THE EXPERIENCE OF KNOWLEDGE WORKERS IN REMOTE ENVIRONMENTS
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

When regional quarantine restrictions were rapidly implemented in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, knowledge workers were forced to vacate their traditional shared office spaces and transition to remote work environments. This unprecedented mass exodus from traditional in-person physical workplaces was facilitated by existing and new software and technology that allowed workers to remain connected and working. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of knowledge workers who experienced this transition to a full-time remote work environment. The study also examined how knowledge workers perceived work performance relative to their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 18 knowledge workers in the New England region of the United States to document their feelings and experiences and to offer a "snapshot" of shared perspectives. Five themes emerged from the data: navigating connectivity gaps and remote communication challenges; isolation and technological barriers contrasting with freedom and flexibility; the intersection of remote work and family dynamics; navigating remote work environments; and collaboration, leadership, and communication in remote teams. The findings showed that knowledge workers preferred a hybrid approach, one that allows for in-person professional interactions and flexibility to work remotely when needed due to personal commitments or preferences. Effective communication was the most common challenge encountered by study participants, and maintaining professional relationships was strained in

remote environments. Benefits included increased time spent with family, the perception of improved levels of productivity, and less time spent commuting.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, across the United States, there was a rapid transition in the workplace as office environments and day-to-day team interactions were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Wong, 2020). Many individuals whose daily interactions had been in person were suddenly forced to adapt to a remote work environment, presenting opportunities and challenges (Wang et al., 2020). If able, those individuals working within a traditional in-office setting shifted, virtually overnight, to a remote work environment—and for a much longer period than initially anticipated (Mills, 2020; Quintana & Quintana, 2021).

Decades prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many emerging technologies created new ways to conduct work (Hobbs & Armstrong, 1998). Email and the use of the internet to perform work and communicate professionally became commonplace by the late 1990s. Since that time, global use of advanced communication technology has increased, and reliance on remote connections between individuals has continued to grow (de Klerk et al., 2021). With advances in email technology, high-speed internet, and data sharing during the 2000s, workers in the United States were working remotely, either full- or part-time, long before the pandemic (McNaughton et al., 2014) . In 2015, researchers at Stanford University conducted a study on remote work and found that remote participants worked more hours than their in-office colleagues and, as a result, performed slightly better in terms of the quality and volume of work (Bloom et al., 2015). Yet, while remote work was becoming more common for certain workplaces in the 2000s, like call centers, the more traditional American workplace saw very little of it, with U.S. Census data showing that only approximately 5% of the American workforce worked from home in 2018 (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required a rapid transition for the American workforce as government-ordered quarantines took effect and work from home was instituted for all workers considered non-essential and capable of working remotely (Mills, 2020). In January 2020, the Trump Administration declared a public health emergency as the first documented case in the United States occurred in Washington State (Trump, 2020), and on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. At that time, there were over 120,000 active cases of COVID-19 worldwide, and the WHO urged all nations to prepare for the anticipated global impacts of the worsening outbreak. Many employees initially planned to work from home for only a few weeks until the risks subsided, but ultimately this was not the case (Quintana & Quintana, 2021).

The initial quarantine period for many states, including Maine, was initially 14 days, from March 25, 2020, through April 8, 2020 (Mills, 2020). This created the perception that workplace occupation would resume on April 9, 2020 (Mills, 2020; Quintana & Quintana, 2021). However, as weeks turned into months, people were faced with a new working environment that did not allow for much, if any, in-person interaction; consequently, employees were forced to adopt new methods in their work and communication to remain as productive in their new working environments (Shockley et al., 2021; Wrycza & Maślankowski, 2020). These new methods relied almost exclusively on an increased use of digital communications, including email, phone, and web-meeting and file-sharing applications (Vargo et al., 2021). Media sources, such as *Forbes*, presented positive perspectives in their early publications, with articles touting the quality of work being performed and claiming that this transition could signal the end of office work entirely (Ferreira et al., 2021). However, by August 2021, more than 18 months into the pandemic, the media narrative had taken a more skeptical view of the value of remote work

(Nguyent, 2021). This was a sentiment expressed earlier by Wang et al. (2020), who recognized that remote work presents a unique set of challenges and is not without drawbacks, and that working from home does not always work for everyone.

This phenomenological study involved knowledge workers who were participating (or had participated) in a remote work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic and sought to understand commonalities between the workers' shared experience transitioning to a remote work environment during the pandemic. Knowledge workers engage in occupations that typically focus their activity on problem-solving and related cognitive tasks, and they are free to allocate time to different projects and tasks throughout their working day (Autor & Dorn, 2013). The participants included individuals who were remote workers themselves or supervised remote employees. The remote working environment separated both external and internal stakeholders from their accustomed interpersonal interactions, changing the ways business was conducted and how these groups communicated with themselves and with each other (Espitia et al., 2021). Research prior to this study indicated that workers who communicated more effectively with each other and actively showed their appreciation and caring for each other's well-being have had most success increasing engagement and motivation ("Increasing Employee Engagement," 2015). Environmental surroundings, such as office space and other aesthetics, can also influence the performance of a remote work participant, and the physical and mental aspects of working remotely may help or hinder a remote employee's performance (Hickman, 2019).

Birkinshaw et al.'s (2020) study of 18 knowledge-based workers who were forced to work from home during COVID-19 found limited evidence of productivity benefits associated with remote work and identified concerns around longer term effectiveness, creativity, and personal resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to persist in December 2021 and created

widespread work-related disruptions through 2022—and the future remained uncertain regarding when, or if, all companies will reoccupy their traditional office spaces at pre-pandemic levels (Parker et al., 2022). Some employers, like Google, have very publicly pushed back on telework (Kaye, 2021), insisting that workers are onsite. By contrast, when the researcher of this study spoke with a colleague who works in the environmental industry in New England regarding his remote work environment, he observed, "I haven't been to the office in months. I am supposed to go in once a week, but nobody's doing it, so why bother?" This showcases an individual perspective that appears to express frustration, satisfaction, and uncertainty at the same time. To fully develop an understanding of the shared experiences represented in that brief sentiment, documenting and analyzing individual experiences to identify recurring experiential themes can be useful.

Definition of Key Terms

The following is a list of terms commonly used within the framework of this research, though they may have different meanings to different people. The terms and their definitions were intended to provide a frame of reference for participants in this study to find a common perspective. According to Ary et al. (2010), "a phenomenological study is designed to describe and interpret an experience by determining the meaning of the experience as perceived by the people who have participated in it" (p. 471). Throughout this work, "stakeholders" fell within two distinct groups: primary study participants and those who were included secondarily by primary participants such as fellow workers or family members. Those who participated directly in the study as remote workers (internal) and those who study participants reported as being impacted by their transition to a remote work environment (external) were all included within the study. The primary group comprised workers who transitioned to a remote work environment as

employees engaged in the performance of meaningful work and constituted participants within the study (Hall et al., 2021). Individuals in the secondary group were not directly involved in the study but were referred to by workers during interviews. This secondary group consisted of colleagues, friends, family members, and other individuals not directly involved in the study, or the world at large (Hall et al., 2021). The way workers participated remotely was also important to define to develop a better understanding of worker experiences.

External Stakeholders. In this study, external stakeholders were those who were not employed directly by companies or agencies but were affected by the decisions and outcomes of the entity that directed the study participants' working environment (Kerschen, 2015). Some examples include family members, peers in other organizations, communities, and competitors.

Hybrid Work Environment. A work environment where workers are allowed work-location flexibility to complete their work wherever (home or office) they can be productive (Doley & Dey, 2021). They may have a shared office space or a standard in-office/work-from-home rotation. Traditional work hours may not necessarily apply, with staff working outside traditional 9–5 office hours (Driscoll, 2021).

Internal Stakeholders. In this study, internal stakeholders were people whose interest in a company, governmental organization, not-for-profit entity, or other organization came through a direct relationship, namely employment (Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2018).

In-Office/Local Work. Work that is completed at a dedicated personal workspace within the employee's organizational/traditional office setting, where staff perform tasks associated with their respective job (Groen et al., 2018).

Knowledge-Based Industries. "The knowledge economy" is defined as production and services based on workers engaged in knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated

pace of technical and scientific advance, and sometimes rapid obsolescence (O'Donovan, 2020). Knowledge industries employ workers in occupations that typically focus their activity on problem-solving and related cognitive tasks, and workers are free to allocate time to different projects and tasks throughout their working day (Autor & Dorn, 2013, Powell & Snellman, 2004).

Knowledge Workers. Knowledge workers are professional individuals employed in within the knowledge economy and were initially categorized by Drucker (Lord & Farrington, 2006) as being engineers, consultants, computer experts, teachers, nurses, accountants, social workers, and researchers who add to a company or organizations services and capabilities by applying their knowledge. A knowledge worker could be considered any employee possessing specialized skills and knowledge who is involved in a consultancy based in their specialized skill or knowledge or are engaged in research and development of new processes, services, or methodologies (Lee-Kelly et al., 2007). These skilled workers use their knowledge to influence outcomes in the modern workplace, adding value and communicating information to empower decision makers and support their organization in accomplishing goals (Vaiman, 2010).

Remote Work. Work that is completed outside the employee's organizational/traditional office setting using various technologies to communicate with colleagues and external clients and professionals (Collins et al., 2016). Other terms for remote work include telework, telecommuting, work from home, and virtual work (Collins et al., 2016).

Web Meeting. A broad term intended to capture many types of online conferencing and collaborative services, including webinars (web seminars), webcasts, and web meetings (Kershaw et al., 2021). Some examples of these services include Zoom, Google Meet, Teams, GoToMeeting, and WebEx (Kershaw et al., 2021).

Statement of the Problem

A dramatic transition to remote work environments occurred in early 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, creating an unprecedented exit from the traditional office spaces that employees, namely knowledge workers, had previously occupied (Trzupek, 2020). Very few studies have collected data on knowledge-worker experiences in response to a government/corporate mandate to change working environments and circumstances (Hallin, 2020). Those studies that have been conducted have indicated mixed results (mainly through self-reported findings), showcasing benefits and challenges (Allen et al., 2015; Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020; Birkinshaw et al., 2020; Bloom et al., 2015; Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012; Collins et al., 2016; de Klerk et al., 2021; de Vries et al., 2019; Felstead et al., 2002; Ferreira et al., 2021; Hickman, 2019). For instance, Teodorovicz et al. (2021) showed that reduced times commuting to and from work resulted in workers spending more time on personal activities, but for others, an increase in work time was linked to the loss of extemporaneous interpersonal interactions that would have occurred in person. And while Bloom et al. (2015) offered some insights into remote work experiences, the call center participants in their study were volunteers who were part of an experiment, and the nature of their work responding to external stimuli was a natural fit for a remote work environment. Also, according to Bloom et al. (2015), after completing the study, many participants were eager to get back into the office and work in a shared environment with their peers. The COVID-19 pandemic mandated remote work environments; they were not voluntary choices. Research conducted prior to the pandemic found that the majority of those who could voluntarily choose remote work out of convenience were afforded the opportunity based on occupational status (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018); the workers'

level of seniority and education provided them this option that many U.S. workers do not have (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

The experiences of knowledge-industry workers who were forced to work remotely as a result of the pandemic should be documented and cataloged to better understand how this rapid change in work environments affected those within the modern workplace (Child, 2021; Driscoll, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). There are no known pre-pandemic studies that provide insight into or understanding of the impacts of remote work on knowledge-based industries in emergency contexts such as those experienced during the pandemic (Teodorovicz et al., 2021). Felstead and Henseke (2017) found that social survey data on job quality/experience were rarely collected alongside data where work is carried out, resulting in data that was more commonly connected to the impact of work performance and that overlook the context of the working environment, which has often been viewed as a constant in past research. This makes it difficult to assess the associated consequences that work location has for work effort, job-related well-being, and work–life balance (Felstead & Henseke, 2017).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to document and understand the lived experiences of knowledge workers who were forced to change their work environment from a traditional physical setting to a remote work-at-home environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study used interview data to understand the shared experiences of the participants, using methods as described by Neubauer et al. (2019), who underwent a full or partial transition from office to remote work during the 18 months from March 2020 to August 2021 because of quarantine requirements implemented due to the pandemic (Quintana & Quintana, 2021). The study focused primarily on those workers who transitioned to become

remote participants in their workplace. Enhancing an understanding of the lived experiences of knowledge workers who transitioned to a remote work environment adds value to the existing literature, especially since this workplace practice continues to evolve as interpersonal contact restrictions associated with the pandemic continue to impact on the American workplace and the knowledge-based workers operating within it (Teodorovicz et al., 2021).

Research Questions and Study Design

The experiences of knowledge workers from March 2020 through August 2021 created an immediate opportunity to document and analyze research participants' experiences. The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What was the experience of knowledge workers who experienced a required change in their work environment from a traditional in-person physical setting to a remote at-home work environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2: How did knowledge workers perceive work performance relative to their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This study employed a qualitative research approach—phenomenology—and utilized structured interviews for data collection. Data related to the lived experiences of knowledge workers regarding the sudden and widespread shift to a remote work environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic were collected and analyzed to identify commonalities. To develop a deep understanding of remote work during the pandemic, this shared event was viewed through the lens of different people's experiences. Further, it was important to identify both unique and shared experiences to inform underlying meanings assigned by stakeholders as a result of the event (Køster & Fernandez, 2021). According to a grounded phenomenological approach, data are collected, and concepts and deductions based on the data analysis are worked out during the

study as the researcher searches for the wholeness and essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

In this research study, a grounded phenomenological approach (Wertz, 2011, 2014) provided an opportunity to develop a detailed understanding of knowledge worker experiences and the common threads that connected their shared experiences. Phenomenology was initially developed by Edmund Husserl around the turn of the last century (Welton, 1999). According to van Manen (2017), Husserl criticized how the theoretical landscape for psychological research was shaped at that time, arguing that neither the positivist focus on a solely external reality, nor the mentalist view that there was no such thing as a material reality, were adequate to describe the human condition. From this critique, Husserl developed the theory of phenomenology, in which both perspectives intersected, offering a descriptive science of consciousness (van Manen, 2017).

Phenomenology posits that there is an objective reality viewed through the lens of human consciousness (Welton, 1999). Phenomenology also holds that every phenomenon has an "essence," a quality that is common and definitional, and the discovery of this essence is the ultimate goal of phenomenological research (Køster & Fernandez, 2021). The collected descriptions of phenomena then provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis to portray the essences of the experience (van Manen, 2017). The aim is to determine what the experience means for the people who have had the experience and, from there, to derive general meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Utilizing this approach, the shared experiences of knowledge-industry workers who experienced a rapid transition to remote work due to COVID-19 were captured and analyzed to understand the shared experiences of the individuals who were collectively impacted.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study documented the experiences of knowledge workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and their perception of how the transition to a remote work environment affected their professional and personal lives as well as external stakeholders to whom they were connected. While many workers were forced to work remotely, others were deemed "essential" and ultimately remained active in their existing physical environments (Mills, 2020). When a group shares a common experience and "identity," the individuals within that group often develop categories into which they fit themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This shared identity is neither foreign nor artificial; it is real and true, and a vital part of each individual. People categorize objects to identify and understand them. Similarly, according to Tajfel and Turner (1979), people categorize individuals (including themselves) to understand the social environment. In this study, the knowledge-worker-assigned category comprised those who work in a remote environment (Doley & Dey, 2021; Driscoll, 2021).

