and transparency emphasized, captured, and described events from stories of their daily lived experiences. (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Table 2 is a visual representation of the data analysis results in coding and theme examples taken from the 16 reformulated themes gleaned from the critical events data analysis, organized by coding categories and subthemes and supported by verbatim excerpts from participants' narratives. Researchers traditionally use triangulation to support the trustworthiness of data and generate themes in qualitative studies. Even so, Webster and Mertova (2007) suggested that when using critical event narrative inquiry story-based studies, triangulation is not practical because they believe it is "almost impossible to achieve" (p. 91).

Table 2*Coding and Theme Examples*

Participant	Interview excerpt	Coding category	Theme
2	“So, you know I used a variety of strategies, at different times depending on what’s going on. You know this morning for example working remotely I did a check-in meeting. Now, I scheduled the check-in meeting, but then I texted, hey I scheduled a meeting. Really, I just need to you know if you all are OK.”	Middle managers’ personal stories of experience with remote work	Strengthen communication skills for remote work
5	“What was important is that I make sure that they were trusting. You know, trusting and making sure that they knew that I’m there for them, but not only me, but that we work as a team. And so, I also have engaged them in teamwork as a coach and as a director before team building.”	Middle managers’ experiences in leading meaningful remote work experiences	building trust and teamwork with remote employees; engaging remote employees in relationship-building skills
10	“So, using a new way of working. That very agile requires a higher frequency of meetings for engaging the team members themselves, as well as getting them connected to the value proposition for the customer.	Middle managers’ personal stories of experience with remote work	Accept the transition to the new, remote way of working
3	“And like I said, you treat people like humans, and you really found ways to listen to them to their issues and you find ways to help them process the feelings that they had. So, I think that’s what I would say on some of my day-to-day engagement with staff.”	Middle managers voice on fostering meaningful work for remote employees	Respect remote employees as people
4	“And so, moving and providing meaningful connections with teachers and staff that I lead becomes difficult when you see the faces behind the camera. But you don’t really know what’s happening. I always wonder, are they checking emails? Because I see the eyes moving around. And then when we come back to revisiting things, people act like, it’s the first time that they’ve heard it.”	Managerial challenges of remote employee engagement during the pandemic	Remote employee disengagement
9	“So, it’s really doing a comprehensive needs assessment and understanding what it is they have access to, and then how can we as a team distribute the workload that exists so that it matches the abilities not just from an individual’s abilities, but from the technical ability that they have through technology to be able to complete the work that we’ve been assigning to them.”	Middle managers’ experiences in leading meaningful remote work experiences	
1	“I think it continues to be, we have to continue to be sensitive and give grace and show humility.”	Middle managers voice on fostering meaningful work for remote employees	

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As the researcher, my responsibility was to produce reliable results that meet the established criteria for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bernard & Bernard, 2013). I served as the primary instrument for this qualitative study; thereby, I was responsible for analyzing and interpreting the data obtained from participant interviews, reflective journal notes, and document reviews. Scholars collect and analyze data to demonstrate that their work is reliable and valid to meet trustworthiness.

Credibility

This research study explored how middle managers foster meaningful work experiences for remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. I used member checking to establish credibility. I accomplished this research step by sharing transcribed transcripts with the study participants, where they inspected, reviewed, and made necessary edits to reflect actual and accurate findings. Davis and Maldonado (2015) articulated credibility as the deepness and profusion of data collected rather than quantity. Researchers establish credibility when participants find the study results plausible and confidence is placed in the truth of the research findings (Bernard & Bernard, 2013).

Data saturation is essential in qualitative research as the goal is to ensure the researcher obtains sufficient information to answer the research question and no new themes surface. I reached data saturation by the tenth interview, where no further information emerged from the data collection. The audits and transcript reviews supported and enhanced the research study findings' credibility and prevented any

potential biases. In this process, I sent 10 transcribed transcripts for participants to inspect, review, and edit, and only one participant returned an edited transcript. The remaining participants either replied agreed, no revisions were needed, or chose not to respond as indicated in the IRB-approved consent form. Patton (1999) noted that rigorous techniques and methods for gathering and analyzing data, such as methodological audits, enhance qualitative research quality and credibility since researchers can present data from different viewpoints. Hence, I used methodological audit trails by gathering data from interviews and journal note-taking document reviews. I recorded participants' thoughts and feelings and observed audible non-verbal gestures to capture a complete picture. After the data collection process, I compared the analysis results that yielded four coding categories and sixteen emergent themes, and for narrative inquiry, no triangulation was necessary.

Transferability

I used the narrative inquiry approach for this study's research design and created interview protocols to demonstrate study transferability. Noble and Smith (2015) noted that research designs and interview protocols are two methodological techniques scholars can use to improve transferability. Implementing participants' transcripts and reflective journal note-taking during the data collection phase revealed transferability. I asked Socratic and clarifying questions while collecting and analyzing data to compare participants' responses to achieve transferability (Baillie, 2015). I was transparent in the study procedures and demonstrated trustworthiness through member checking and audit trails, achieving transferability through a detailed study's context, location, and people.

Dependability

The research data collected from middle managers' daily experiences fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated answering the research question and demonstrated dependability. Researchers establish dependability when there is an opportunity to replicate the study. I provided details of the study's procedures and interview protocol to create a logical and transparent process that established the opportunity to replicate and enhance dependability (Tobin & Begley, 2004, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). Methodological audit trails support credibility because researchers have an opportunity to present data from different perspectives (Patton, 1999). I used methodological observations and reflective journal note-taking to demonstrate dependability by gathering data from interviews and transcript reviews. After the data collection process, I effectively compared the analysis results and applied an audit trail review to preserve the dependability of this study.

Confirmability

This study's findings and results were derived from the participants' responses instead of bias to maintain confirmability (Yin, 2018). With confirmability, the participants' responses yielded findings to corroborate and confirm with other research studies (Papakitsou, 2020). Data triangulation is one strategy researchers can employ to increase the study's conformability (Noble & Smith, 2015). Using audit trails, transcripts of interviews, and reflective journal note-taking strategies, I ensured confirmability by

employing these steps. Research studies that achieve confirmability have a clear plan for other scholars to replicate or test and see if they can achieve similar results.

Results

I developed the central research question for this study, so there is a logical alignment with the purpose of the study, the research problem, and the qualitative method. The purpose of this qualitative, narrative inquiry study was to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The central research question for this narrative inquiry study was: how did middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic?