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) was formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) during the 1970s to help explain how an individual's behavior may change when they become part of a smaller group or team and then tend to isolate themselves as separate from, or better than, others within a smaller unit of likeminded individuals or those in a comparable situation. A small group may develop a sense of pride and self-esteem in part by categorizing and focusing on the negative aspects of others—that is, an "us versus them" mentality (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within the context of this research, those participants who sat together in the office constituted one group, and remote participants constituted another (Stets & Burke, 2000). Using SIT helped understand study participants' common feelings around being forced into a remote

environment and their perceptions of eventually returning to an in-person setting where they were physically present within an office. There are environmental divides between remote knowledge workers and in-person knowledge workers, and there is the potential to create an "us vs. them" mentality that falsely biases one group's perception of the other (Hogg et al., 1995; Homans, 1960).

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream publications (e.g., *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Time*, *Business World, New York Times*) touted the benefits of working from home, such as increased flexibility, focus, and productivity. These publications presented a narrative that assumed working from home was the future of work and that there were virtually no drawbacks to its implementation; however, the most commonly documented benefit of remote work, according to current research, was a reduced likelihood of transmission of COVID-19 (Alipour, Fadinger, & Schymik, 2021). This early reporting in the spring and summer of 2020 seemed to ignore the documented challenges of remote work (Hickman, 2019; Ligthart et al., 2016). For example, in November 2020, a *Forbes* article speculated that "2020's unexpected but successful experiment with massive remote work may lead not just to more remote workers, but also to millions of Americans relocating in the next decade or so" (Levanon, 2020, p. 8). Such media pieces published in 2020 did not reference any of the research demonstrating the significant potential drawbacks to working remotely (Hallin, 2020; Hickman, 2019; Ligthart et al., 2016). In 2008, Golden et al. concluded that there is a pronounced negative impact on job performance associated with professional isolation for those who spend a significant amount of time teleworking and have very limited face-to-face interactions. Fried and Hansson (2013) indicated that the assumption of a mutual employer/employee benefit is problematic, as it allows businesses and team members to move forward with these arrangements without an effective

plan or policy in place to guide the performance of work in a new environment, especially within team-based work environments. In addition, de Vries et al.'s (2019) study on the use of teleworking in the public sector found that, contrary to frequent claims, the results did not show that telework enhanced worker engagement.

Assumptions and Limitations

This study involved participants who were impacted by remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Study participants were recruited by email and, upon agreeing to participate, were interviewed. The study focused on knowledge workers, including consultants, engineers, municipal staff, and government workers, who were impacted by the pandemic and did not include service participants, trades persons, educators, health care participants, retail employees, or other industry-sector workers. This study was also limited to knowledge-based industries, and this is an important distinction associated with the limitation of this research. The study was limited in both geographic reach and industry type, and therefore the findings have limited generalizability. However, the study participants represented a diversity of workplace environments in both the public and private sectors, across multiple disciplines, and at municipal, state, and federal levels. Specifically, this research was limited exclusively to knowledge workers in the New England region who were engaged in the regulation or development of commercial projects.

The researcher had direct experience working with, and supervisory authority over, staff who worked at home in a hybrid style and those who remained in the office. To address potential researcher biases, the semi-structured interviews were based upon the same structured questions (Appendix B), which were provided to all participants. Jones and Donmoyer (2021) noted, using standard interview questions that allow the respondent to provide genuine responses can provide

greater context surrounding the respondent's specific environment, thereby increasing the value of the research. All of the potential study participants were known to the researcher, and this allowed the researcher to increase the number of potential study participants in the target industry and also allowed for more honest and direct responses to interview questions. Cohen (2001) defined a conflict of interest as being present when an individual has an allegiance that would require certain actions that could influence the outcomes of research at any stage. The potential study participants were not employed by or supervised by the researcher. The affiliation was only one of professional association working within a shared knowledge industry sector. Another perceived conflict of interest may have existed in that the researcher had direct experiences with both positive and negative aspects of managing knowledge workers in a remote environment. To support a more comprehensive interview process, enhance the quality and depth of responses from survey participants, and to further reduce potential bias, participants were given a formative influences timeline (FIT; see Appendix A) prior to their interview to minimize the researcher's influence during interviews. Working professionals were interviewed under the assumption that they provided honest and truthful descriptions of events as they either observed or experienced them.

Rationale and Significance

This study comprised a phenomenological exploration of shared knowledge-worker experiences at a time when work was—and will likely continue to be impacted by the dramatic and abrupt shift to remote work that occurred in 2020 (Bloom, 2020). The future of work will involve an ever-increasing amount of digital collaboration, stakeholder interaction will continue to evolve, and the relevant knowledge base must continue to expand so employees and supervisors are aware of the real experiences associated with a remote work environment

(Athanasiadou & Theriou, 2021; Ligthart et al., 2016). This study is significant in that it documented the direct experiences and perceptions of knowledge workers' experiences during the pandemic. The findings can help internal and external stakeholders understand their own and others' positive and negative experiences and perhaps identify how outcomes could be improved in the future.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to document and better understand the lived experiences of knowledge-industry workers who underwent a change in their work environment from a traditional physical setting to a remote work-at-home environment due to COVID-19 mandates (Hallin, 2020). Some industries have seen, and will continue to see, a return to traditional shared office environments, but for others, remote work will likely remain a part of their professional life and continue to expand in the future. Having more information to increase awareness and guide decision making in professional settings will directly impact internal and external stakeholders as they develop policies and protocols addressing these new challenges. These changes will likely persist, and understanding different approaches regarding what is most effective for workers in these new remote environments can improve outcomes. It is vital for all staff to be self-aware and aware of the experiences of those around them and of other groups experiencing similar circumstances to remain most effective and continue to improve their performance in the workplace. The following chapters present a review of the existing literature, the study methodology, results, and conclusions based on the shared experiences of those who navigated this transition and highlight the pathways and roadblocks to their personal and professional success. The final chapter also outlines the implications of that study that were informed by the results of the research, as well as

recommendations for action, and suggestions for future study. This research study captured the experiences of knowledge workers who transitioned overnight into remote work environments, and this research is novel in nature, as this set of specific circumstances represents an unprecedented event for this group of workers (de Klerk et al., 2021).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise of the Industrial Age drove workers out of their homes and local communities into factories and offices at levels previously unprecedented in documented human history (Allen, 2019). From the late 1600s to the mid-1800s, society evolved rapidly, and distinct social classes began to emerge, establishing the foundation of today's socioeconomic structure (Alfani & Ammannati, 2017; Madsen & Murtin, 2017). During this time, women and children became a component of the working class, changing the dynamic of the structure of society. Previously, there was no middle or upper class; rather, royalty, the bourgeoisie, and the lower middle class and lower comprised the class structure. As this shift continued into the 1900s, caregivers began transitioning out of homes and into the workforce. Yet, as global modernization marched forward, the working world continued to struggle to achieve financial stability and an improved quality of life, and in some cases, that struggle became worse (Alfani & Ammannati, 2017; Allen, 2019).

During the 20th century, there was a response to the inequalities in the structure of society, particularly in the United States. Unions had begun to form in the post-Civil War era, but these movements became truly energized when Franklin Delano Roosevelt unveiled and implemented the "New Deal." After the economic collapse of 1929, action was needed to create a future for the United States (Jarvis, 2017). The proposed New Deal included public works projects to put Americans to work, financial reforms to provide safeguards for the banking industry, and major federal programs, such as social security, to provide for those who were unable to care for themselves (Jarvis, 2017). As the United States progressed through the 1900s, workers began retaining more rights and protections under the law, and many of these reforms continue today to the benefit of the American worker (Jarvis, 2017). The American Federation of

Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) was formed in 1955 and represented a concrete example of the continued growth and commitment to workers' rights through the age of industrial unionism (Masters et al., 2006). The central purpose of the organization remained true to the labor movement it has always represented: to advance the economic and job interests of the union membership. Collective bargaining delivered significant improvements in fair treatment of worker after World War II; this was accomplished by more than tripling weekly earnings in manufacturing jobs between 1945 and 1970, and providing union workers with groundbreaking new programs to provide security for workers dealing with old age, illness and unemployment, and, through new contractual protections, further strengthening workers' rights to fair treatment in the workplace (Masters et al., 2006). The last sweeping change, in the form of the Affordable Care Act (ACA; March 23, 2010), created a program for ensuring healthcare access for all Americans (McIntyre & Song, 2019). The ACA provided leave and rights for American workers that allowed them to live meaningful personal lives compared with their professional responsibilities in the workplace. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, many American workers saw this work–life line blurred as their homes rapidly became their workplaces, resulting in unprecedented experiences for workers (de Klerk et al., 2021).

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is used in the advancement of both academic and practical knowledge, utilizing novel conceptualizations and circumstances that may link across research disciplines, provide new insights, and move human understanding forward by leaps and bounds (Lindgreen et al., 2021). Jaakkola (2020) described the conceptual framework as being developed around a focal phenomenon that is observable but is not described or cataloged in the existing research. Insights around specific phenomena may come from the researchers'

observations around the collected data but may also be influenced by the researchers'

interactions with study participants (Jaakkola, 2020). Phenomenological frameworks have been

developed and adapted in ways that provide researchers with the approaches necessary to inform

a deeper understanding of the human experience (Borghmans & Laletas, 2023). The conceptual

framework that guided this research study was grounded phenomenology (van Manen, 2017).

To better understand the shared human perception of an event—in this case, the COVID-

19 pandemic—researchers often employ a phenomenological approach to understand how the

individual experiences of study participants are connected (van Manen, 2017). Phenomenology

was first developed around the start of the 20th century, fell out of scholarly favor around 1970,

and then experienced a resurgence in the 1990s that has continued to the present day (Brinkman,

2023; Wertz, 2014). The theory was originally developed as a response to criticism that research

could not focus solely on external realities nor on the belief that there was no reality that could

help adequately understand or describe the human condition (Gallagher, 2012). Phenomenology

seeks to locate the intersection of the sum of both experiences, with the goal of objectively

describing the human experience of an external reality (Køster & Fernandez, 2021). To utilize

this theory to understand the human experience of an event, different individuals' experience of

the same circumstances must be documented and then examined to identify common themes and

the underlying meaning of those shared experiences.

The essence of a phenomenological approach is understanding the structures of the

experiences of real human beings rather than of any imagined experience (Gallagher, 2012). This

can be achieved through the collection and analysis of empirical qualitative data related to an

identified phenomenon (Williams, 2021). Williams (2021) stated that qualitative research alone

already provides high-level, original accounts of experience. Indeed, it is likely that qualitative

approaches to phenomenology comprise a more powerful and comprehensive science of lived experience than philosophy ever could, and that phenomenology will in the end become the dominant form of the science (Williams, 2021). Many philosophical concepts cannot be used in qualitative research without losing their identity altogether (Wertz, 2014). However, researchers have developed new phenomenological concepts for the sake of qualitative research (Koster & Fernandez, 2021). As such, phenomenology evolves as a result of research undertaken to understand phenomena of interest (Van Manen, 2017). This approach was employed by the researcher to study and better understand the subjective experiences of knowledge workers who transitioned to a remote work environment because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Personal Interest

During the researcher's professional career working for more than two decades in the environmental sciences sector, their direct experience supervising staff changed during their time as a knowledge worker. Growing up, the researcher did not have direct access to a personal computer, and the hand-held cellular telephone was an imagined future device available only on Star Trek. When entering the workforce after college, email communication had become prevalent, and through direct experience, some form of remote work began to occur in 2007 for the researcher. Being assigned to field surveys outside the office, the need to collect and transfer (upload/download) data became necessary to have current access to the most current project information so the work could be completed correctly. Over the course of the next several years, email in the evenings became commonplace, or participating in conference calls from far afield.

In 2007, the researcher took a position with a national environmental consulting firm, and through the use of a virtual private network (VPN), staff were able to access the shared drive from a company laptop anywhere there was an internet connection. This was the researcher's

first exposure to a remote environment where work that would have traditionally been performed in an office could be performed from home. Over the following decade, the researcher was increasingly responsible for overseeing professional staff, leading projects, and eventually an independent consulting company. Their direct experience with remote work produced mixed results. While email access improved with the advent of new digital technologies, the perception of those participating in remote work was that they were more efficient and simply performed their work better. The researcher's personal experience frequently did not align with the self-appraisals of the remote staff members' performance.

The researcher's personal experience was that work products, such as technical reports or permit applications, that were assembled by those working alone in a remote environment required more review and subsequent modifications than those developed by team members in in-office environments. The researcher had originally entered the University of New England's doctoral program in 2019 with the intention of researching the efficacy of remote work in knowledge industries, to compare workers' self-perceptions with those of their peers while examining knowledge workers who had worked full time in-office, on a hybrid basis, or fully remote. The purpose of the study considered by the researcher at that time was to better understand the realities associated with remote work: Did personal bias lead them to believe remote workers were not as effective, or was there some truth to this? In March 2020, the entire knowledge workforce in the northeastern United States transitioned to a remote work environment overnight, and the researcher was presented with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to catalog and document the feelings and experiences of knowledge workers who were forcibly transitioned into remote work environments, regardless of personal preferences. This research was of personal interest to the researcher, as they grew up during the "analog age," which shifted

rapidly to a fully developed digital world, encompassing both personal and professional environments.

Topical Research

In the 21st century, global society saw the advent of the Digital Age, and much of the work completed has changed from that performed on paper and on production lines to tasks completed via computer-driven remote network (Kurzweil, 1990). Members of society are constantly connected to other individuals; this is also true of work as well (Rossi, 2007). Work from home continued to increase over the course of several decades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), and with the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, a necessary surge in remote work occurred and continues to be used by companies to maintain productivity under the constraints of the global pandemic (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020). For those who are able, working from home presents an environment with reduced risk of contraction or transmission of COVID-19 and allows employees to address issues with children, or parents, who may be at home unexpectedly during these times (Couch et al., 2020).

In the Digital Age, working from home was forecast at the onset of the internet (Poole, 1990) and has become progressively easier to do in practice, growing in public popularity. Indeed, with a local laptop, an internet connection, and email, many individuals can work from almost anywhere. However, the change during the 2020 pandemic was unprecedented, with nearly 42% of the U.S. workforce working from home at peak need during the late spring of 2020 (Wong, 2020).

A survey conducted by the *Harvard Business Review* in 2018 found that those who worked from home tended to feel isolated, disconnected, and more likely to leave their position compared with their peers working in more traditional office settings (Schawbel, 2018). Just

prior to the pandemic, some large companies, such as Honeywell, had eliminated all work-from-home options in favor of traditional office-based work (DePass, 2016) because they had seen reduced performance and collaboration across teams that were working remotely. Honeywell sought to remedy the reduced performance by bringing previously remote workers back into a traditional setting. Munsch (2016) identified cultural differences that played a key role in whether work from home staff would be effective in performing tasks and contributing toward team objectives. Despite the promising nature of information and communications technology and early optimistic expectations, telework failed in large part to catch the interest and imagination of management and employees (Sârbu et al., 2021).

Hynes (2016) utilized a multi-level perspective on the sociotechnical transitions approach to uncover why telecommuting has remained a "niche" practice dominated by a narrow collection of sectors, managers, and workers, despite the suggested benefits of reducing work-related travel, including the daily commute to an office, and enabling work to be accomplished at a distance. A sociotechnical transition is a technological change or advancement that alters how an entire society functions; some examples would be transportation (horses to cars) or communications (landlines to cellphones) (Geels, 2019). Hynes (2016) found that despite its promising nature and early optimist predictions, telework has largely failed to capture management and workers' attention and imagination. Ligthart et al. (2016) found that not all individuals or organizations are well suited to remote work. Within some institutions, some negative outcomes of telework included social and professional isolation and the loss of commitment, reduced knowledge sharing, and lower levels of productivity. Donnelly and Johns (2021) also found that there are increasing opportunities for the dehumanization of digital workers who work outside an organization's office setting. By contrast, Bloom et al.'s (2015)

research on call-center workers in China found a 13% increase in productivity, with 9% attributed to more time worked and 4% to efficiency. While call-center workers in Bloom's studies did not necessarily require collaboration with others—as is necessary with knowledge workers—these numbers were significant enough to influence a publicly traded international company (Ctrip-NASDAQ, with16,000 employees) to roll out a work-from-home option for all their staff (Bloom et al., 2015).

Working from home was a new experience for the majority of knowledge workers, with nearly 60% of the workforce reporting that they rarely or never worked from home prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Parker et al., 2022). While workers have gradually trended toward a post-pandemic return to brick-and-mortar offices (Harfoush, 2021), those sectors of the economy whose employees can work from home are likely to keep their options open for the foreseeable future (Blundell et al., 2020). This was complicated for many families, and the COVID-19 pandemic also exposed and exacerbated existing economic disparities (Mariotti et al., 2022). Those for whom remote work was an option remained gainfully employed, but unfortunately, for many other sectors, such as hotel and restaurant service, many workers faced a complete loss of employment (Blundell et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

In qualitative analyses a theoretical framework may be used to explain the relationship between a group of individuals and a given phenomenon, the theoretical framework helps the researcher make sense of the story being told by the data that would otherwise be missed (Garvey & Jones, 2021). There are two theories that are a part of the theoretical framework in this research study. Phenomenology, specifically Van Manen's (2017) theoretical framework for phenomenological research served as one lens as well as the methodology for this research study.

A second theoretical framework through which the data were viewed was social identity theory, as formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) during the 1970s and defined how an individual's behavior may change when part of a smaller group or team. When a group of individuals share a common experience and shared identity the individuals within the group commonly develop categories within which they fit into (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These two theoretical frameworks are described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Van Manen's Theoretical Framework

Van Manen's theoretical framework for phenomenology is a methodical and reflective method through with research is performed to better understand human experiences. The framework seeks to identify common themes found within shared lived experiences, distilling data collected into core elements that allow the researcher to define and give meaning to those shared experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology was initially developed by Edmund Husserl around the turn of the last century (Welton, 1999). Following in this tradition, those researchers who employ Van Manen's methods engage in bracketing, setting aside preconceptions to approach the phenomenon with fresh inquiry (Van Manen, 2017). Within this framework phenomenological reflection is employed by the researcher and this reflection can be characterized by in depth contemplation of the data, following intuition, and using imagination and together these thought exercises are all crucial steps in developing and understanding and exposing the underlying meanings and essences of experiences studied by the researcher (Husserl, 2014). This theoretical framework requires the researcher to engage in developing a written narrative as a form of inquiry and the writing is used to capture and articulate the details of the shared human experience through use of language (Van Manen, 2017). Phenomenology employs the use of detailed narrative interviews to collect detailed descriptions of study

participants broad, individual, and subjective perspectives and experience (Van Manen, 2017). Approaching experiences holistically, this theoretical framework considers the feelings, perceptions, and external dimensions.

As a methodology, the analysis associated with this research involves the creation of textural and structural descriptions, intended to capture the details and underlying architecture of an event and the shared lived experiences of those who experience it (Husserl, 2014). Through the entire research process, the researcher remains aware of the phenomenological gap between the study participants' experiences and their own understanding and perspective (Van Manen, 2017). The researcher works purposefully to understand the feelings and perceptions of study participants through extensive reflection (Heidegger, 1962). Van Manen's theoretical framework provided a comprehensive and insightful method and theoretical lens for exploring and comprehending the depth of human phenomena and this theoretical approach was a guiding principle in the performance of this research.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) offers a compelling framework for understanding the intricate dynamics of human social behavior. The theory was first developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970's, and explores the ways that individuals tend to categorize themselves and others, shaping their social identities based on group affiliations. The core statement is that people tend to classify themselves and others into different social categories, such as religion, age, or organizational affiliation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT implies that people derive a very significant part of their self-concept from the social groups to which they belong and emphasizes both an individual's personal identity and social identity, with an emphasis on how individuals manage their sense of self in social contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Central to SIT is the notion of in-group favoritism and out-group denigration, meaning that individuals exhibit a tendency to positively favor members of their own group while expressing animosity or toward members of other groups to which they themselves to not belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT explores the use of social comparisons and the pursuit of positive distinctiveness, demonstrating how individuals seek to obtain a positive social identity by comparing their group more favorably than others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT provides a behavioral context through which researchers may examine the complex nature of human social interactions, illuminating the psychological drivers that underlie group dynamics, intergroup conflicts, and the formation of social cohesion. SIT works in the context of remote work environments, as small groups may form and serve to isolate them from other individuals that they may have previously had regular interactions with (Kossen & van der Berg, 2022). Employees feel a strong need to connect with their colleagues to satisfy their own need to form meaningful relationships with others (Wang et al., 2020). Isolated individuals tend to feel disconnected and are less inclined to regularly engage with colleagues, which in turn leads to a loss of an important sense of belonging (Golden et al., 2008). SIT also explains why employees might lose their bond with an organization in a remote work context due to a reduced number of interactions and a shift toward online communication, with is less interpersonal and can be less frequent (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). Additionally, organizational identification is even more relevant in remote work settings for team members to maintain positive behaviors within work groups (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). SIT could also influence perceptions of separateness between those who work predominantly in a remote work environment, or those who work a hybrid schedule and there is the possibility that these different groups could develop prejudice or

negative perceptions of team members or other professionals that could be attributed to SIT (Kossen & van der Berg, 2022).

Familiarity with Technology

Modern technologies have been found to be readily adapted and advanced by younger individuals, who are exposed to these developments at an earlier age (Barbosa Neves et al., 2018). Kaminska and Borzillo (2018) found that people from Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) take more time than those from Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1996) to adapt to new enterprise social networking systems because they value learning in depth how they work. Kaminska and Borzillo (2018) argued that Generation X prefers mastering the current social network before digging into another to figure out how it works, while Generation Y tends to disclose more personal information, participate more, and hesitate less to express their opinions. This leads to differences in comfort using new software or communication platforms within professional settings (Gibson et al., 2009). Kaminska and Borzillo's (2018) findings also confirmed age diversity's negative impact on communication between team members in the workplace. In the last 10 years, the age at which children have their first contact with and use of computer technology has steadily decreased (Juhaňák et al., 2019). This has significant impacts on the development of an individual's digital literacy (Koltay, 2011), that is, their familiarity with the use of computers and internet-enabled data access and communication. Test results regarding knowledge and skills related to information and communications technology have shown that children who start using a computer at a later age (i.e., after age 7) demonstrate significantly lower general competence and independent autonomy at age 15 compared with their peers who started using computers at an earlier age (Juhaňák et al., 2019). Juhaňák et al. (2019)

concluded that, based on their study results, those who did not begin using computers until the age of 20 would experience a similar impairment, or reduced competency.

Interpersonal communication has changed since the inception of the internet in 1983, with face-to-face communication increasingly replaced by computer-mediated communication (CMC). CMC users are mostly younger people—for instance, Generation Y, Generation Z, and millennials (Kaminska & Borzillo, 2018). These younger generations are more comfortable with using digital interactive technologies for communication; the Baby Boomer generation, on the other hand, places higher value on face-to-face communication (Kaminska & Borzillo, 2018). These differences in preferred communication can cause conflict between multiple generations (Venter, 2017). Moreover, differences in communication styles and comfort with technology can create challenges within the workplace and within individuals' personal lives (Aesaert & Braak, 2015). This suggests that there may be generational differences in the consequences of shifting to remote work for knowledge workers subject to an unexpected transition to an entirely digital environment.

Pandemic Remote Worker Experiences

In a study by Jämsen et al. (2022), a sample of 1,091 public sector employees in Finland, with no previous experience with remote work, completed an open-ended survey during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey findings revealed that 17 unique aspects of communication had changed as a result of transitioning to a remote work environment. Jämsen et al. (2022) also found that the study participants comprised three primary groups: (1) those who found remote work challenging to relational communication, (2) those who saw remote work as an opportunity for relational communication, and (3) those who were ambivalent. Another notable aspect of the study was that the researchers presented the participants' individual

characteristics alongside their perceptions, offering unique insights into the diversity of relational communications in organizations and its importance to individual well-being and the ability to cope with situations (Jämsen et al., 2022). It should be noted that their results showed that most employees felt that remote work was a challenge to relational communication, a finding that is consistent with previous research. Cooper and Kurland (2002) found that remote workers felt isolated from their coworkers and that they lost out on possibilities for organizational learning. Golden et al. (2008) and Carillo et al. (2021) reported similar findings regarding feelings of separateness and isolation.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is generally understood to relate to core self-evaluations (i.e., positive self-regard) and that those individuals with positive self-perceptions are more likely to pursue goals for intrinsic and value congruent reasons (Judge et al., 2005). Judge et al. (2005) found that the pursuit of these goals led to more subsequent self-regard and was directly related to increased job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is not only influenced heavily by the individual's perception of their own performance, but also can be heavily influenced by their work environment, defined as the space where people perform their work and achieve outcomes, and whether that space creates a positive or negative experience that is directly correlated with positive or negative outcomes related to job satisfaction (Donley, 2021).

This complex environment is also known as a psychological climate, and the work environment has a psychological impact on the individuals' well-being (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006). This psychological climate correlates directly with job satisfaction as well as other improved outcomes for employees, including better engagement, worker productivity, and commitment to the organization. Put simply, when people feel good about the work they do, they

do a better job (Donley, 2021). Employees who experience greater satisfaction at work self-report increases in self-efficacy, professional autonomy, increased feelings of personal accomplishment, and stronger organizational commitment (Grawitch & Ballard, 2016). Based on this understanding, an environment that increases job satisfaction is almost guaranteed to increase positive inputs that can be utilized to determine the individual's level of job satisfaction, or positive self-regard (Harr et al., 2014; Judge et al., 2005; Ng et al., 2009; Susilowati & Azis, 2020).

Work–Life Balance

Remote work has had demonstrable benefits for employees needing flexibility to achieve a personal work–life balance while still contributing to the success of an organization (Allen et al., 2015). These benefits, however, can be dramatically diminished when the remote employee is less able to disengage from work since their home has now become their office as well (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007). A cross-validated occupational survey conducted in 2014 found that those working from home were performing work outside business hours to a point of self-reported health impairments (Arlinghaus & Nachreiner, 2014). These negative consequences were documented during the COVID-19 pandemic, when nearly 70% of the office-based workforce in the United States shifted to a remote environment (Lecours et al., 2021).

Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) found that the work-from-home environment negatively impacted experiences related to both personal and professional performance, which may lead to conflict between work and family life. The remote work environment not only blurs the boundary between professional and personal life, but also may not allow stakeholders to adequately disengage from the stress experienced during the performance of work, spilling over into, and creating consequences for their personal lives (Zhang, 2016). This tendency to work

beyond standard office hours could have implications for the transition to remote work for more

knowledge-industry workers (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). Stress in the home and in the

workplace may merge, compounding tensions in an already stressful environment. As previous

research has demonstrated, remote work carried out from the home can create blurred lines and a

deleterious imbalance between professional and personal responsibilities (Allen et al., 2015;

Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012; Felstead, et al., 2002;

Hickman, 2019; Hobbs & Armstrong, 1998; Kossek & Lautsch, 2018; Lecours et al., 2021).

Professional Fulfillment

In 2008, Golden et al. found that there was a pronounced negative impact on job

performance associated with professional isolation for those who spent a significant amount of

time teleworking and who had very limited face-to-face interactions. The remote work

environment may only be suitable for those who are professionally prepared for it. When

presented with a work-from-home environment, workers must be self-sufficient and independent

to maintain mutually beneficial outcomes (Krauss & Fussell, 1990). There are variations in the

effectiveness of staff based on personality, and these personality variations can be magnified by

the work-from-home environment, relating directly to both positive and negative impacts on

performance and job satisfaction (Müller & Niessen, 2019). Isolation can lead to a reduced

commitment to the goals of the organization, and, ultimately, the quality of work can suffer

(Müller & Niessen, 2019).

Contrary to frequent claims, a study by de Vries et al. (2019) did not find that telework

enhanced work engagement. Employees working in a remote environment often have the

perception that those working in a hybrid or physical office setting could experience inequity in

leadership recognition of their achievements (de Vries et al., 2019). Those workers in a remote

environment fear that they are not seen and heard as readily as their hybrid or in-office peers and could therefore experience adverse impacts, real or perceived, as a result of a transition to a remote work environment (de Vries et al., 2019). These remote staff begin to believe that they are perceived as less committed to their tasks by their supervisors, assigned less visible projects, and are provided less feedback and mentoring or even less career advancement support (Marshall et al., 2007). However, the presence of interpersonal trust, self-efficacy, and transformational leadership have been demonstrated to play a role in the reduction of stakeholders' perceptions of isolation and its negative impacts in remote work environments (Munir et al., 2015).

Workplace Segregation

Adopting innovative approaches to maintaining connections between stakeholders is important when transitioning rapidly to new work environments where once-commonplace communications have been disrupted (Lecours et al., 2021). According to Hartig et al. (2007), in an environment where connections are sparse, the remote worker may disengage, and their work quality and commitment to the company goals may diminish. Conversely, excessive oversight and pressure to perform by leadership can lead to the same consequence (van Wart et al., 2017).

Findings from a telecommuting study conducted in 1999 suggested that in shifting to a virtual work environment, some workers experience changes in procedural perceptions and oversight, which can lead to unintended consequences for worker productivity, including productivity impacts if workers are expected to simultaneously raise children who may need constant attention, "trapping" parents in the dual roles of caretaker and employee while working at home (Kurland & Egan, 1999). Conversely, with work located in the home—and thus so much more accessible—telecommuters may find themselves working longer hours, further straining family relationships (Kurland & Egan, 1999). Employees may need the transition time between

home and work to refocus themselves from home challenges to work challenges and vice versa. In other words, the daily commute may serve as a "warm-up" period in the morning and a "cool-down" in the evening (Burch & Blunt, 2020). By placing workers in the home and eliminating the commute to work, telecommuting may blur distinctions between family life and work life. This blurring may be a disadvantage for the individual (Kurland & Egan, 1999). Telecommuters must overcome the challenge of maintaining access to resources at work, as failure to do so could lead to performance losses. Telecommuters may also need to be more technically savvy than their office peers, since support services are not accessible onsite (Kurland & Egan, 1999).

On the other hand, telecommuting has the potential to provide societal benefits. It can decrease traffic congestion on strained highways and reduce automobile-related air pollution— although its impact may be negligible if only a few people telecommute (Eregowda et al., 2021). Additionally, by working at home, telecommuters discourage community crime that might otherwise occur in bedroom communities (Kurland &Egan, 1999; Stickle & Felson, 2020).

Workplace Communication

Studies have found that workers operating in a remote environment, without adequate oversight or connection to other employees, were less likely to recognize mistakes, seek feedback from colleagues, identify alternative recourses, and engage the support of more experienced staff than found in a traditional office environment (de Vries et al., 2019; Golden et al., 2008; Müller & Niessen, 2019). Electronic communication has been historically ranked below face-to-face communication across all demographics in terms of information richness because it is hard for both parties to deliver and capture the complete information intended to be exchanged through such communication (Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017). Jalilvand and Heidari (2017), found this is especially true regarding certain words that have alternative meanings,

which could lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Therefore, electronic communication can be less effective for its intended purpose compared with face-to-face communication in certain situations when clear and straightforward information is considered the key to success (Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017). While use of digital communication (e.g., email, telecom, web meeting) now allows for rapid transmission of business-critical information, it also allows for mass transmission of not-so-critical, sometimes irrelevant, messages (Stich et al., 2018). Digital communication can become a time-consuming activity that often forces employees to complete tasks they would not do otherwise and that have little to no value (Stich et al., 2018). The remote work environment could result in a breakdown in communication, which is associated with lower commitment and productivity among stakeholders, and which can result in adverse outcomes such as decreased job satisfaction.