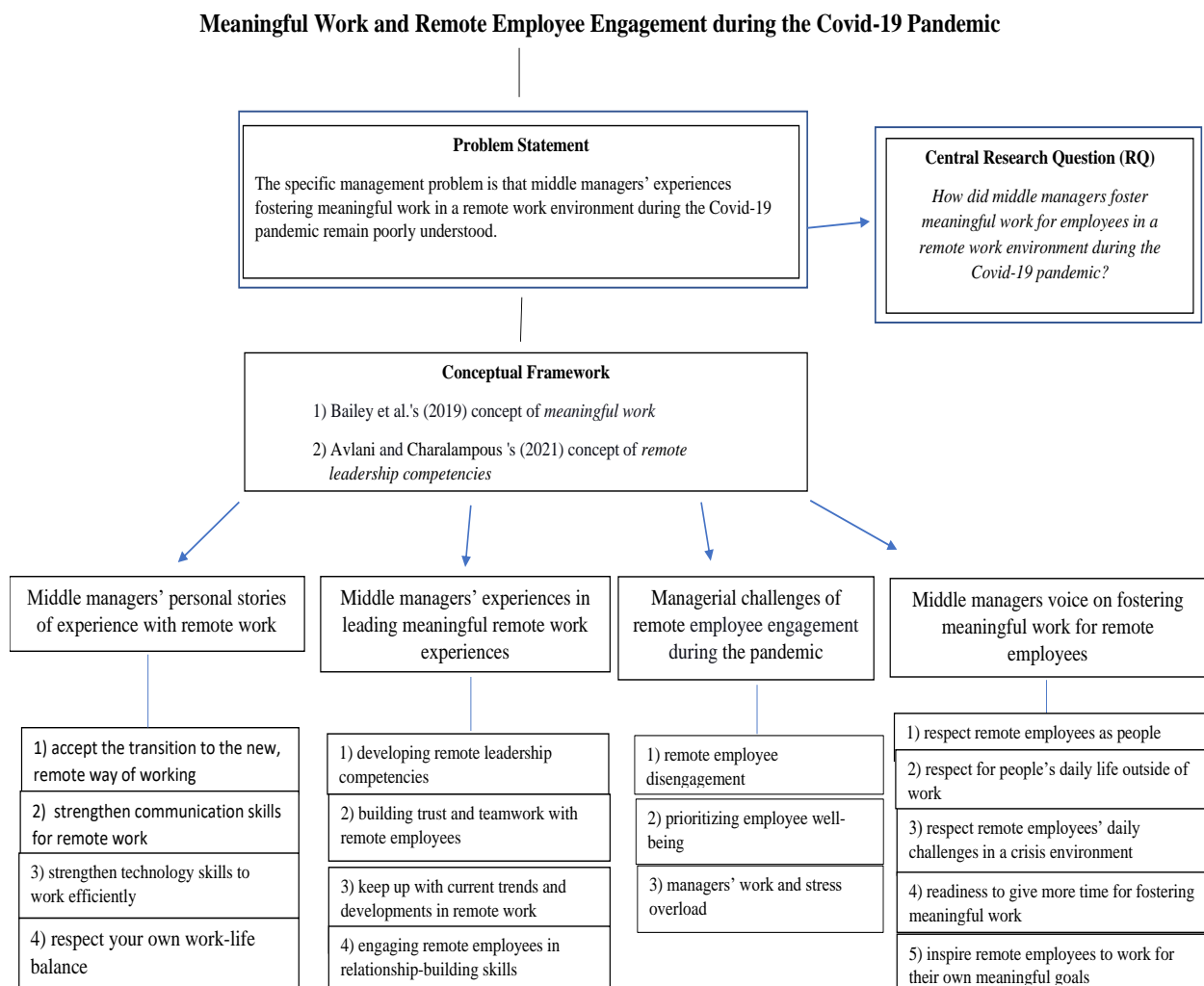
The interview questions were grounded in the conceptual framework and extant literature focusing on the challenges for many middle managers during the pandemic in leading the sudden transition to remote work and prioritizing employees' needs for meaningful work. My study's semistructured interviews were used to gain insight into the participants' daily experiences, and the interview questions were grounded in the conceptual framework and scholarly literature reviewed in Chapter 2. I collected critical facts and positions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) by retelling each participant's own stories as captured through personal experience, including the individuals' personal and social experiences. This study was grounded in a hermeneutic approach that focuses on how human experience is mediated through storytelling (Clandinin, 2016). Hermeneutics is based on deciphering, interpreting, and translating ideas by examining language and considering multiple meanings that include my perspective, and this approach results in

findings that can likely become significant research material (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

In Figure 1, I visually represent coding categories and themes gleaned from the analysis of critical events.

Figure 1

Categories and Themes



Based on the coding and analysis results, I categorized the participant's responses into the following 16 themes: (a) accept the transition to the new, remote way of working;

(b) strengthen communication skills for remote work, (c) strengthen technology skills to work efficiently, (d) respect your work-life balance, (e) Developing remote leadership competencies, (f) fostering trust and teamwork among remote employees, (g) stay current on trends and developments in remote work environments, (h) train remote employees in relationship-building skills, (i) remote employee disengagement, (j) prioritizing employee well-being, (k) managers' work and stress overload, (l) respect remote employees as people, (m) respect for people's daily lives outside of work, (n) respect for remote employees' daily challenges in a crisis environment, (o) readiness to give more time to fostering meaningful work, and (p) inspiring remote employees to work for their own meaningful goals.

Accept the Transition to the New, Remote Way of Working

This theme refers to middle managers recognizing and embracing learned experiences by fostering meaningful work and engaging employees in remote work environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although middle managers experienced challenges during the pandemic, it created an opportunity to learn new ways to lead, engage workers, utilize resources, and manage work relations (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Kaul et al., 2020; Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020). Participants discussed insights gained from the COVID-19 pandemic that provided them with a new way of working.

Participant 10: “And when the pandemic hit, and we had to adjust to this new way of working, some of those relationship-building, employee engagement muscles....”

Participant 4 said,

It definitely was a shift of having to move to figure out new ways to connect with people. So, I'm constantly battling that, constantly thinking of new ways to do things. We've done scavenger hunt. We've done, you know, breakout rooms.

Participant 2 said,

I do think that employees and teams and leaders have learned that there are some things we did do better and more thoughtfully and effectively working from home. So, whatever caused that or supported that difference and better work, we need to be mindful of how we bring that back to the office.

Strengthen Communication Skills for Remote Work

This theme strengthens communication skills to foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employees' abilities and skills vary, but the work environment rapidly transformed due to challenges brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how employees communicated was one affected by this change (Ouwkerk & Bartels, 2020; Walther, 2015). Participants discussed ways the COVID-19 pandemic affected staff communication and needed improvements to improve this skill for remote work. Participant 7 said,

I used text; I used cell phone calls. We used remote video chat and email. We also use the cloud communication with Office 365 and Teams in order to share documents and even get signatures accomplished, scanned. And so, it really transitioned from a typical office work and meetings done face-to-face to doing

the same activities. Just we're using our technology and leveraging technology to get work done.

Participant 8 said,

So, I think being a great communicator in a different new situation is the best thing you can have, really take people's feelings into account, and not just telling them we care. But let them be vocal about it and its open table. Say what you got to say, and be honest about it, and get it out and work together.

Strengthen Technology Skills to Work Efficiently

This theme refers to leaders integrating technological resources for employees to succeed in a remote work environment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders discovered that many of their employees had limited technical skills to complete their tasks, and systems required upgrading to work remotely (Albrecht et al., 2021; Larsson & Teigland, 2020). Participants discussed supporting staff by integrating technological resources while working in a remote work environment.

Participant 3 said,

So, we started utilizing, you know, services like Zoom and Asana and these types of programs to help manage the day-to-day work for employees. But it was a lot of listening. There was a lot of mentoring. There was a lot of phone calls that we needed to have with our employees to just help them process the things are happening. I think you had to; you have to show a lot of patience. You had to show a lot of empathy. We were all collectively as a world going through a very difficult, difficult situation with this COVID 19.

Participant 6 said,

Other challenges again dealt with the technology itself, whether it be devices or the internet connections at all poses a challenge when they're not working, if that's what we're depending upon to make the remote work happen. We had to make sure that those devices were working. So, our technology department is one of our groups that definitely came to our rescue many times during that process, whether that be getting the needed information or for fixing things that came up along the way.

Respect for Your Own Work–Life Balance

This theme refers to the importance of employees establishing and respecting a healthy work-life balance while working remotely. Leaders faced challenges in managing employees who presented as distressed, alienated, and with diminished well-being (Martela et al., 2021). Participants discussed their personal experiences supporting distressed and overwhelmed employees at the heart of the staffing problems.

Participant 1 said,

Absolutely. Support can mean a lot of different things to different people at different times. I recognize that even the quality of work that a person is able to provide can suffer because when you're stressed and worried, you know, it tends to impact a lot of different things.

Participant 9: "Because it wasn't one person working from home, most of them had families, so their children were at home doing school, and their spouse was at home doing work."

Developing Remote Leadership Competencies

This theme refers to leaders developing meaningful leadership skills and support to foster meaningful work for employees working in a remote work environment. Besides employees who struggled during the lockdown, organizations learned that their leadership experienced challenges while managing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Avlani & Charalampous, 2021; Bonacini et al., 2021). Participants discussed personal experiences leading and managing employees while working remotely and the skills needed to support staff successfully.

Participant 3 said,

You have to, you know, trust your employees, trust them that they're doing what they need to do, and you provide leadership and guidance as to what needs to happen on this project and that project. And you manage by the project, you manage by the work versus the time.

Participant 6 said,

And so, a lot of our staff were home, and we were able to remote into the work being done to actually see the work being done. And it was it was a much easier process, honestly, to be able to engage and check on many employees very quickly from one room, if you will, to another, as opposed going from location to location. Physically, I was able to go digitally much quicker if that makes sense. Yeah, they were basically doing Google Meet or Zoom, just like we're doing right now.

Building Trust and Teamwork With Remote Employees

This theme refers to middle managers understanding the power of building trust and collaborative teams to foster meaningful work and engage employees in remote work environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although middle managers may utilize leadership skills gained from in-person experience to lead and manage remote workers, they may need to employ more meaningful leadership skills because some situations require them to be nimble and diverse. (Göçen, 2021; Guinot et al., (2021); Michaelson, 2021). In this study, participants discussed the importance of establishing trust and building teams for employees in a remote work environment.

Participant 5 said,

I think because we had been establishing trust and teamwork. We went over teamwork, what teamwork means, and what a team means, that was already established. I think what I needed to help them transition was, we also had trainings....

Participant 1 said,

You know, trust is huge. Trust is important being very transparent about your expectations of people's work, but also your expectations and goals and visions for the employee. Because, now I feel like you have to be much more clear about how you, how much you value the person.

Keep Up With Current Trends and Developments in Remote Work Environments

This theme refers to leaders' understanding of the current trends, developments, and changes that affect employees in remote environments. Leaders who are not abreast

of the current trends and development centered around remote work environments may diminish feelings of meaningfulness (Chaudhary, 2020; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020; Savvides & Stavrou, 2020). Participants discussed adjusting to current trends and development to support their staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant 3 said,

So, I'm in finance. I'm the director of finance and human resources, and so what we needed to do is find a better solution for our accounting system, our accounting software. At the time we were using QuickBooks. And Quick Books is just very manual. We needed to access QuickBooks through the server, and I mean, we needed to remote in, anyway, it was just a hassle, right? So very early during the pandemic, I recognized that we needed another solution.

Participant 6 said,

And for us to flip the switch and to say we're going from live in-person teaching to online teaching was very easy for us because we were already doing it so much. So, there was a lot of times that whenever I would jump onto their Google classrooms and actually Google Meeting or Zoom, whichever they were doing. If I were to jump on and actually watch the instruction going on, it was to the same level that they would normally see if I were to walk into a classroom in the school building.

Engaging Remote Employees in Relationship-Building Skills

This theme refers to leaders' uncovering strategies to engage remote employees and build remote relationship skills. Employee engagement was drastically impacted by

the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing leaders to learn new ways to engage and develop employee relationship skills (Mazzei et al., 2019; Statistica, 2021). Participants discussed their personal experiences of managing and building employee engagement and relationship building during the pandemic.

Participant 10 said,

Yes. Be it the COVID-19 pandemic, as required, means there to be more intentional about managing and maintaining relationships. And so, I do hope that I get to maintain this momentum and keep up this level of employee engagement exercise if you will. I think, my only concern about being in-person, face-to-face in that state before COVID 19 is that myself and even my leaders around me that, we do not become relaxed, and we don't engage the way that the pandemic has required us to do.