Productivity and Performance

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers were forced to adopt new methods to remain productive in a remote work environment that was unfamiliar to many (Wang et al., 2020). To be the most effective in a work-from-home environment, workers must be self-directed and able to assess for themselves which daily activities may make them most successful in maintaining productivity independently (Hunter, 2019). Remote work has been shown to correlate consistently with important organizational benefits, such as improved employee engagement and performance (de Klerk et al., 2021); however, it can be also coupled with feelings of isolation and reduced employee engagement (Zhang, 2016). Early in the pandemic, many business journals, newspapers, and magazines offered up guidelines and tenets for companies and their personnel to maintain productivity in their new remote workspaces. Starting in early 2020, these publications, such as *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Time*, *New York*

Times, promoted "best practices" for working from home consistently, outlining "how-to"

guides, some excerpts from which include, setting a fixed work schedule, creating a dedicated

home workspace, getting dressed in the morning and preparing for the workday, and setting

boundaries with others at home (Larson et al., 2020). Developing a comfortable home workspace

that contains all the tools and technology to perform job responsibilities is a critical component

of successful remote work (Segal, 2021). Additionally, Segal (2021) encouraged adherence to a

standard schedule, as is done in a traditional office setting, and is also important for professional

teams working in remote environments. This allows remote workers to develop positive habits

around identifying times when they should be engaged in or disengaged from work and able to

recover from professional activities and engage in their personal lives (Larson et al., 2020). An

activity as simple as showering and getting dressed to go into one's remote office can create a

clear initiation of professional work that can improve the productivity of remote staff and their

engagement in their work (Segal, 2021). In addition, regularly checking in on a set schedule with

both supervisors and peers helps increase accountability and recourse, allowing workers to

collectively support and motivate each other (Larson et al., 2020).

The use of a schedule to develop time commitments to specific deliverables and tasks

improves productivity and work–life balance as well (Larson et al., 2020). Setting consistent

targets as one would within a traditional office environment—instead of allowing those working

remotely to simply go with the flow—will improve results (Limón, 2020). Creating a more

functional remote work environment for teams can ultimately keep employees engaged and

playing an important role on the team, during the pandemic, and even now when the pandemic is

over (Mangla, 2021). However, this new way to work could permanently alter the future of

knowledge-worker engagement (Trzupek, 2020). If a staff member is starting a family, taking

care of a relative, or dealing with another personal circumstance that would take them out of the office and require a shift to remote work, the use of a remote environment would allow them to maintain their career fully as well as their commitment to the team, with reduced interruption (Hunter, 2019).

Worker Performance

Maintaining work quality in any environment can present challenges. Management methodologies employed in an in-person professional environment likely would still have value despite a shift to a work-from-home or telework environment (Hynes, 2016). Such documented methods include the development of vision and strategy, goal setting, empowering employee action, anchoring actions within corporate culture, and effective communication (Appelbaum et al., 2012). Numerous peer-reviewed studies have shown that transformational leadership is influential in improving overall performance of staff within working environments (Bass et al., 2003; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Lowe et al., 1996; Waldman et al., 1987; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Kour et al. (2019) demonstrated other significant factors that can impact worker performance, including general optimism, feelings of well-being, and personal strength. These factors were found to increase employee's organizational productivity and performance in a substantial way (Kour et al., 2019). A strong organizational culture is also a key component of worker performance (Kotter, 1996). When a strong culture is in place, staff have a clear understanding of who they are and their role, and with clear direction and purpose, performance is markedly improved (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Denison, 1990; Kotter, 1996). If staff are motivated by strong leadership, acclaim, and reward, they can be expected to thrive as motivated performers committed to the improvement of the position, they themselves and their colleagues hold in any working environment (Riyanto, 2020). Riyanto (2020) found that when working

remotely, employees may experience substantial workplace isolation that could disengage them from their work and ultimately disrupt their performance and general well-being. Environmental surroundings, such as office space and other aesthetics associated with an office, can influence the performance of a remote worker, and the physical and mental aspects of working remotely may help or hinder a remote employee's performance (Hickman, 2019).

General Work Quality

Leadership can employ similar approaches to improving workplace productivity to enhance the quality of work for staff in most environments (Kotterman, 2006). In the early 21st century, many staff feared they would someday be made obsolete by advances in technology, whether in the form of programs, automated systems, or automated equipment (Watson, 2018). Watson (2018) suggested that workers who feel they will be replaced when they become obsolete may develop a fatalistic mindset that can result in lack of care in completing tasks and disengagement from purpose-driven thinking in the workplace. The continued track toward globalization and the downward pressure of prevailing wages not matching inflation are also demotivating factors regarding the quality of work performed in 2021 (Moss, 2021). If workers do not believe they are appropriately valued, they will not put forward their best effort in the workplace (Bosch & Weinkopf, 2017). Bosch and Weinkopf (2017) found that many workers are also not positioned for upward mobility in the workplace. Statistics from the Brookings Institute published in 2019 showed that more than one fifth of the U.S. labor force in the private sector earns poverty-level wages or lower, with very little chance for improvement (Ross & Bateman, 2019).

Lack of opportunity for advancement can lead to disengagement of the workforce, regardless of the presence of a pandemic (Kotterman, 2006). Osterman (2008) found that in a

workplace environment where there is a lack of opportunity for advancement or upward

mobility, the care put into and the quality of on-the-job performance can be extremely poor,

given the workers' perception of their value. Firms must focus on developing programs that

create higher quality employment, which would ultimately result in higher quality work

(Osterman, 2008). Osterman's (2008) research found that the introduction of workplace policies

designed to improve wages, work hours, and workplace standards resulted in improved work

quality and productivity in 83% of the operations that implemented these improved policies. This

work was corroborated by Nielsen et al. (2017), who found maximum benefit in performance

where there were structures implemented to build social capital and, at the same time, where

autonomy was supported by training employees in problem-solving, and where work was driven

by leaders who possessed transformational leadership skills. Therefore, workers who are actively

engaged by their employer and their leadership perform better when they are supported through

provisions for compensation, fair work hours, and standards in the workplace.

Worker Engagement and Motivation

Employees seek to perform work that has meaning (Kotter, 1996). To create a working

environment (in person or remote) where staff continue to remain engaged and motivated, there

must be a reason "why" (Kotter, 1996). Even when work is demanding and pay is not optimal,

staff have been found to remain engaged if they find deeper meaning in their professional work

(Rich et al., 2010). Conversely, if they do not find meaning in their professional position,

turnover can be expected to increase. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is one way that staff

have been found to successfully engage with and find meaning in their work. CSR has also been

found to increase staff engagement and result in improved company performance in both

productivity and profitability (Güney, 2019). Güney (2019) recommended that companies focus

on raising staff engagement and commitment levels within their ranks to retain motivated employees. According to Pollitt and Brown (2008), companies that more effectively communicate with personnel and actively show their appreciation for employees and their care for their well-being will have the most success in increasing engagement and motivation.

The concept of employee engagement was explored in the book Strategic Direction, 2015, stating that ideally, such actions should be an integral part of leadership training, not least because they reflect the guiding principles of interpersonal leadership. Equipping leaders with the means to convey fairness similarly needs to be encouraged and prioritized within training programs. Arguably, the significance of employee engagement reverberates well beyond the individual workplace: A healthy work environment has positive implications for society and the economy as well ("Increasing Employee Engagement," 2015).

Shahidan et al. (2016) found that the work environment, team and co-worker relationships, and organizational well-being are all factors that directly influence employee engagement. Focusing on these factors can dramatically enhance the work environment and ensure the well-being of the organization if staff are fully engaged (Shahidan et al., 2016). Nyberg et al. (2021) translated this phenomenon to the remote work environment; however, relationship management can be more complicated (Nyberg et al., 2021). They posed that even though many employees have expressed a preference to work virtually, there are several pitfalls. First, although communication is critical, clear communication is even more challenging when employees work remotely (Nyberg et al., 2021). Second, employees may have more difficulty acclimating to the organization and learning the skills and practices specific to the organization when starting in a virtual environment (Nyberg et al., 2021). Third, organizations face challenges

establishing their preferred culture and indoctrinating newcomers into the organization's culture (Nyberg et al., 2021).

Workplace Turnover

Turnover presents problems in any operation, creating turmoil in the workplace and increasing described negative emotional states resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences (Locke, 1976; Spence-Laschinger et al., 2009). Employee turnover has varied based on both age and level of experience (Cho & Lewis, 2012). Turnover primarily concentrates on relatively new employees and those most eligible for rehire; it is fairly low among more experienced employees (Cho & Lewis, 2012).

Regarding the remote working environment, turnover has the potential to be more commonplace as workers have been found to be more isolated and disconnected (McNaughton et al., 2014). Being fully embedded and of critical importance to the team objective or initiative can also reduce turnover (McNaughton et al., 2014). Increased participation in work leads to a greater commitment to mission completion and ultimately reduces turnover (Mallol et al., 2017). This may seem straightforward, but managers may only offer workers small glimpses into the overall project purpose or goal of a team initiative (Appelbaum et al., 2012). If they allow staff to become more embedded and engaged in the ongoing daily work, they will positively influence employee retention (Mallol et al., 2017). For some transactional managers, this may present challenges, but these can likely be addressed by delegating tasks to a broader self-regulating team that will embed all staff collectively as key co-workers that regularly rely on one another to succeed as a group (Kotter, 1996).

Effective leadership is highly influential on employee retention, and the most effective leaders are those who show genuine interest in their staff and have a low profile while

developing a high-profile corporate culture (Avolio et al., 2004). This leadership style closely monitors and highly values relationships (Boyatzis et al., 2015). The leaders most effective at reducing turnover through staff interactions teach leadership while practicing it and have ultimately proven that leaders can be demonstrably powerful yet invisible at the same time (Proulx, 2021).

Conclusion

This literature review highlighted the benefits and consequences of remote work for employees and employers. The relevant literature goes back more than 50 years, but remote work as an alternative to traditional in-person setting has primarily emerged as a trend more recently (Bloom et al., 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The pandemic quarantine of 2020 necessitated an immediate shift for nearly all knowledge workers into a remote environment—an event that was unprecedented in both its requirements and outcomes (Yan, 2020). Limited research has been conducted to ascertain the value of, and the experience of, a workforce implementing a mandatory work-from-home model or to make such a model available (Wang et al., 2021).

The theoretical framework outlined served to guide the development of the proposed research study, the collection of the data, and its subsequent analysis and conclusions. Van Manen's (2017) phenomenological framework guided the data collection and analysis associated with this qualitative phenomenological study, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of knowledge workers who transitioned to remote work environments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This methodology assisted the researcher to develop themes that defined these individuals shared experiences, providing valuable insights that serve as a snapshot in time (Van Manen, 2017). Social Identity Theory (SIT) provided a research framework to better understand how social identities can influence attitudes, behaviors, and interactions of

knowledge workers, providing insight into the dynamics of group interactions and individual behaviors. Within the workplace, employees often identify with their own specific team or department, forming distinct social identities separate from their colleagues (Kossen & van der Berg, 2022). Within professional settings individuals may express favoritism through supporting or collaborating more frequently with members of their own team, all the while harboring bias against members of other teams or departments to which they do not belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The available literature relied on an impressive amount of survey data to reach reported conclusions and has also tapped into the direct experiences of those who have worked in remote environments, office environments, and hybrid workplaces (Bloom et al., 2015). However, the rapid onset of quarantine conditions, forcing knowledge workers to adopt work-from-home practices due to COVID-19, was a new paradigm never experienced in modern society (Barrero et al., 2021). Currently, a substantial part of the workforce (approximately 50% according to Bloom, 2020) cannot, and will not be able to, work from home long term. Several studies highlighted the unexpected conflicts of trying to balance personal and professional responsibilities, while others have shown how remote workers can feel alienated and isolated in their new outside-of-office environment (Brummelhuis & Bakker; Cutter, 2020; Golden et al., 2008; Hartig et al., 2007; Ligthart et al., 2016; Munsch, 2016; Sârbu et al., 2021). Negative psychological states decrease overall company performance as well as individual job performance (Allen et al., 2015), and workplace loneliness results in markedly poorer performance for those employees experiencing it (Uslu, 2021).

This literature review also outlined what was found to be effective in ensuring performance continuity, including constant and open communication between all staff and across

all levels of an organization. Feeling isolated in one's environment away from peers can have very negative consequences (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Zhang, 2016). Accommodating the need for staff flexibility has been shown to improve outcomes, as levels of stress and fear may be higher than typical due to direct personal impacts on employees and their families due to COVID-19, and applying undue pressure without making expectations clear could reduce staff commitment (Sârbu et al., 2021).

Bloom et al.'s (2015) research demonstrated marked improvements in worker performance in several remote work environments, but these were primarily related to phone-support/inquiry-response positions, not knowledge-based industries. The research study conducted provides direct insight into the shared experiences of knowledge workers who had to adapt to new remote working environments for themselves as well as their colleagues during COVID-19. This research study adds to and improves upon the canon of knowledge regarding the experience of remote work and illuminates pathways for improved functionality in these new environments in the 21st century and beyond. The subsequent chapters outline the study's methodology, summarize findings from the interviews, discusses the outcomes, and considers opportunities for further research on knowledge-worker experiences within remote office environments. The next, chapter, Chapter 3, outlines the research design.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

During the winter and spring of 2020, the traditionally office-based working world shifted dramatically to a remote work environment due to COVID-19, catapulting a movement that had already begun with the onset of the Digital Age (Barrero et al., 2021). This research study documented the experiences of remote workers and how the pandemic impacted knowledge workers who were rapidly transitioned into new environments outside the offices they had previously occupied in person. Some of the early research conducted on remote work (Bloom et al., 2015) focused on call-center workers or booking agents in China, who responded to external stimuli and were more naturally suited to a remote work environment. In 1990, work from home was found to consist of about 1% of the U.S. labor force and 1.4% in 2000 (Bloom et al., 2015). Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that 2% of U.S. workers worked remotely full-time, and only 15% had ever worked a full day from home (BLS, 2019). By contrast, as the pandemic moved into 2022, many people were not expected to return to the workplace or the classroom (Alipour, Langer, & Kane, 2021). The Pew Research Center outlined how new technologies and software were developed (or enhanced) and rapidly deployed during the pandemic to keep people connected—and will most likely continue to evolve and be utilized in the future (Anderson et al., 2021). Such technologies included 5G connectivity, cloud-based computing, virtual reality technologies, edge computing, and e-learning platforms, to name a few, and new software applications include Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Trello, Slack, Webex, and more.