Participant 2 said,

And so, there is a little more personal relationship engagement that happens, I guess, in a different way than in the workspace or in a different way. I mean; so, I think you use some different strategies, and then you also have to understand the way we normally are as a manager.

Remote Employee Disengagement

This theme refers to the challenges of disengaged employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in the remote work environment. Disengaged employees presented unique challenges in the remote work environment, as did many other challenges that leaders faced when transitioning from in-person (ground) to remote work

(Kuenzi et al., 2021). Participants discussed employee engagement challenges when making the sudden transition to remote work during the pandemic.

Participant 4 said,

You know, and but they're on. But are they really on, you know, are they really on and are they really connected with you? So, I personally loved just being able to connect with people and then you have people wearing their masks still young on the virtual platforms. And so that's another layer of anonymity that you don't really know what your impact is, so that is a challenge for me.

Participant 2 said,

And what that I mean, there were people that were not ready to come back while we were preparing to do it. So, we had to strategize on how to get these people back to work that had real human fears of getting sick. And we know in the news people were dying and still are. So it was, I think, this kind of a slope of engagement, being mindful of the stressors.

Prioritizing Employee Well-Being

This theme refers to leaders encouraging employees to prioritize their well-being to foster meaningful work for employees working in a remote work environment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the workplace transformed from in-person to remote work environments, and the quarantines and lockdowns impacted employee well-being (Allan et al., 2018a; Klonek et al., 2021). Participants discussed personal experiences leading and managing employees while working remotely and the skills needed to support staff successfully.

Participant 5 said,

And so, the steps have been, as far as, making sure that there's presentations and that we have talks in regard to how to take care of themselves, make sure that they are taking time for themselves, and that they make sure that they pause.

Participant 7 said,

And I spend intentional time making sure that our team is healthy, and our people are healthy, and I can meet their needs because when people know that you care. You care about what's going on with them, they really don't care what you know and what your priorities are until you make them a priority.

Managers' Work and Stress Overload

This theme refers to leaders managing personal stress levels while supporting employees in distress. The lockdowns' direct impact on organizations caused stress overload for their employees (Allan et al., 2018a; Klonek et al., 2021). Participants discussed personal experiences managing a stressful remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant 8 said,

It was a very transparent situation. I did not want to assume how they felt about it. You know, I don't want, it was new for me to, and let them know, hey, we're both in the same boat. I've never been a pandemic principal, so this is also very new to me, and I know the teachers were stressed out. So, I think the best thing I did was just remain vocal, remain a great communicator, and make sure it's meaningful.

Participant 4 said,

But I have had since going through this and having to be the leader that did provide these meaningful experiences for my staff. You know, I've questioned whether I'm supposed to do this. I've looked in and tried to connect to find another way to get out of it. And just for the mere fact that you are in constant like in stress all the time, distress, you know?

Respect Remote Employees as People

This theme refers to the importance of leaders respecting and understanding their employees. Leaders understand their employees' needs to create a meaningful work environment (Allan et al., 2018a; Klonek et al., 2021). Participants discussed insight gained as a result of respecting employees and creating meaningful remote work environments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant 5 said,

And I think this has been a way of trust of themselves, and also not only that, but of companies and managers trusting employees that they are productive without having so much eyes on them. There's no need for that and I believe that there's no need to have so much on a human being. A human being will be motivated if they feel valued, if they feel and they see the outcome.

Participant 9 said,

Have we lost our sense of caring and just become more robotic in our organizational world? And I think the answer to all that is, yes, we have, and we've got to do a better job of getting back to caring for one another, being

intentional with one another. And I always say you should want to grow the people that work for you.

Respect for People's Daily Life Outside of Work

This theme refers to leaders' being mindful of employees' daily lives outside of work impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders understood circumstances that affected employees beyond the workplace during the pandemic (Heyden et al., 2020). Participants discussed respecting employees' daily lives while working in a remote environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant 3 said,

You get to your, you know, quote unquote office kitchen table or whatever you deal with the kids, make sure there, you know, on task and then you start your day, and you find time to eat lunch. And then you know, you work through six, seven, sometimes eight o'clock at night because you're already there, you're not going anywhere. You don't have anything else to do. Why not, you know, get ahead is the thinking, right?

Participant 8 said,

If you are here late, 6:30. I am going to ask, what are you doing here? I am going to send you home and tell you that is enough. It's time out because I need you reinvigorated for the next day.

Respect Remote Employees' Daily Challenges in a Crisis Environment

This theme refers to leaders' being mindful of employees' daily challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many employees experienced daily challenges

beyond the usual workplace challenges (Heyden et al., 2020). Participants discussed respecting employees' daily lives while working in a remote environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant 7 said,

One of my remote workers got COVID. She's a direct report to me, and she was working from home and got COVID and was tremendously sick and could not go out and get basic needs. And so, I, we took up a collection and a fund, and we bought groceries. We bought meals for her while she was very sick, and we would leave them on her front porch and helped her get well. That was an example during that time.

Participant 4 said,

And one of the parents came up, and I had just had a battle at Walmart trying to get toilet paper, and the lady got the last toilet paper. And, she and I were just having small talk and I told her about that, and so, when I was about to leave, she left. She found toilet paper or had toilet paper but came and brought it back to my car and put it on my car before I left. And I was like, almost in tears.

Readiness to Give More Time for Fostering Meaningful Work

This theme refers to leaders' understanding and adjusting for employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders understood that employees needed time to transition and adjust to expectations and changes (Heyden et al., 2020). Participants discussed leadership skills that require demonstrating flexibility for employees in a remote environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 9 said,

I'm going to do this with you, or it can be again that face time and understanding or having a conversation of I see that you're struggling. When it's a remote environment, you know, I can't stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you and walk through what's going on, I can't see your face, and I can't sense your emotions. I can't do any of those things. And so, you really again have to be very intentional about reaching out and having touch points with your employees that go beyond just where are we in this in this workflow. It has to be where you are intentional and spend time understanding.

Participant 3 said,

And you also have to be flexible. Hey, you know what? You want to start a little bit later in the day, find, you know, because you know that they're probably going to be working through the evening. And so, you kind of let the gas off a little bit.