According to Teodorovicz et al. (2021) and Yang et al. (2021), more research is needed to augment literature centering on the experiences of individuals that were part of team-based organizations that shifted rapidly into remote work environments due to the onset of the COVID-

19 pandemic. This qualitative research study used semi-structured interviews to collect data documenting the experiences of participants who had undergone a full or partial transition from physical office work environments to remote work from March 2020 through August 2021. The study participants included knowledge-industry workers whose lives were impacted by a shift away from in-person work environments to predominantly remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also included study participants who worked in a hybrid remote program in which they spent time working in the office and from home as the pandemic restrictions began to ease. The data analysis sought to document the different experiences and challenges faced by participants who were suddenly and unexpectedly forced into remote work environments and to identify emergent themes shared by participants.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to document and better understand the lived experience of knowledge workers whose work environment transitioned rapidly from a traditional physical environment to a remote work-at-home environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study captured and described the perceptions and experiences of participants experiencing this change in their working environment using interviews as the primary data-collection tool. A principal driver of the research stemmed from a lack of information in the literature regarding the effects of a mass exodus from the modern workplace (Oakman et al., 2020), specifically outcomes associated with the recent pandemic, which forced an accelerated transition to a predominantly remote work environment from March 2020 to August 2021.

The study participants included knowledge workers who, prior to the pandemic, had functioned as team members in a primarily in-person, shared workspace. Knowledge workers have occupations in which they focus their daily activities on problem-solving and related

cognitive tasks and are free to allocate time to different projects and tasks throughout their

working day (Autor & Dorn, 2013). A total of 18 interviews were conducted with individual

participants working across different organizations, including public, private, and nonprofit

entities, to provide a cross section of experiences (Alase, 2017). Interview participants were

selected from all position levels within their organizations (e.g., senior-, mid-, and entry-level) to

provide a cross section of experiences based on years' experience in their given industry (Aguas,

2020). The interviewees included six individuals from each of the three staff categories described

earlier, for a total of 18 study participants.

<div align="center">**Site Information and Demographics**</div>

The knowledge workers who participated in this study primarily came from different

divisions responsible for managing and regulating environmental rules and laws within the New

England region of the United States (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire,

Rhode Island, and Vermont). While work responsibilities are dynamic for knowledge workers

about four of these workers were responsible for evaluating conditions outside a traditional

office setting and doing work remotely in the field. Another six spent more time at their desks,

processing data and reporting on information collected by their peers. Six of these workers were

responsible for developing complex narratives related to substantial environmental permit

applications filed with regulatory agencies to allow projects to proceed, others were responsible

(from a regulatory perspective) for reviewing these submissions and confirming or refuting the

veracity of the information contained therein. Four of the study participants were office leaders

and managers responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of a team or an entire

company.

The consulting community, regulatory agencies, and nonprofit groups served as participant recruitment sources. Personnel from these agencies were approached to gain perspective on how remote work had altered their day-to-day professional efforts. The work locations of all 18 study participants represented brick-and-mortar office settings that had transitioned to remote work environments for staff at some point between March 2020 and August 2021. At the time of the study, half of these offices were still working remotely, while others had begun moving back into the office or were functioning on a hybrid schedule. Several of the study participants represented local branches of much larger entities. There were also geographic differences in work locations that played a role in whether they had shifted back to a shared space or continued to work remotely; for example, at least six of these companies retained a policy across locations, even though local quarantine requirements were rescinded.

Sites where study participants worked fell within the general category of environmental science, permitting, engineering, and regulation as the researcher is a working professional within this industry sector and this sector was the intended industry of focus for the purpose of this research. These knowledge workers were engaged in collecting environmental survey data, developing reports and permits, designing projects, managing staff, overseeing workflow, or reviewing and approving state, municipal, and federal permit applications. Examples of project activities included development of renewable energy projects, construction or replacement of bridges and roadways, upgrading electrical transmission lines, residential and commercial development, and other complex developments that require evaluation, design, and permitting.

Twelve study participants worked in private professional service firms that provide expert advice for a fee. These kinds of consulting firms can have one employee or thousands, and they may consult in a broad range of domains, such as project management, due diligence,

permitting, engineering, and more. Four study participants worked in the government sector as regulators who reviewed materials compiled by applicants. In addition, the study included two personnel from nonprofit entities that would be considered part of the environmental sector in the region and commonly provided comment on larger public projects or served as intervenors providing peer review or support on scientific studies submitted to regulators regarding proposed projects. Development entities made up the final group of study participants. These entities are project proponents who develop a concept project for the consultants to analyze and design, and they fund the project and permitting efforts. These four groups represent knowledge workers typically involved in assessing and permitting complex projects and that were impacted by the need for remote work during the pandemic that comprised the participants in this research study.

Each study participant was interviewed via Zoom (web meeting) as required by the University of New England (UNE). After agreeing to participate in the study, each participant was given a formative influences timeline (FIT; see Appendix A) to orient their thinking and support an informed discussion with a more complete understanding of how their life experience may have influenced their experiences with remote work (Jones & Donmeyer, 2021). Each interview relied upon a structured narrative template during the data collection process and was based on methods and materials from existing literature, utilizing open-ended questions intended to create a comfortable and free-flowing conversation (Bloom et al., 2015; Galanti et al., 2021; Gamma & Metzinger, 2021; Hickman, 2019; Lee et al., 2018) in which study participants shared rich details of their feelings and experiences associated with remote work that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was participant-oriented, as the phenomenological approach is primarily concerned with the lived human experience and how it can be understood by others; therefore, the researcher worked to develop an understanding of each participant's

perspective while the participant shared their personal experiences with remote work as a result

of the COVID-19 pandemic (Alase, 2017). The interviews were intended to be open-ended and

free-flowing so the participants would feel encouraged to engage in honest conversations about

the topic while the researcher collected data (Cope, 2014; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006;

Jones & Donmeyer, 2021).

The interview questions engaged the participants in sharing meaningful personal accounts

about transitioning to a remote work environment. The study participant invitations were sent via

email, along with the FIT, and the interview process was semi-structured, with questions

developed so they could easily be understood based on the idea of the human relationship

between the researcher and the participant (Fuchs, 2007). The intent of the semi-structured

interview process was to facilitate a dialogue in which both the participant and the researcher

could resonate with and understand each other's experiences and feelings (Sholokhova et al.,

2022). Each interview was an enjoyable and interactive participatory experience in which the

two embodied subjects shared ideas and experiences associated with the seemingly overnight

transition to remote work that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This use of

bracketing was intended to temporarily suspend the researchers' own beliefs and biases to allow

the researcher to process and understand the study participants' responses in a raw and

undistorted way, allowing the researcher to reflect and shape an interpretation that would be

genuinely that of the study participants (Fischer, 2014).

Participants and Sampling Method

The study participants were knowledge workers who experienced the rapid transition to

remote work environments in March 2020 as a result of the pandemic. These individuals fell

within three participant categories in the study: entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level. These

categories were identified during the interview process and represented an important component of the study, but participants were not selected based on these criteria. These categories were used generally during this research to determine if there were shared experiences or commonalities unique to each of these subgroups. While interviews were conducted with one interviewer and one participant, the use of general categories within a phenomenological framework, as suggested by Bradbury-Jones et al. (2009), was utilized to collect and evaluate individual responses to explore common themes within these age and experience groups. The worker categories were based on industry-standard approaches and the broad experience of the researcher in the knowledge-based industry that was the focus of the research. Indeed.com, a website for perspective employees and entities seeking new hires, provided a list of similar categories based on the most common terms used in job listings based on work experience and capability (Herrity, 2020).

Entry-Level Participants

Entry-level staff have less than three years of experience in their given field and may have less than a year of professional experience past college (Herrity, 2020). These individuals are primarily directed or supervised by others in the performance of the majority of their work, and anything they produce, or any surveys they conduct, would be peer reviewed by other staff before being considered final. They may have advanced degrees but seldom possess any professional certifications or licensure. The six entry-level participants in this study were expected to have been impacted most significantly by a transition to remote work, as their ability to interact with other individuals to access opportunities for growth and development may have been diminished (Herrity, 2020).

Mid-Level Participants

Mid-level staff have between three and eight years of experience in their given field and are likely key members of their respective teams. Most of these individuals are expected to work independently and likely have supervisory responsibility over some entry-level staff members Herrity, 2020). Much of the work they produce is expected to be near final, pending senior-level approval, and at times the work they produce may be considered final without senior-level review (Herrity, 2020). Most of these staff carry professional certifications and licensure befitting their practice and serve on professional boards and committees. The six mid-level participants in this study were expected to have been less impacted by a transition to remote work, as they were expected to be more independent and likely more suited to adapt to new ways of performing their work (Herrity, 2020).

Senior-Level Participants

Senior-level staff have more than eight years of experience in their given field; some of these individuals had several decades of professional work under their belt (Herrity, 2020). They are team and company leaders responsible for overseeing large numbers of staff, managing their respective offices, and meeting the performance targets of their organizations (Herrity, 2020). The six senior-level participants in this study were expected to have been impacted to varying degrees by a transition to remote work depending on their leadership styles, and the interviews provided insights into their styles as well as the responses of their specific teams (Herrity, 2020).

Instrumentation and Data Collection

This qualitative phenomenological study focused on collecting responses to a series of questions posed during semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom and catalogued by reviewing recordings and transcriptions of interactions between the researcher and participants.

A UNE Zoom account was utilized for the purposes of recording and transcribing participant responses. The researcher also took notes, but the interview transcripts provided the primary data for coding and analysis. The interviews were conducted by a single researcher and were conducted during a 3-month timeframe.

As previously stated, 18 interviews contributed to this study, but initially a total of 19 interviews were performed; however, one interview was discarded because of poor audio quality and because the interview was cut short when the participant traveled into an area where cellular services were unavailable. Without any selective intention, the 18 analyzed interviews ultimately included six participants from each of the three defined categories (i.e., entry-, mid-, and senior-level). Each interview was scheduled for a maximum of 1 hour, with some interviews taking only 30 minutes. The interview protocol contained eight questions. The researcher transcribed each interview, and these were provided to each respondent, so they had the opportunity to provide any feedback or clarifications they determined were necessary (Brinkmann, 2023). This member checking method was utilized to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the data prior to analysis (McKim, 2023).

As noted, the participants included personnel who fell within the category of knowledge worker; the study did not include those who could be categorized as service workers, trades persons, educators, or representatives from production, retail, and other industry sectors. Potential study participants fitting the category of knowledge worker (40 individuals total) that were known to the researcher were sent an email inviting them to take part in the study (see Appendix C). Of the 40 individuals who were asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview, seven declined to participate, 10 did not respond in any way, 23 expressed a willingness to participate, and, ultimately, 18 followed through with scheduling and completing

the interview process. Fortunately, the interviews included an equal number of participants from each group (entry-, mid-, and senior-level) to provide equal representation in described experiences, even though this was not the intent of the study, nor was it analyzed for the purpose of this research.

Knowledge workers willing to participate in the study were interviewed by the researcher in a 60-minute block, and each interview followed the same protocol (see Appendix B). The questions required the knowledge worker to reflect on both their experience with remote work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and their view of the performance of other team members, including peers and leadership. Prior to the interview, study participants were given the opportunity to develop a formative influences timeline (FIT). The FIT was sent to each participant with a request that they review it prior to the beginning of the interview, where it served as part of the data collection protocol and an opportunity to develop a richer description of their lived experiences as they told their own stories uninterrupted by the researcher. This was intended to provide context for the respondent's specific environment and life experience and, in turn, increase the value of the research (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021). As Jones and Donmeyer (2021) found, using an FIT creates the potential for greater richness in interview responses and enhances opportunities to develop a broader understanding of the circumstances and experiences that influenced participants' feelings and experiences. However, it is important to note that five of the 18 participants did not review the FIT prior to the interview.

Data Analysis

The study data were collected over a three-month period through interviews conducted via Zoom as required by the University of New England. Recorded video or audio files (depending on participant preference) were transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature.

Zoom's data entry and database complies fully with the EU General Data Protection Regulation and is ISO27001:2013 Information Security Management Systems (ISMS) certified (https://www.iso.org/standard/27001). The UNE Zoom platform is hosted on Amazon Web Services (AWS), and Trint is responsible for all data stored on AWS and sets independent encryption, transfer, and retention policies. In addition to AWS encryption, data in transit and at reset were further protected by a layer of TLS encryption (TLS 1.2 and AES 256) to prevent unauthorized access or interception of data and to protect study participant confidentiality.

Once the interviews were transcribed and member checking of the transcripts completed, the original recordings were destroyed, and the data were subsequently coded and analyzed to identify patterns and emergent themes in interviewee responses. Once the final version of the transcript was returned to the researcher, or the time for the participant to respond had expired, each participant was assigned a coded numerical pseudonym, and the master key list remained in the researcher's sole possession, stored securely on a password-protected cloud server and accessible only by the researcher. Once coding of all transcripts was complete, any identity revealing participant materials in the possession of the researcher were destroyed, including the master list and original recordings. To adhere to the UNE Institutional Review Board (IRB) human-protection requirements, all devices and research methods were only used with the full consent and approval of the participants. Each participant was assigned a unique participant number, which protected their confidentiality during data delivery and reporting. These confidentiality measures enhanced the quality of information provided by study participants as they provided their honest opinions without concern about exposure or judgment.

The process of data collection in phenomenological research involves a process of self-reflection and clarifying how the researcher's personal perceptions and values guided or limited

the formation of questions and influenced the data collection and analysis (Saldaña, 2011).

Qualitative research is now a multidisciplinary practice, ranging from social science to

interpretive art (Saldaña, 2015). Research performed may be very dissimilar in their initial points

of view and methodologies for how they conduct their research and how they report it (Saldaña,

2015). For this study, the researcher adopted a pragmatic approach to better understanding the

shared lived experience of knowledge workers impacted by a single event with global

implications (Saldaña, 2011). This pragmatic approach can be characterized as using research

designed by using the methods that would work best, the researcher believed the use of open-

ended questions and that a combination of different approaches could provide a broader

understanding of the feelings and experiences of the study participants (Saldaña, 2011). The

researcher, throughout the process, remained open to different approaches to both the data

collection and analysis, understanding that the more one is immersed in both the data and the

methods of investigation, the greater one's ability to understand and identify the diverse patterns

and complex meanings of social life (Saldaña, 2015). Interview transcripts were initially coded

based on their category as described earlier.

The study's data analysis comprised a systematic process of organizing interview data

and to make sense of the common experiences and themes that emerge from the information

collected (Creswell, 2013; Sahagún Padilla, 2011; Saldaña, 2015, 2016). First, the researcher

read each transcript to become familiar with the content and experiences and perspectives shared

during the interview process. Initial coding involved the creation of preliminary codes or labels

for segments of the data; example coded included "hybrid," "difficult," "flexibility," or

"challenge." In addition, CAQDAS was utilized to code the collected transcripts to identify

common themes and phrasing. After this process was completed, a coding scheme was

developed around common themes, phrases, and categories, which represented the concepts used to organize and assimilate the interview data into higher level experiences and feelings that were shared by some or all of the study participants. After the first round of coding, all transcripts were coded collectively to determine if there were any experiences that were unique to a single group based on age or level of experience. In qualitative research, the coding process is not linear, and during this study's data analysis, the process toggled between the codes, raw data, and thematic categories, helping the researcher better understand patterns and meanings in the interview data (Koster & Fernandez, 2021).

Triangulation is utilized during data analysis to develop a comprehensive understanding of the subject material and to test the validity of the research, and it includes the use of multiple theories and data sources within the study of a single phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014; Heale & Forbes, 2013). In the context of this study, the single phenomenon was knowledge workers' transition to a remote environment, and each interview was considered a separate data source for developing common themes and shared experiences. Though the inclusion of participants from multiple workplaces offered different perspectives, the research produced findings around shared themes and experiences that occurred across all participant contexts (Schatz, 2012).

Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues

This study involved participants who were directly or indirectly impacted by the rapid transition from traditional, shared, in-person office spaces to remote work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the research focused on knowledge workers affiliated with consulting and engineering services firms, nonprofits, and regulatory agencies, and did not include service participants, trades persons, educators, or representatives from production, retail, or other industry sectors. Therefore, the findings from this qualitative phenomenological research

study cannot be considered generalizable to other firms and individuals. While there may be transferability across this localized subset of knowledge workers, it may be limited to particular professions. The results are not applicable across all industries and employment sectors, as the qualitative results drew heavily upon the specific context in which they were collected.

At the time of the study, the researcher had direct experience working with, and having supervisory authority over, staff who had worked at home or in a hybrid style, and those who had remained in the office. To address potential researcher biases, the researcher asked the same questions during the semi-structured interviews. The researcher documented experiences described during the interviews and confidentially reported on results, and it was assumed the study participants answered questions honestly and forthrightly and did not intentionally or subversively influence the outcome of the research. The basic method of phenomenological analysis consists of epoché and reduction—finding the open space for phenomenological reflection—but no matter how the openness and reflection are understood, epoché and reduction do not result in any predictable outcome or guaranteed future results (van Manen, 2017). The insights derived from this research were not "technically derived" or "methodically produced"; rather, phenomenological insights were "encountered," "discovered," "given," "found," or sometimes even "stumbled upon" (van Manen, 2017).

The original participant sample target of 18 interviews from the proposal phase was achieved, and the 18 interviews conducted provided ample data for this phenomenological research (Alase, 2017). The researcher chose to limit the interview time to 60 minutes to focus on collecting responses and descriptions of experiences that were concise and focused. The participants were given adequate information and time to determine whether they wanted to participate in the study, and all retained the right to withdraw their participation at any time.

They were provided with the researcher's contact information and were fully informed that the researcher would be the only one with access to their identity when the data analysis was conducted. If requested, all confidential data belonging to a study participant would be returned to them or confidentially destroyed.

As noted previously, participants were assigned a coded numerical pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. Prior to participating in the research, they were informed of their right to withdraw their voluntary participation at any time. Information on study participants was held by the researcher in a confidential location, and all information developed for the study were classified and stored using coded numerical pseudonyms after the initial data collection was complete. Identifying information was kept wholly in confidence, and any potentially identifying information obtained from interview respondents was altered or removed from the results. Names of study participants' workplaces were not utilized; instead, an alias or nondescript reference (e.g., "office" or "company" for a named entity) was used when reporting results. All data, including responses, contact information, and video and audio recordings were stored on a secure password-protected server. Any hardcopy materials (i.e., notes or transcripts) were kept in a locked room at the researcher's home office. All information collected was used exclusively for this study and not used or disclosed to others for any other purpose. All original recordings were destroyed at the earliest opportunity during the project, following member checking and verifying transcripts for accuracy. All personally identifiable participant information was also destroyed. The remaining unidentifiable data will be destroyed at the end of the 2024 calendar year.

Trustworthiness

To maximize the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher took care in both data collection and analysis to provide structure to the complex and evolving environment presented by the research (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). To allow the evolution necessary for qualitative research in a dynamic real-world environment, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was employed to support, manage, and document the study (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). CAQDAS served as a valuable means of facilitating data collation from primary sources in a single place and identifying emerging trends and thematic elements. The role of the researcher was to document the descriptions of the participants' lived experiences and to discover current and potential meanings related to those experiences in a specific context (Aguas, 2020).

The credibility of the study depended on the honest engagement of the study participants. This integrity was achieved through direct engagement with participants, persistent observation, the use of peer researchers, negative case analysis, researcher reflexivity, and participant checks and validation (Morrow, 2005). Prior to the data analysis, the researcher shared the study participants' interview transcript to ensure that respondent inputs had been correctly captured as part of the member checking process.

Transferability, or generalizability, is not a goal of qualitative research and is often viewed as incompatible with a constructivist stance and typical qualitative goals, settings, and practices (Maxwell, 2021). According to Lewis (2014),

> qualitative research cannot be generalized on a statistical basis—it is not the prevalence of particular views or experiences, not the extent of their location within parts of the ample, about which inferences can be drawn. Nor, of course, is this the objective of

qualitative research. Rather, the value of qualitative research is in revealing the breadth

and nature of the phenomena under study. (p. 351)

The primary purpose of this phenomenological study was to illuminate the shared lived

experiences of the study participants (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021).

The dependability of the study depended in part on the availability of similar research

that confirmed or connected to the emerging themes and experiences documented in this study.

The data collection and analysis sought to reduce the potential for researcher bias and to provide

confirmability, this was done through the using numerical codes to identify each transcript when

member checking was complete so that the researcher could not readily identify the specific

study participant transcript being analyzed. The use of CAQDAS in the data analysis process

further improves the dependability of the research (O'Kane et al., 2021). The formative

influences timeline (FIT) was employed as a component of the interview process to address

confirmability since the literature (Jones & Donmoyer, 2021) has shown its effectiveness. The

audit trail consisted of a confidential collection of notes, citations, transcripts, and materials used

during the research process that documented the decisions and assumptions made by the

researcher (Carcary, 2020). This audit trail could be reviewed by another individual, who could

presumably come to the same conclusions as the researcher (Cope, 2014).

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to document the common lived

experiences of knowledge-industry workers impacted during the rapid transition to remote work

environments that occurred because of the COVID-pandemic. The study employed a qualitative

phenomenological research model utilizing semi-structured interviews to collect data that were

analyzed for shared experiences and common themes. Recruitment for the study targeted

industry-specific companies and individuals from many different entities; ultimately, 18

interviewees were selected for participation. One-on-one interviews between the researcher and

participants were conducted via Zoom. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the study sought

to explore, investigate, and interpret the lived experiences of the research participants (Alase,

2017). As Creswell (2013) stated, "We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue

needs to be explored" and phenomenological approach is the most appropriate tradition to use in

getting to the root-cause of the phenomenon" (p. 47). Chapter 4 centers on the raw data that were

collected and analyzed, presenting them in a structured, straightforward manner to communicate

the feelings and opinions of the study participants. Chapter 5 offers an interpretation and

discussion of the findings described in Chapter 4, followed by the researcher's concluding

thoughts.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to document and better understand the lived experiences of knowledge workers who underwent a rapid change in their work environment from a traditional in-person physical environment to a remote work environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study documented the feelings and events that individuals experienced while working remotely during the pandemic. Two research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What was the experience of knowledge workers who experienced a required change in their work environment from a traditional in-person physical setting to a remote at-home work environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2: How did knowledge workers perceive work performance relative to their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Studying knowledge workers' remote work experiences during the pandemic offered a rare opportunity to capture the thoughts and feelings of an entire class of workers and catalog aspects of their experiences. This study focused exclusively on knowledge workers, who, for the purpose of this study, were defined as those employed in occupations in which they focus their day-to-day activities on problem solving and related cognitive tasks and are free to allocate time to different projects and tasks throughout their workday (Autor & Dorn, 2013). Knowledge workers are differentiated from other workers by their ability to solve complex problems or to develop new products or services in their fields of expertise, and they are uniquely suited to a remote work environment, as they are not required to be in a specific space to complete a physical task (O'Donovan, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, the knowledge workers in this study functioned as team members who worked primarily in an in-person setting in a shared workspace

environment. The transition to a remote work environment separated workers from their accustomed interpersonal interactions, changing overnight the way business was conducted and how teams communicated with themselves and others (Espitia et al., 2021). The results highlighted how individuals, teams, and organizations adapted to a sudden, large-scale change, capturing participants' thoughts on what worked and what did not work during this period and informing strategies for future disruptions that may occur (Elbogen et al., 2022).

At the time of this research study, three studies had been published that collected data on knowledge worker experiences that occurred because of a government/corporate mandate to change working environments and circumstances (Birkinshaw et al., 2020; Hickman, 2019 Hallin, 2020). However, there are no known pre-pandemic studies that can be extrapolated to provide insight into or understanding of the impacts of a remote work environment on knowledge-based industries in emergency contexts such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Teodorovicz et al., 2021). With advances in technology, some knowledge workers had experience with remote work environments, but the pandemic-related transition was unexpected, immediate, and implemented for all non-essential workers capable of working from home (Mills, 2020).

This research study focused on the phenomenon of a remote work environment forced upon knowledge-industry workers because of the pandemic to document worker experiences and feelings and to better understand how the rapid change in work environment affected this population of workers (Child, 2021; Driscoll, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Research supports the development and implementation of workplace policies around the use of remote work in a post-pandemic world (Ferreira et al., 2021). In addition, knowledge-worker teams may benefit from this research by developing a general understanding of how a remote work environment impacts

their productivity and performance (Kagerl & Starzetz, 2023). Hickman's (2019) study also showed that a worker's environmental surroundings, including physical space and aesthetics, such as workstation or access to suitable equipment and technology, have an influence on a remote worker's performance of their job, and that these physical and emotional aspects of remote work have the potential to both support or obstruct a remote employee's capability to achieve optimal functionality in remote work environments. This phenomenological study of knowledge workers' experience in a remote work environment during the pandemic presented an opportunity to understand what impacts a remote work environment might have on an individual regarding various aspects of their work and home life, providing valuable insights for shaping future work environments and policies.

After the study received approval from the UNE IRB, the researcher began the data collection phase of this research project. The study participants comprised professional staff who fell within the category of knowledge worker. Such workers operate within the knowledge economy, defined as production and services related to knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technical and scientific advance, and sometimes rapid obsolescence (O'Donovan, 2020). For this study, participants were recruited from the consulting community, regulatory agencies, and nonprofit groups. Study participants were further broken down into three categories of knowledge worker: entry-, mid-, and senior-level, based on years of experience and professional capability. The study did not include people who could be categorized as service workers, trades persons, educators, or representatives from production, retail, and other industry sectors. Potential study participants who fit the category of knowledge worker, were employed in the environmental sector in the New England region and had transitioned to a remote work environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (40

individuals total) were sent a recruitment email seeking their participation in the study (see Appendix C). The knowledge workers who received the recruitment email were known to the researcher through professional associations or previous work relationships, though none of the knowledge workers were employed by the same organization as the researcher. Those recruited were employed by 16 separate agencies, companies, and organizations responsible for managing and regulating environmental rules and laws within the New England region of the United States. These entities included the consulting community, regulatory agencies, and nonprofit groups.

Of the 40 knowledge workers who were invited to be interviewed for the study, 23 expressed a willingness to participate, seven declined, and ten did not respond in any way. Ultimately, 19 participants scheduled and took part in an interview; however, the interview of one of these 19 was excluded from the study due to poor audio quality and the participant's lack of suitable cellular data for the Zoom call. A follow-up interview could not to be conducted with this individual, and they were therefore removed from the study. The 18 completed interviews included an equal number of participants from each group (i.e., entry-, mid-, and senior-level), providing equal representation in described experiences, even though this was not the intent of the study (nor was it analyzed as part of the research).

All the knowledge workers who participated in this study were college graduates and employed at companies or organizations that were targeted for this study. The participants worked in different divisions responsible for managing and regulating environmental rules and laws within the New England region. Three of these workers were responsible for evaluating environmental or physical conditions of a project site outside a traditional office setting and doing work remotely in the field. Six participants spent approximately 75% of their time at a desk using a computer in the performance of their work, processing data, and reporting on

information collected by their peers. Six of the knowledge workers were responsible for managing teams and leading the development of complex narratives related to substantial environmental permit applications filed with regulatory agencies to allow projects to proceed. The final three participants were responsible for reviewing these submissions and confirming or refuting the information contained therein, from a regulatory perspective.

This study relied on one-on-one interviews conducted via Zoom (web meeting) as required by UNE. After agreeing to participate in the study, the researcher gave a participant information sheet (Appendix D) to the participants outlining the study's purpose and relevant information, such as confidentiality, member checking, and the voluntary nature of the study. In addition, a formative influences timeline (Appendix A) was given to the study participants to orient their thinking and support an informed discussion of how their life experiences may have influenced their experiences with a remote work environment (Gamma & Metzinger, 2021; Jones & Donmeyer, 2021). After sending this information, a semi-structured interview (via Zoom) was conducted with each of the 18 participants. The interview structure was based on methods and materials from existing literature (Bloom et al., 2015; Galanti et al., 2021; Gamma & Metzinger, 2021; Hickman, 2019; Lee et al., 2018).

The use of a semi-structured format enabled the researcher to ask a combination of specific open-ended questions designed to encourage the participants to talk freely about their experiences, perceptions, and feelings. This format also enabled the researcher to ask follow-up or probing questions as necessary, according to the responses of each participant. The study was participant-oriented, as the phenomenological approach is primarily concerned with lived human experiences and how they can be understood by others; therefore, the researcher worked to

develop an understanding of each participant's "perspectives and experiences," while the participant made sense of their own personal experiences (Alase, 2017).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom, and each interview was a minimum of 30 minutes long, with the longest being 60 minutes. Once the written transcripts were produced and reviewed by the researcher and all identifying information, such as names and places of employment, were removed, the member-checking process began. Each participant was sent the transcript of their interview via email and given 5 days to verify the accuracy of their transcript or request that changes be made. After submitting the transcript to the study participant, the original recording was destroyed. The participants were notified that, if they did not respond within 5 days, the researcher would assume that they felt the transcript was accurate and that they did not wish to make any changes. Fourteen of the 18 transcripts were accepted upon receipt during the member-checking process; four participants made minor changes to their transcripts. The completion of the member-checking process marked the end of the data collection phase of the study and the beginning of data analysis.

Analysis Method

During the early stages of data analysis, the researcher actively engaged with the data by reading and then re-reading each interview transcript in its entirely upon completion of member checking. The researcher took notes and recorded initial observations for each transcript. All 18 transcripts were then coded using NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), and by hand. Codes were triangulated through a second and third coding of the raw original data. The use of coding enabled the researcher to reduce the volume of information in the raw transcripts by capturing what was most commonly shared by study participants. These

data derived from the totality of the transcripts were used to develop themes and ultimately

informed the conceptual framework and the literature review.

The coding focused on identifying recurring patterns within the interview transcripts

regarding the remote work environment. The researcher initially read through the interview

responses, multiple times, to identify common terms and ideas expressed by participants; to

search for words or phrases that were repeated in the participants' responses; and to condense the

words or sentences into a short transcript. In qualitative analysis, researchers are advised to begin

their data coding by reading the interview transcripts several times; specifically, they are

encouraged to read the transcripts three times to get a feel of what the research participants were

saying verbally and also to get a better feel of the participants' "state of mind" vis-à-vis how the

subject-matter had affected their "lived experiences" (Alase, 2017). This first step helped break

the lengthy responses into simple statements or sentences to make the data more manageable.

After the manual coding was completed, NVivo was used to assist the researcher in identifying

common terms, ideas, and shared experiences. The transcript data were uploaded to NVivo to

allow the researcher to gain access to digital tools that can help visualize the data and more

easily identify codes and categories across responses through specific queries, word frequency

analysis, and diagrams.

The data analysis assisted in identifying common threads in shared experiences and in

capturing the collective essence of this period for knowledge workers. Participant responses were

coded to identify common experiences or feelings expressed by study participants. Coding by

hand and with NVivo was utilized to identify concepts and themes associated with the shared

experiences and common feelings, or the lived experience, of these knowledge workers when

they moved to a remote work environment. These themes highlight the factors that relay the lived experience of knowledge workers working in a remote environment.

The raw data were broken down into codes, then categories, and reviewed for emergent themes. The analysis was based on Saldaña's (2015) *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Figure 1 is a demonstrative visualization of the process undertaken following the methodology developed by Saldana (2015).