Participant 1 said,

I just think because of all the pressure, and any additional considerations, there was just a lot more grace. You know around grace around you know when you arrive to work and just be a very cautious around what people were willing to talk about related to health.

Inspire Remote Employees to Work for Their Own Meaningful Goals

This theme refers to leaders embracing employees defining their own meaningful work goals. Leaders create meaningful work for themselves and their subordinates that fosters a sense of calling and purpose (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Göçen, 2021).

Participants discussed meaningful work and reflected on employees' defining their meaningful work experiences in a remote environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant 7 said,

Meaningful work as an employee in this circumstance would be, still knowing my mission and purpose. It would include knowing that I have goals, projects, and expectations for getting work accomplished, even as I'm working remotely and having the resources. And the communication ability to get things done, even while I'm away.

Participant 10: "Feeling engaged with the work that I'm involved with that my contributions are connected to the value that we are delivering for our customers."

Summary

In Chapter 4, the study's results revealed an inclusive data collection and analysis of personal stories from 10 participants using a narrative inquiry approach. This qualitative narrative research study presented answers to the CRQ: how did middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic? I established four coding categories grounded in the conceptual framework of this narrative qualitative study and gleaned 16 themes from the thematic analysis utilizing the critical event approach from their lived daily experiences. The four coding categories authenticated in the conceptual framework were as follows: (a) middle managers' personal stories of experience with remote work, (b) middle managers' experiences in leading meaningful remote work experiences, (c) managerial

challenges of remote employee engagement during the pandemic, and (d) middle managers' voices on fostering meaningful work for remote employees.

The 16 themes gleaned from the 10 participants' stories through the critical event analysis comprised matters as follows: (a) accept the transition to the new, remote way of working; (b) strengthen communication skills for remote work, (c) strengthen technology skills to work efficiently, (d) respect your own work-life balance, (e) developing remote leadership competencies, (f) building trust and teamwork with remote employees, (g) keep up with current trends and developments in remote work environments, (h) engaging remote employees in relationship-building skills, (i) remote employee disengagement, (j) prioritizing employee well-being, (k) managers' work and stress overload, (l) respect remote employees as people, (m) respect for people's daily life outside of work, (n) respect for remote employees' daily challenges in a crisis environment, (o) readiness to give more time for fostering meaningful work, and (p) inspire remote employees to work for their own meaningful goals.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this research study, I used a critical event analysis of participants' stories and member checking of transcribed transcripts to safeguard credibility and dependability. I conducted audit trails and reflective note journaling to enhance data credibility. I presented the participants' stories, obtained from virtual audio interviews and transcribed to support confirmability.

In Chapter 5, I broaden this research study's analysis by interpreting the study findings and how the data confirms, disconfirms, or extends knowledge in the discipline by comparing them with the comprehensive literature review I presented in Chapter 2. I

depicted how future research and new scholarly knowledge for organizations on retaining employees in remote work environments, as construed through participants' stories, fostering meaningful work for employees in remote work environments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to seminal narrative inquiry methodologists Webster and Mertova (2007), “People are always tellers of tales. They live surrounded by their stories and the stories of others; they see everything that happens to them through those stories” (p. 1). Through storytelling, I used this narrative inquiry study to document the daily challenges of 10 middle managers who fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment (Clandinin, 2016; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

This study was framed by two key concepts that focus on alignment with the purpose of the study, which was to understand how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment: (a) Bailey et al.’s (2019) concept of meaningful work and (b) Avlani and Charalampous’s (2021) concept of remote leadership competencies. In this empirical investigation, I aimed to advance research and a deeper understanding of middle managers’ experiences fostering meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic initiated a rapid digital transformation in the daily workplace and created a different work environment where feelings of meaninglessness challenged managers and their employees after losing their everyday work conditions (Ouwkerk & Bartels, 2020).

The new remote working space means that employees and their managers would have to relearn how to manage alienation levels, feelings of meaninglessness, and the loss

of their everyday on-ground work conditions (Bonacini et al., 2021). In this empirical investigation, I sought to advance research and contribute original qualitative data to the study's conceptual framework. A critical event analysis of the 10 participants' narratives revealed 16 prominent themes: (a) accept the transition to the new, remote way of working; (b) strengthen communication skills for remote work, (c) strengthen technology skills to work efficiently, (d) respect your work-life balance, (e) developing remote leadership competencies, (f) fostering trust and teamwork among remote employees, (g) stay current on trends and developments in remote work environments, (h) train remote employees in relationship-building skills, (i) remote employee disengagement, (j) prioritizing employee well-being, (k) managers' work and stress overload, (l) respect remote employees as people, (m) respect for people's daily lives outside of work, (n) respect for remote employees' daily challenges in a crisis environment, (o) readiness to give more time to fostering meaningful work, and (p) inspiring remote employees to work for their own meaningful goals.

Interpretation of Findings

Most findings in this narrative inquiry study confirm or extend existing knowledge, and each narrative presents issues that confirm the findings reviewed from the extant literature in Chapter 2. During the critical events data analysis process, I observed no discrepant data contradicting the themes and theoretical suppositions presented within the conceptual framework or in the scholarly literature I reviewed in this section. I critically review the findings from the four finalized conceptual categories that emerged from the data analysis of the results. In each subsection, I compare and contrast

my findings with seminal authors' research presented in the conceptual framework and my critical review of the scholarly literature (Avlani & Charalampous, 2021; Bailey et al., 2019; Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020; Walther, 2015). I demonstrate how the findings confirm and expand existing knowledge about how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during crisis situations. Extension studies, such as this empirical investigation, provide replication evidence and extend previous studies' results in new theoretical directions (Bonett, 2012).

Middle Managers' Personal Stories of Experience With Remote Work

Scholars have asserted that middle managers faced challenges during the pandemic while leading the transition to a remote work environment, which eroded employees' meaningful work experience and created a loss of meaning and loneliness, causing adverse performance outcomes at the individual level (Bonacini et al., 2021). Researchers denoted in the literature review that employees' needs for meaningful work may have been undermined as a management priority, which could have diminished employee engagement and well-being (Klonek et al., 2021; Kuenzi et al., 2021).

The study results confirmed that although employees experienced a loss of meaning and disengagement, they also learned some meaningful lessons. The study participants confirmed that managers recognized the remote work experience caused disengagement, but remote work also stretched employees' capacities, presented lessons, and created a new way of working for employees. The study findings align with Klonek et al. (2021) that managers recognize that employees need meaningful work to minimize

disengagement. The study results extend knowledge based on Bailey et al.'s (2019) concepts of meaningful work, that work is seen as significant for employees, and the qualitative research from my study may propose reasons for diminished employee engagement and well-being faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Managerial Challenges of Remote Employee Engagement During the Pandemic

Many organizations faced challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic that pressed middle managers to employ diverse managerial skills (Ouwerkerk & Bartels, 2020). Organizations shifting from on-the-ground (in-person) to remote work environments had to factor in the resources needed to perform remote work and the impact on their employees' well-being. The comprehensive literature review in Chapter 2 unveiled how researchers have addressed challenges but left theoretical and practitioner-based questions unanswered in the management and leadership literature (Frémeaux, & Pavageau, 2020; Michaelson, 2021).

The study results confirmed that middle managers faced significant challenges while managing factors that affected employees and their work performance, such as employee disengagement, assessing job-demand resources, team dynamics, and diminished employee well-being. While managing during the pandemic, the study participants confirmed that unique challenges arose. Even so, they gained meaningful leadership skills from resolving workplace challenges in a remote environment. The study findings align with Çetin's (2021) perspective that challenges employees experienced being thrust into remote work during the pandemic caused managers to adapt and support workplace concerns.

Middle Managers' Voice on Fostering Meaningful Work for Remote Employees

A literature gap on how middle managers may foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment has presented a problem for scholars (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Guldenberg & Langhof, 2021). Employee engagement and well-being may improve when middle managers employ meaningful leadership skills and gain insight into fostering meaningful work in remote work environments (Bailey et al., 2019; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). The study results confirmed effective leadership practices that foster meaningful work for remote employees. The participants confirmed leadership practices that fostered meaningful work and improved remote work environments for employees that promoted positive social change.

The study findings align with Frémeaux and Pavageau's (2020) concepts on leadership activities that contribute meaning to their own and their employees' meaningful work experiences while at work. The study findings extend Lee's (2021) knowledge of meaningful leadership interventions that enhance employee engagement and leadership practices and facilitate retaining employees in remote work environments.

Middle Managers' Experiences in Leading Meaningful Remote Work Experiences

Researchers have indicated that managerial problems with leading meaningful remote work experiences during the pandemic presented challenges consistent with the study's findings in this qualitative narrative analysis (Çetin, 2021). The literature review uncovered support for developing leadership competencies, keeping up with current trends and development, building trust, teamwork, and engaging remote workers in relationship-building skills were a few that foster meaningful work (Avlani &

Charalampous, 2021; Chaudhary, 2020). The study results confirmed that employees' meaningful work experiences are connected to leadership skills and remote competencies, the importance of keeping up with current trends and development, building trust and teamwork, and engaging employees in remote relationship-building skills.

The study participants confirmed that they benefited from managerial skills that focus on managing projects versus managing time, establishing trust, building relationships, teamwork, engaging employees, and staying abreast of current trends and developments. The study's findings align with Lips-Wiersma et al.'s (2020) known authentic qualities that emerged in the literature as leadership behaviors that foster meaningfulness. The study's results extend Avlani and Charalampous's (2021) concept of remote leadership competencies and managerial skills that are fundamental for effective remote leadership practice.

Limitations of the Study

Although researchers are the primary tools in the study, they may not control some elements of the research and thus create deficiencies and possible weaknesses in the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). The researcher is responsible for presenting all study shortcomings that create limitations because they may affect the study results, interpretations, or both (Tracy, 2019). By using the critical event analysis of participants' personal stories and the narrated results, I applied a qualitative narrative inquiry to protect the study's trustworthiness. Through the reflective journal note-taking process, I captured any biases and assumptions of the researcher and participants to address any ethical

challenges throughout the research process. I established a transparent environment with the participants.

The study participants were volunteers and shared unique personal stories of their daily experiences; as a result, the transferability of the study's findings may not apply to all situations experienced in organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants presented as comfortable with engaging conversations, which created an opportunity to obtain sufficient and accurate data. This study's participant recruitment process was conducted through LinkedIn Professional Network, which did not include a partner organization. Therefore, participants did not appear to fear or have beliefs about possible retaliation from their organizations or supervisors.

Although a limitation of qualitative research is small sample sizes due to the inability to generalize findings to the target population, the study offered meaningful, in-depth, and rich data that presents close and personable experiences in understanding the phenomenon through in-depth interviews. I mitigated this study's limitations by aligning the research method using a small sample size, and philosophical paradigms that contributed to the data saturation and transferability of results (Boddy, 2016). Using Clandinin's (2016) narrative inquiry approach, interviewing 10 middle managers' personal stories about fostering meaningful work for employees in remote work environments during the COVID-19 pandemic was suitable to construct sample narratives. To address participants' availability and eliminate this limitation, I scheduled all interviews based on participants' availability, emailed calendar invites, and sent out interview reminders one day and two hours prior to the scheduled interviews. All

participants reviewed the approved IRB consent form and responded with their consent. No participants were paid as possible biases during their sharing would impact the study's findings.

Recommendations

This qualitative research study comprised a more profound understanding from daily experiences of how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study findings substantiated challenges addressed in the literature review that middle managers faced during the pandemic while supervising meaningful work experiences for employees in the remote work environment (Klonek et al., 2021; Kuenzi et al., 2021). From the in-depth storytelling of study participants with 7 to 27 years of managerial experience and who supervised employees' remote work experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, I gleaned invaluable themes.

The pandemic impacted organizations worldwide and led to lockdowns in the United States and periodic workplace quarantines lasting over two years, drastically impacting employee engagement and well-being (Çetin, 2021). Although organizations were not fully prepared to respond to the challenges brought on by the pandemic, middle managers' experiences with fostering meaningful work in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic remain poorly understood. Scholars may conduct future research studies to address meaningful leadership practices to better understand the need for updated management and leadership practices to equip middle managers in similar circumstances. This exploratory qualitative research study presented findings that may

provide an opportunity to replicate using qualitative methods and quantitative validation in future research studies.

Recommendations for Meaningful Leadership Practices

Future research studies on meaningful leadership practices and interventions may facilitate management training opportunities to solve middle managers' challenges of supervising remote work during transition and challenging times. Fletcher and Schofield's (2019) findings validated that examining meaningful intervention practices might broaden perceived opportunities for employee engagement and motivational processes, which were two challenging areas for leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent studies indicate that management might have undermined employees' needs for meaningful work as a result of managers' facing challenges while leading the sudden transition to a remote work environment (Klonek et al., 2021; Kuenzi et al., 2021).