Figure 1

Breakdown of the Analytical Process (Saldaña, 2015)
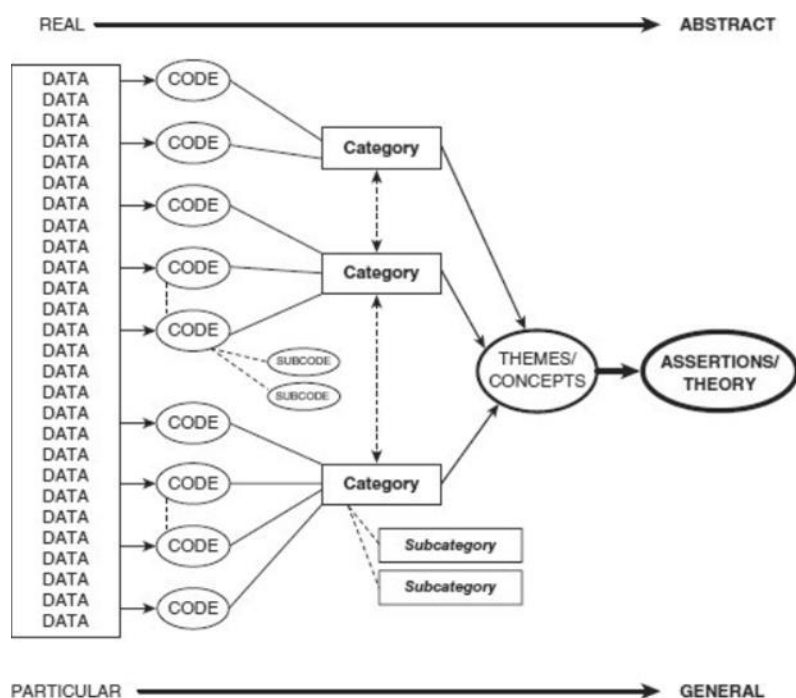
The preceding figure illustrates the breakdown from transcript to data, data to categories, categories to themes, and themes to assertions. The 18 interviews in this study totaled approximately 16.5 hours and produced 70 pages of narrative data to analyze. These textual

narratives yielded 110 individual codes, then distilled into 49 categories and ultimately five themes.

All 18 study participants had experience, either directly in the performance of their work or indirectly through association with co-workers, friends, or family members, with a remote work environment and met the study's eligibility criteria to be considered knowledge workers. The participants were placed into three categories—entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level— based on time in their professional position. Entry-level participants had limited professional experience, were just starting their career (1–3 years) and required oversight in the performance of their work. Mid-level participants had several years of professional experience in their industry (3–8 years), required minimal oversight, and may have been responsible for overseeing the work of entry-level personnel. Senior-level participants had long-term professional experience (over 8 years), were considered proficient to perform their work independently, and were responsible for overseeing large teams or entire practices. The years of work experience for the participants ranged from a minimum of two years to a maximum of 38 years. Of the 18 participants, six met the description of entry-level, six met the description of mid-level, and six met the description of senior-level. Regarding gender, 12 participants were male and six were female. Age-related data were not collected for this study.

The names of each of the 18 study participants were replaced by a number that corresponded to the interview transcript created by the researcher's UNE Zoom account. These unique numbers were used to identify the participants so their responses would remain confidential. Data presented in this dissertation correspond to the participant numbers and include some participant demographic information to offer additional background for the reader. For example, Participant 114422 was a female, entry-level knowledge worker. Table 1 presents

the participant numbers, showing the three categories described earlier (entry-, mid-, and senior-level) along with the gender of the participant, for the benefit of future research that may seek to further explore different experiences with remote work based on time and experience working within a particular industry.

Table 1

Study Participants

Entry-Level	Mid-Level	Senior-Level
Participant 140642*	Participant 123254#	Participant 180404#
Participant 114422*	Participant 191139#	Participant 141020#
Participant 200925#	Participant 180524*	Participant 200230#
Participant 130419*	Participant 160524*	Participant 134950#
Participant 200943#	Participant 190336*	Participant 130742#
Participant 180313#	Participant 130331#	Participant 120411#

Note. The asterisk (*) represents female participants, and the number sign (#) represents male participants. However, data were not analyzed on the basis of gender; this is presented for demographic purposes only.

Twelve of the 18 participants had worked remotely prior to the pandemic, while the remaining six had never performed in a remote work environment prior to COVID-19. Prior work in a remote environment was another participant characteristic that was not analyzed as a component of this research, as the study did not differentiate between those who had previous experience and those who had none. All six of the senior-level participants in the study were male, and the gender breakdown for both entry- and mid-level participants was split equally— three males and three females in each level.

The qualitative data analysis focused on content analysis, searching for commonly used words and phrases, and allowing patterns and themes to emerge from the data. The coding process was used to categorize and analyze interview transcripts. Memos and a coding log were maintained to document the coding process and researcher reflections. NVivo was utilized to corroborate, reinforce, and analyze common codes and patterns within the data. Figure 2 shows the CAQDAS auto-coded participant sentiments from the combined interview transcripts.

Figure 2

NVivo Auto-Coded Sentiments from Combined Transcripts
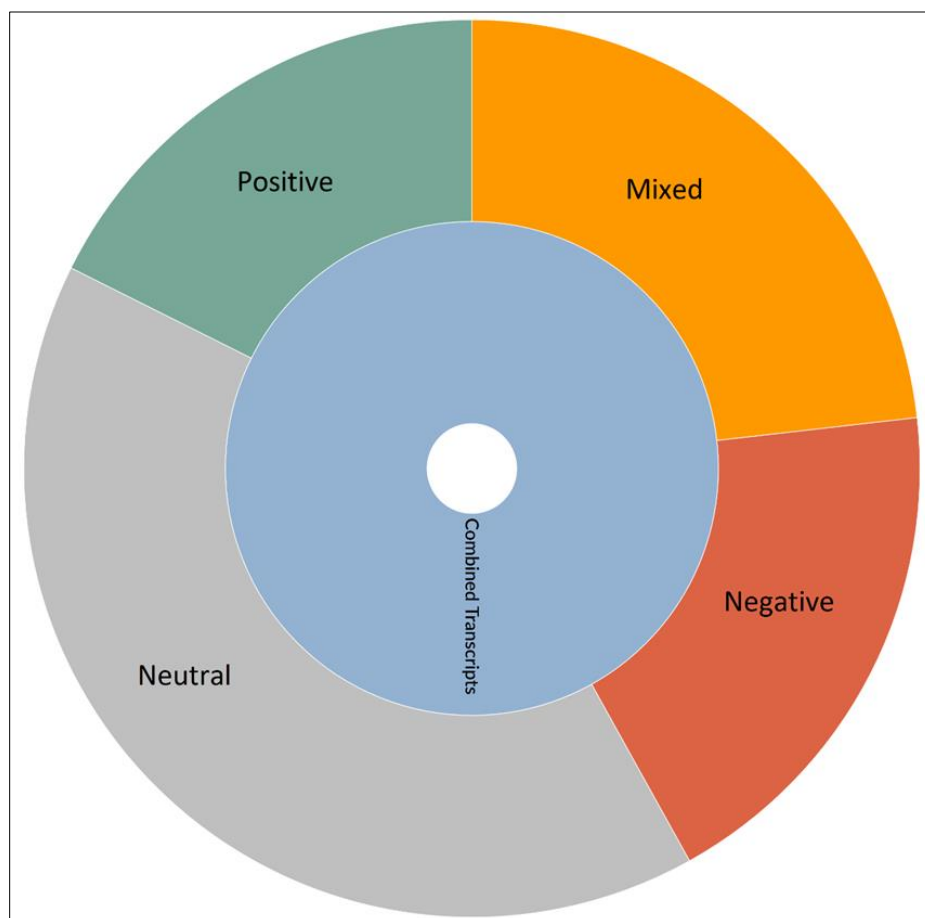
The CAQDAS outputs demonstrated that the data were diverse and that the collective experiences of all study participants was, not surprisingly, mixed. There was not a predominantly positive or negative sentiment associated with their collective experiences with a remote work environment as a result of the pandemic.

Transcripts were coded based on responses only; they were not coded based on gender or level of experience. Data related to gender and experience demographics are presented to provide a frame of reference for further research. Common codes and categories were identified both in hardcopy transcripts and in a project file in the NVivo database. All data uploaded to NVivo for analysis used unique participant numbers, and no personally identifiable information remained in any of the transcripts during the digital data analysis. The codebook within the NVivo software contained a list of common codes and examples of where they appeared in the data. These results were obtained by using a spreadsheet and also through visual representations of common codes. Figure 3 provides a raw example of an output from NVivo for Participant 134950.

Figure 3

NVivo Coding for Participant 134950
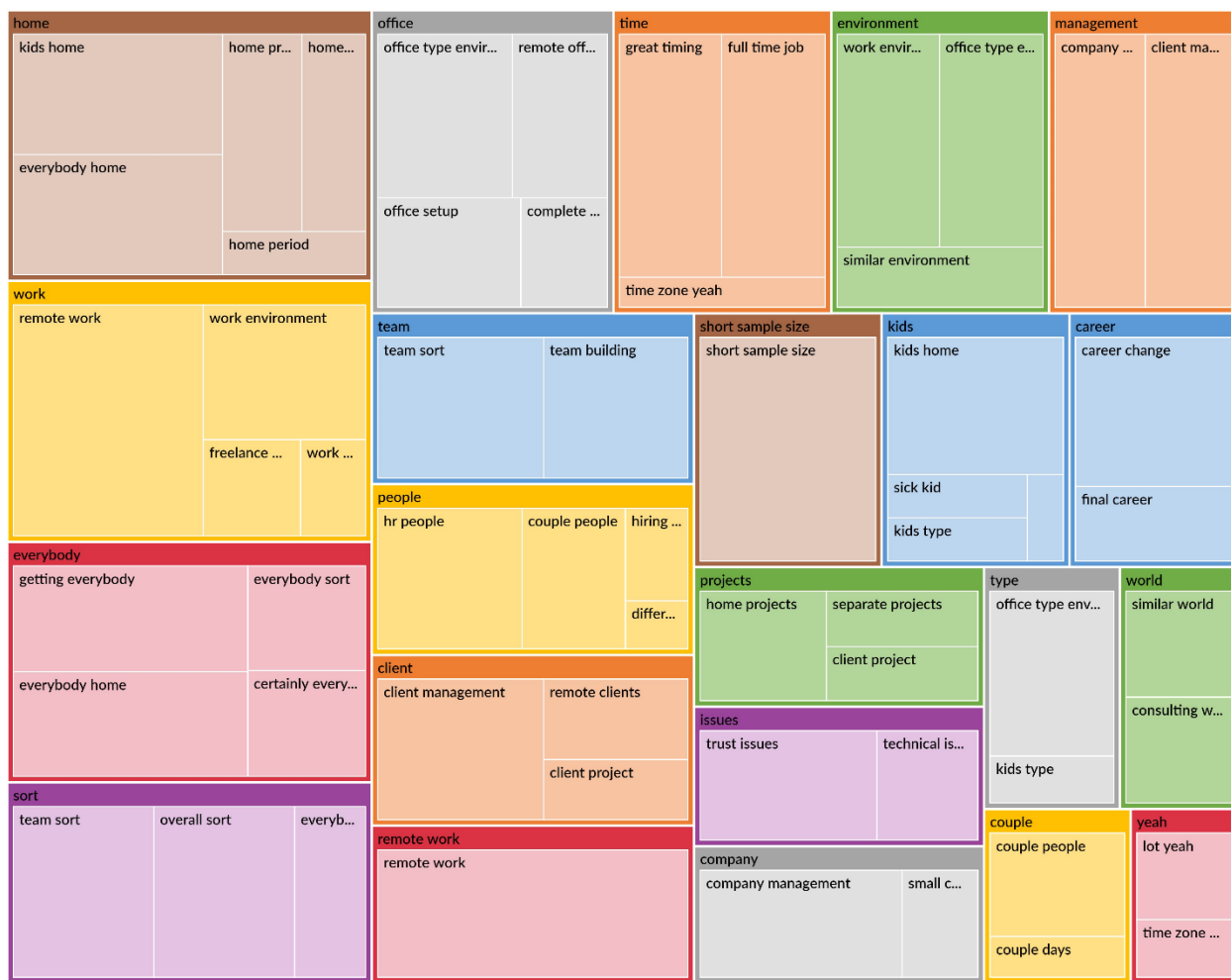
The raw maps of commonly used phrases were printed for each participant interview and reviewed by the researcher to identify commonly used phrases across all interviews. In addition to comparing these maps, hard copies of the transcripts were reviewed and searched digitally to identify common codes across all study participants. Common codes were utilized to develop categories, from which themes of shared experiences would ultimately emerge. Figure 4 displays the 49 categories derived from the data.

Figure 4

Categories—NVivo and Manual Coding Combined

Work	People	Home	Time	Team	Family	Job
Remote	Communication	Space	Commute	Environment	Parent	Performance
Space	Connection	Full	Meetings	Kindness	Child	Change
Hiring	Regular Life	Daycare	Work/Life	Decisions	Sick	Emails
Training	Managing	Printing	Productive	Trust	Break	Hybrid
Field	Interaction	Quality	Billable	Technical	Separate	Virtual
Product	Comfortable	Tough	Personal	Time Zone	Pandemic	Delays

The categories shown above are presented in no particular order and show the groupings the researcher imposed on the coded segments of the interview transcripts (Cardano, 2020). This was done to reduce the number of codes into larger segments for the purpose of generating themes presented in the subsequent chapter. These categories were developed by the researcher, with the support of CAQDAS, and this arrangement allowed the researcher to compare and contrast study participants' feelings and experiences associated with these categories. These larger "buckets" were developed by ordering codes into larger categories, separate from the interview transcripts, so the commonalities could be identified and described (Cardano, 2020).

Presentation of Results and Findings

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked questions about their experiences with the rapid transition to a remote work environment that occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the interview, each participant was provided the participant information sheet (Appendix D) and the formative influences timeline (Appendix A) to orient their thinking around how their life experiences may have influenced their perceptions of a

remote work environment. The interview protocol (Appendix B) contained eight open-ended questions. During the individual interview sessions, no participant declined to answer a question.

Participant Responses to Interview Questions

Eighteen knowledge workers located within the New England region of the United States and representing three different experience categories (entry-, mid-, and senior-level) were interviewed for this research study. Six of the participants were entry-level staff members, six were mid-level personnel, and six were senior-level practitioners. The participants' years of work experience ranged from two years to 38 years. All the study participants had transitioned into a fully remote work environment as a result of pandemic quarantine orders. Brief summaries of participant responses to the eight interview questions are shared here to provide an overview of the data collected and to highlight direct insights from study participants through their unaltered thoughts, perspectives, and experiences. The eight questions that comprised the interview protocol were developed to aid the researcher in understanding the shared lived experiences of study participants and solicit responses that would address the research questions this study sought to explore.

Question 1: "Do you have an opinion about working from home?"

Participant responses to this question contained 30 of the 110 total identified codes within the data. Figure 5 shows codes derived from participant responses to this question.

Figure 5

Question 1: Manual Participant Coding

Flexibility	Productivity	Awesome	Don't Like	Neutral
Positive	Love It	Management	Never Tried	Distractions
Technology	Communication	Great	Uncomfortable	Downside
Support	Optional	Separate	Collaboration	Detached
Variable	Pressure	Projects	Negative	Convenience
Efficiency	Solutions	Motivation	Problems	Tools

The responses to this interview question were broad and very diverse, with each participant sharing their personal perceptions and opinions regarding a remote work environment. For instance, Participant 114422 expressed an appreciation for the flexibility of the remote work environment but disliked the experience as a day-to-day reality. Participant 200230 stated that remote work would be their new preferred "way to work," having never tried it previously, and felt they were more productive in their new remote environment. Participant 123254 stated flatly, "I hate it, I am not good at it." Participant 130331's sentiments changed during the pandemic: They had previously worked in a remote environment in 2016 and found the experience favorable; however, they viewed the remote work environment associated with the pandemic as detrimental since it was mandatory but not suitable for everyone.