In recent studies, the focus has centered on managing technology and innovation; meaningful work practices remain at the forefront of current development; resources management and sustainable development; social media; corporate responsibility; employee engagement; and disengagement linked to job satisfaction and work performance. Although meaningful work is an evolving concept in management and leadership disciplines, less research has focused on leadership practices fostering meaningful work for employees in remote work environments. Statistica (2021) affirmed that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 17% of employees worked in a remote work environment, which has increased to 44% since the pandemic and may not change or increase post-pandemic, supporting recommendations for further research in this area.

Recommendations for Scholarly Research

My literature review revealed that limited research on remote and meaningful work had left theoretical and practitioner-based questions unanswered in the management and leadership literature (Frémeaux, & Pavageau, 2020; Michaelson, 2021). Two years have passed since the COVID-19 pandemic; organizations and their leaders are recovering from a new and emerging problem with unforeseen issues, now called a *new normal* post-pandemic (Statistica, 2021). Further research may equip leaders with management and leadership practices essential to drive positive social change in the future workplace to aid in adjusting to the *new normal* post-pandemic.

Given the impact of the pandemic on leaders and their employees' physical and mental well-being, the need for organizations to incorporate effective practices to ensure employees are engaged, motivated, and well-being (Bonacini et al., 2021). Future research studies on this topic need to be in the literature foreground. Leaders who demonstrate adaptable management skills give meaning through leadership practices and impact employees' meaningful work (Göçen, 2021). This study's findings revealed factors grounded and noteworthy in Bailey et al.'s (2019) concept of *meaningful work* and Avlani and Charalampous's (2021) concept of *remote leadership competencies*. Comprehensive research studies on meaningful work and leadership competencies may uncover rich resources for managers facing similar crisis challenges.

A few recommendations to advance further research on middle managers' fostering of meaningful work for employees in the remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Replicate another study in different industries/sectors and other countries significantly impacted by the pandemic.
- A quantitative study to measure the impact of a sizeable target population would offer a comprehensive literature review.
- A phenomenological or case study approach may emphasize the long-term impact of middle managers' fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work

Implications

Implications for Social Change

During the pre-COVID-19 pandemic, organizations utilized remote work to achieve their organizational vision and goals for a small percentage of employees, about 17% of U.S. employees (Statistica, 2021). Now, remote work has transformed into a workspace into which people are still adjusting to what is now called the *new normal*. As it remains today, labor forecasting analyses anticipate that many employees who moved from in-person ground to remote work during the pandemic might not return to the in-person office (McKinsey Global Institute, 2021). Hence, remote employees may require well-versed leaders equipped with meaningful leadership interventions and practices fostering meaningful work, employee engagement, motivation, and establishing leader-employee trust relationships. Employees who eventually work in a hybrid workstyle, a part-time office, or remotely will require the same support to achieve meaningful work goals (Chaudhary, 2020).

Even though scholars have increased their interest in meaningful work concepts, recent studies neglected to address the current trends and developments in remote work

environments, which might diminish feelings of meaningfulness among employees (Savvides & Stavrou, 2020). In this study, I extracted data that reflected the social implications, as confirmed by a study participant who said,

And I really think what that points to more than anything is what I've said before, we've got to do a better job of growing our leaders and the leadership skills that are required to build effective teams, and that goes beyond technical proficiency and workflows.

Remote employees require unique leadership guidance and skills to retain and support their needs beyond managers' employing knowledge of workflows and systems to achieve organizational outcomes (Albrecht et al., 2021; Fletcher & Schofield, 2019).

Managing and supervising employees in a remote environment during the COVID-19 pandemic confirmed that studying this matter has challenges. Many recruits who received the study invitation never responded, although some expressed an interest. I am most appreciative of those who responded and accepted the invitation, as research such as this study provides rich data to close the literature gap and aid organizations. I aspire that the study participants' contributions will support future leaders and managers in conducting meaningful leadership activities and practices for themselves and their employees. As a result, organizations will continue to integrate meaningful work, current trends, and development that promote positive social change.

Middle managers are essential employees in organizations who have direct communication with senior management and direct reports. Thus, middle managers who create meaningfulness that fosters employee retention may sustain organizations through

one of the lasting effects of COVID-19, what has come to be known as the *Great Resignations* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). I uncovered this insight from one study participant's storytelling, who said,

And I think what we saw too, and we're seeing even with the great resignation, is that people want to work for good people; they want to work for good leaders.

And unfortunately, I think we saw a lot of weak leaders exposed throughout the COVID pandemic, and I think that those things were exacerbated by it. And so, we saw people realize this is not where I want to be or who I want to work for, and I didn't feel valued before the pandemic, and I certainly don't feel valued now, during, and after.

The JOLTS report of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) indicated that about 4.5 million people walked off their jobs; in November 2021, the number of employees quitting their jobs hit a high record, thus calling this shift the *Great Resignation*. This marked shift in the workforce may have social implications and support concerns raised in this study. My research study findings may broaden an understanding of the impact of creating meaningful work experiences for employees in remote work environments. The study participants' daily experiences of middle managers fostering meaningful work for employees in the remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic supported Walden's mission of advancing positive social change. Although the COVID-19 pandemic created a different work environment for employees, research studies in the meaningful work domain may bolster management practices that

retain valuable employees and deter what we now see in the workforce as a *Great Resignation* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

Implications for Theory

This research study is grounded in Bailey et al.'s (2019) meaningful work framework and Avlani and Charalampous's (2021) concept of remote leadership competencies and sought to expand knowledge in management, leadership, and organizational change disciplines. I extended the two theories supporting the conceptual framework, Oldham and Hackman's JCT and Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory. I presented theoretical recommendations that addressed the study participants' problems. The study participants shared rich and meaningful stories that contributed to the in-depth understanding of this study and expanded the growing body of literature on meaningful work and remote work since the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study had implications for theory in composing original contributions to the theoretical literature on meaningful work, management practices, and leadership competencies, specifically in the remote work environment during a crisis, on how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in the remote work environment. I fulfilled this research study's purpose and answered the central research question using a narrative inquiry approach to better understand how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implications for Practice

In this qualitative narrative inquiry, I explored how middle managers foster meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19

pandemic. The study participants identified practices and changes they incorporated to improve the remote work environment while responding to workplace challenges during the pandemic. Engaging remote employees in relationship-building skills was a practice gleaned from this study's data. One participant shared,

I think the transition, I don't want to say that it wasn't difficult. I think what has been difficult, it wasn't so much of them going from face-to-face to remote. I think because we had been establishing trust and teamwork.

Employee engagement and motivation were essential areas impacted by being thrust suddenly into a remote work environment, so the study findings provide insight into fostering meaningful work experiences for employees in remote work is significant (Frémeaux & Pavageau, 2020; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). Managers were expected to continue supervising and managing workplace challenges without training and time to cope with factors brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic. An essential organizational practice discovered in this study equips leaders with meaningful leadership practices to retain employees working in remote work environments.

From this study's findings and scholarly literature review, middle managers may gain a better understanding of the effects of pandemic conditions on employees working in remote work environments, and several professional practices may be executed as follows:

1. Create policies that promote the treatment of remote workers as individuals.
2. Include resources that help remote workers improve their communication skills.

3. Allocate resources to help employees improve their technological skills so they can work more efficiently.
4. Recognize and promote professional development opportunities for staff leaders' competencies.
5. Raise employees' awareness of the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance.
6. Stay up to date on remote work trends and developments.
7. Promote remote work practices that promote trust and collaboration.
8. Acknowledge and respect remote employees' daily challenges in a crisis environment.
9. Build awareness and respect for people's daily lives outside of work.
10. Foster a desire to devote more time to meaningful work.
11. Encourage remote workers to set meaningful goals for themselves while maintaining their decision-making autonomy.

In this study's literature review, researchers confirmed a gap in the meaningful work domain that widened when related to the remote work subject matter. Scholars affirmed the effects of COVID-19 on meaningful work for employees in the remote work environment (Çetin, 2021). This study's findings revealed insight compiled from participants' stories of daily experiences fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Comprising middle managers in this study, organizations may understand the challenges they face during similar crises

and implement resources and practices that equip them to engage, motivate, and retain remote employees.

Conclusions

The lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workforce remain a question, and organizations may lose a wealth of experienced workers. In November 2021, the workforce experienced a shift with employees quitting their jobs, creating a concern known as the *Great Resignation* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Many employees who became ill due to COVID and quarantine pondered no return, while others experienced factors that diminished meaningful work and well-being, prompting a need for change (Martela et al., 2021). Middle managers faced challenges while supervising employees in a new remote work condition that elevated disengagement, alienation, distress, and fatigue (Bonacini et al., 2021).

In this study's literature review, researchers confirmed a gap in the meaningful work domain that widened when related to the remote work subject matter. Scholars affirmed the effects of COVID-19 on meaningful work for employees in the remote work environment (Çetin, 2021). This study's findings revealed insight compiled from participants' stories of daily experiences fostering meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Comprising middle managers in this study, organizations may understand the challenges they face during similar crises and implement resources and practices that equip them to engage, motivate, and retain remote employees.

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Appendix A: Letter of Introduction and Recruitment

Hello-

I am a doctoral student at Walden University, inviting you to participate in my research study. ***The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the Covid-19 pandemic.***

The study is important as the findings may inform middle managers and organizational leaders on interpreting meaningfulness. Additionally, the study results will support middle managers in gaining a better understanding of the effects of pandemic conditions on employees working in remote work environments. I believe your experience would be a significant contribution to the study.

If you would be interested in being a part of this study, the signed consent needs to be returned to the researcher via email or indicate your consent by typing “I Consent” to the researcher via email.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Monique Foster (Researcher)
Ph.D. Candidate – Walden University

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Preliminary Actions: Interviewer to participants:

Thank you for accepting my invitation to participate in my study. The purpose of this study is to understand how middle managers fostered meaningful work for employees in a remote work environment during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Before we get started and ensure consistency among participants' interview responses, I would like to share the definitions of terms we may use within the interview process as they are defined within this study.

COVID-19 pandemic: This term refers to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a virus outbreak that affected the world globally and accelerated the remote working trend, as quarantines and lockdowns made commuting and working in an office close to impossible for millions worldwide (Ouwkerk & Bartels, 2020).

Remote work environment: This term refers to a workplace where employees work remotely away from the on-ground worksite and may present challenges for leadership in the area of employee's alienation levels, feelings of meaninglessness, and loss of their everyday work conditions (Bonacini et al., 2021).

Employee engagement: This term refers to the employee's willingness to commit and engage in the organizations' work activities because they trust and feel valued by their leaders (Na-Nan et al., 2021).

Meaningful Leadership: This term refers to leaders giving meaning through leadership practices and their impact on employees' meaningful work (Göçen, 2021). Leaders create or provide resources that support meaningful activities for their employees while at work.

Before we begin the interview, you must be comfortable in your location, and you feel free to participate without interruptions. Do you feel this description describes your setting at this moment?

May I begin the interview?

Demographics and Screening for Inclusion Criteria:

Participant No: _____

Age _____

Highest Academic Degree: _____

Industry sector: _____

Total years of experience as a middle manager _____

Months/years' experience supervising remote employees during the COVID-19 pandemic: _____

Total employees under your supervision: _____

1. How do you define a meaningful work experience for yourself as a remote employee?
2. Can you share some of your daily experiences on engaging remote workers during the Covid-19 pandemic?
3. Can you share some daily experiences that stand out for you in supporting your team/staff in transitioning from the on-ground (in-person) to remote work?
4. As a manager and leader, what were some challenges of providing meaningful work experiences for employees during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. Can you share your own thoughts and feelings on fostering meaningful work experiences for remote workers during the Covid-19 pandemic?
6. Can you share a meaningful leadership experience you had as a supervisor in a remote work environment that stands out for you during the COVID-19 pandemic?
7. Any final thoughts and feelings on your experience as a manager with leading employees during the COVID-19 pandemic to meaningful work experiences?

Examples of probes to facilitate conversations around shared facts:

“Can you provide me an example of that?”

“Can you please tell me more?”

“Is there anything else?”

“I gathered you...”

Epilogue to Interviewees:

It was a pleasure, and I thank you for your time and attention throughout this interview. I will be conducting interviews with other managers supervising remote workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. I will provide you with a copy of your interview transcript as discussed in the consent to check accuracy. I will use no personal identifiers to identify you, and all participant responses will be combined for data analysis and report.

Thank you for your time and participation in this study.