Eleven participants expressed that the pandemic quarantine changed their opinion of remote work environments. Six of the 11 perceived the use of a remote work environment as more favorable as a tool to remain productive, while five of the 11 felt that remote work was less favorable now as a direct result of having been immersed in a remote working environment. Participant 134950 shared, "I could still do my job [remotely], I just don't think I would like it as much." Figure 5 represents the coding completed by hand for each of the study participants'

responses to Question 1. Each transcript response was reviewed separately, and then common codes were collected across all 18 participant responses. The data in the table represent the most common words or phrases used by participants in their response to the question, "Do you have an opinion about working from home?"

Question 2: "Does a remote environment affect your ability to do your job?"

This question was designed to elicit performance-focused responses from the study participants, encouraging them to share their perspectives on whether their work was affected in a way that could be attributed to the transition to a remote work environment. Participant 180313 expressed that the remote work environment impacted their professional relationships, which in turn had an adverse effect on their professional performance as well as their enjoyment of the experience:

> I believe in in-person collaboration, teamwork, breaking bread together, which ultimately leads to the "esprit de corps" of a team. I am not convinced that can be done remote. We need to get back to face-to-face communication.

In response to Question 2, half of the study participants observed that internet connectivity or broadband speeds had an impact on their ability to perform their job in a remote environment. This feeling was not limited to any single participant category; rather, it was spread evenly across both gender and level of experience. Participant 141020 felt that the remote environment itself did not influence their ability to do their job, but it was a compounding factor of whether their children were present in the home. This participant also shared that when home alone, they believed they could be more productive than in their traditional office setting.

Participant 180524 shared that while their perception of their personal performance was not affected by the transition to remote work, the performance of their team overall suffered due

to lack of interpersonal interaction. This participant indicated that they had spent some time in a

business development role, part of a team responsible for generating new leads. They expressed

that shifting to a remote working environment made it more difficult to simply connect as a

team, in a spontaneous way, when the need arose. Schedules had to be coordinated and response

times were slow compared with pre-pandemic collaboration.

Regarding performance, Participant 200943 shared that without being present in an

office, they found themselves working less, not because they were more or less efficient, but

because of a lag in receiving new assignments. Once the work they had on their plate was

completed, they would not have anything new to work on until they received another assignment.

They believed that the same amount of work was ultimately completed in less time than typical;

they simply found themselves with free time available between tasks. Participant 200943 shared,

> There's a lot of claims that [remote work environments] increase efficiency with people
>
> working from home, and I don't necessarily think that means getting more work done. I
>
> think that means getting more work done in less time. I am expected to be available 40
>
> hours a week, but I may not actually have 40 hours' worth of work to be done. If I am in
>
> the office, it's pretty easy for me to take a few minutes and go see if someone else needs
>
> help with something, get some quick tasks that can maybe fill an hour or two out of my
>
> day, but that is kind of challenging.

All 18 study participants observed that the remote environment had an effect on their

ability to perform their work in some way, but, as outlined in this section, there were different

reasons for that, as well as varying effects. The unanimous response is a strong indicator that a

remote work environment differed from what these knowledge workers were accustomed to, and

some aspect of their work had changed for all participants in this study. There were no instances

where study participants did not experience some form of change, or disruption, within their daily routines undergoing a transition to remote work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Question 3: "Have you had any experience with issues communicating with staff who are working remotely?"

This question was intended to explore any challenges study participants experienced that could be attributed to a remote working environment. All 18 study participants expressed, in some way, that they experienced issues with communication while working remotely. Participant 141020 expressed that the remote work environment during the pandemic had negative consequences for communication on all fronts. Some of these consequences were tied to stress around personal safety and fear for loved ones, diminishing their focus on professional activities; they also felt depressed and disconnected from other people as a result of the imposed isolation. They shared, "It was kind of an acute situation, so I would say it was negative on all fronts."

Participant 200230 observed that sometimes effective communication was impacted by background noise in the remote work environment. If, for instance, the participant was interacting with a colleague who had children and/or a dog, the interaction was less effective than when the participant had a web meeting with someone who lived alone. As they expressed,

> When he [i.e., the colleague] was home, you could tell it was just this din in the background and, you know, dogs barking, kids screaming, you know, you can easily see how it's hard to get anything done. I mean, literally, this guy has two little boys, 13 and 11, and, you know, you're on a phone call, and after about 10 minutes, one of them is gonna hit the other, and there'll be, you know, screaming in the background.

Participant 180404, the majority of whose professional correspondence was through email, believed that the transition to a remote work environment had helped make

communication more effective. This meant that everything discussed was cataloged in writing and could be revisited at a later date without being lost to time. The use of Microsoft Teams to chat with a colleague and know their availability, versus being occupied or offline, was also a useful development since, while such tools were available prior to the pandemic, the transition to a remote work environment forced all users to adopt them. Prior to the pandemic, Participant 180404 said that only about half the staff were using these types of software applications (e.g., Teams, Slack, Skype, etc.):

> I've actually been pretty surprised, like, the whole concept that you have heard about being a paperless society. You know, we don't need paper and printers and all these things anymore, at least maybe in our kind of line of work. So, I was surprised at how quickly we were able to pivot to that. And, you know, we store data now, and we take notes on the computer, and even though I have a small printer at home, I almost never use it now, not being an Impact, but a benefit.

Participant 180313 felt that while communication was still possible in a remote work environment, it was more difficult to resolve difficult situations or conflicts without being able to meet in person to openly discuss the issue and reach a mutual understanding. They believed that so much communication is non-verbal, and because of this, conference calls did not have the same efficacy face-to-face interaction. As they shared,

> I have an example of a pretty contentious project that I've interacted with multiple parties on, and during the pandemic, it was a lot of unproductive virtual meetings, but we had a chance to meet in person a week ago around a conference room table, and it was seamless. We were able to work it out in person—[it] helps to see faces and body language.

Using similar language and descriptions, all study participants shared challenges with communication-related issues, which were the most common issues referenced.

Question 4: "Did you choose your current working environment?"

Of the 18 study participants, seven stated they were able to choose their working environment at the time the interviews were conducted, during July and August 2022. Participant 200230 shared, "I've got a place to work in the office if I want to go in, but when I do, it's ridiculous because everyone is asking me questions, and I don't know what they're working on." The remaining 11 participants were required to follow the policies and procedures outlined by their employer. For nine of these 11 participants, their working arrangement allowed them to perform their duties in a remote work environment or in their office, but there was no clearly defined expectation of presence in the office; the decision was up to the employee and their direct supervisor, and the approach described by all was a hybrid working arrangement. As Participant 123254 shared,

> I would say it is a lenient expectation for us to spend some time in the office. We do have some people who are still fully remote, but it normally comes with good reason, such as health problems, and childcare is a big one. So, if you need to, you can work from home, especially with a lot of daycares just closing down all the time.

Two of the study participants had recently been required to return to the office a minimum of three days each week, but they both expressed that the requirement was not enforced in any way. Rather, it was a mandate expressed in words only and that many personnel were choosing to remain working from home. Participant 160524 said,

> So, from the CEO down, we're now supposed to be in 2 days, home 3 days, but it's kind of like, who knows, I know that there is no one keeping track of us. I don't really have

the ability to choose, but if I was supposed to be in the office and I just didn't go, nothing

would happen.

The choice of working environment was not common and did not correspond directly to staff

category or gender; this was believed to be a result of different workplace policies and

procedures that varied across study participants.

Question 5: "If you could choose, would you choose in-office, hybrid, or remote?"

This question was designed to elicit a very simple and straightforward response. Of the

18 participants, 13 expressed a preference for a hybrid environment, four for a full-time in-office

environment, and one for a fully remote work environment. However, there were some

differences in responses regarding what a hybrid environment would look like. Ten of these

participants viewed it as a tool they could use when they needed flexibility in their personal lives

(e.g., traveling or needing to be home for an appointment or other personal reasons). The other

half expressed a preference for a set schedule, with two or three days a week remote and the

remaining days spent together in an in-person office setting. Fourteen of the 18 participants

responded to this question with a one-word answer ("in-office," "remote," or "hybrid"), while

four elaborated further on the reason for their preference. The majority (17 participants)

expressed their feeling that a fully remote work environment would not be their preferred method

of work after their experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 140642 shared,

It's not a cop-out, but I think a hybrid is important so having flexibility and

understanding what people need. I think having set expectations about, like, we're going

to do these amount of days in the office, and that's kind of, like, you need to be on that

schedule, just because we need to have those people together, so I think having a shared

time, even if it's a day a week in the office, I think that's important to, like, bring people

together.

Participant 134950 expressed a preference for a hybrid environment because of the

increased flexibility they felt it offered them regarding where they would spend their workday

depending on how they felt or what might be going on in their personal life. Participant 134950

said,

> I love the flexibility of the hybrid because I always want more flexibility, even if I'm not
>
> going to use it, right. I [like] the ability to stay home and get a few hours of work in on a
>
> day when I have a sick kid or I just don't feel like going to the office—it's great, it's great
>
> to have that flexibility, so it helps with the work life balance.

Four participants expressed a strong preference for a return to an in-person environment

since they felt their professional experience improved and was more enjoyable in a shared

environment. Participant 123254 had a particularly unique perspective on this question. Though

this participant shared a preference for in-office work, they felt they might be willing to make the

transition to a fully remote environment in the future:

> I would choose to be in the office, right now. I don't, I don't have children, and so I think
>
> that could change, that aspect, if I were to do something like that. Where it becomes more
>
> difficult to kind of do both. I think the other thing was if I would consider going fully
>
> remote if we sort of just bit the bullet and did it if we didn't pay to have the office space,
>
> if we didn't pay to have all the irritation of owning this space and owning all the crap
>
> that's in it and everybody just decided to actually have workstations at home and make it
>
> a real thing that we all do, I might go for it.

While the majority of respondents response expressed a preference for a hybrid environment, some preferred going back to a work environment they were accustomed to. This preference was to return to a routine they had been comfortable with and desired a return to their preferred routines. Others expressed an interest in adopting a remote component of work that afforded them greater flexibility in their personal lives while remaining connected and productive when they simply could not be present in an office. Only one study participant expressed an interest in a fully remote work environment as their preferred professional environment.

Question 6: "Has a change in work environment had any impact on team dynamics"?

Sixteen of the 18 study participants shared that the pandemic-induced transition to a remote work environment had an impact on the dynamics of their team, while two participants stated that they did not perceive any impact associated with the transition. Participant 130331 shared that some colleagues became difficult to reach or disconnected entirely. When an associate repeatedly rescheduled or canceled Zoom meetings (until the study participant simply gave up), this very negatively impacted the professional relationship for the participant. Even worse, they believed the other party was indifferent and was simply ignoring their request to connect. They persisted initially but finally quit, adversely impacting their perception of the other team members. Participant 130331 shared,

> I remember trying to get together with one of the partners. Just like a "let's talk" and then something spiked, with like weather, or it was like Omicron or something, it was like maybe August, and she was like, "Hey, can we push this out a few months. I don't, I'm just not comfortable leaving my house right now," and I think that's a relationship that

suffered, you know, i''s like, "Well, why don't we get on the phone, why don't we just do like a Zoom call," but it never happened, and we still haven't connected.

Participant 160524 felt that the transition to a remote work environment widened preexisting divisions within their company:

We are calling each other every day, FaceTime each other every day, commiserating over like, "This is crazy! When are we going to go back?" We have, you know, Zoom happy hours, and as often as we could. So, if anything, we probably got closer, but it widens the gap between me and other teams within the company that I didn't work with, but I was, you know, working literally side by side with them before, so it kind of created, to some degree, sort of, siloed some or siloed totally. Yeah, I mean, unless you had to work with somebody else, that would be the only time I would see them, and now I don't.

These "silos" only became more isolated when there was no need for them to interact regularly with other departments. Without being in shared office space or attending team functions, some participants felt they became disconnected from the colleagues with whom they would not naturally have had interactions within the course of performing their work. Of the 18 participants, six mentioned specifically feeling "siloed" or "more siloed" as a result of the transition to a remote work environment. One participant expressed that while being pulled in many different directions in a fast-paced professional environment, it was important to carve out time and "make time for everyone, even if it did not seem important."

Relationships built prior to the COVID-19 pandemic were shared by participants as one reason adverse impacts associated with a remote work environment were not prevalent. Twelve participants described the need to work together through an adverse situation with a team that was closely knit prior to the onset of the pandemic. Challenges that arose were more common in

peripheral associations, that is, relationships that existed because of proximity rather than necessity.

Question 7: "Have there been any impacts to company/organizational performance?"

Of the 18 participants interviewed, eight expressed that the transition to a remote work environment had an adverse impact on the performance of their respective organization. Another eight study participants shared a neutral view of the impact associated with the pandemic, the most common response being "Not really, no." Two of the study participants believed that the transition had had an overall positive impact on the performance of their organization; these participants believed that the use of online meetings opened doors for them to perform their work in a home or office environment and expand their professional work beyond their local geography in the future. Participant 190336 shared that prior to the pandemic, most of their consulting work was conducted in an in-person setting. The pandemic forced the normalization of work performed through web meeting software such as Zoom. It opened a new level of freedom for the participant, who felt like their business had survived the pandemic and would continue growing as a result of these new ways of working. Participant 190336 shared,

> I would say [it] positively [impacted company performance], and I was able to effectively parent and be available for my kids, and I lost less time to work and by leaving, like, I'd have sick kids or have to have no daycare, and if I couldn't work remotely, I would not have been able to sustain an income, and so working remotely allowed me to be like an adult in the house for my kids. I was also able to balance the needs of my clients and not cancel on them, so their quality of care was maintained. I had an income coming in [and] it kind of just worked across the board for everybody. I wish that the pandemic had

happened earlier in my career so that it would have normalized the ability to work

remotely sooner in my professional line of work.

Notably, all six participants categorized as entry-level believed the transition to a remote

work environment had had an adverse impact on their organization. They expressed challenges

in receiving the mentoring and training they felt they needed to grow in their professional

capabilities. In addition, they expressed a sense of "bad luck" joining the workforce right at the

onset of the pandemic before they felt they had their feet solidly beneath them; the proverbial rug

was pulled out from underneath them.

Participant 180313 shared an unexpected positive outcome: a dramatic move away from

paper. They shared that their organization had been slow to adopt the use of electronic

documents in their project work; however, the transition to a remote work environment left many

knowledge workers without the tools they had typically had access to in the office, such are

large-capacity printers. Participant 180313 stated,

> We finally came into the 21st century and really got aggressive on electronic submissions,
> you know—no more paper, digital signatures. Some internal processes were enhanced to
> digitize things and electronic approvals. There is a benefit to screen sharing, instead of
> being on a conference call where you're on a phone; looking at a screen with a
> PowerPoint or video stuff has a benefit.

This transition forced a shift in the use of electronic submissions and electronic files. Five

of the 18 study participants shared this same sentiment about an unanticipated benefit that will

likely remain in place moving forward. These five participants also shared that they perceived

this shift to dependence on electronic submissions will save time, money, and resources for all

involved, this transition would eliminate the need for hard copy versions of large applications to

be printed, bound, and shipped to respective recipients, and that alone would be a beneficial development.

Question 8: "Is there anything else you would like to share with me about remote work or your experiences since March of 2020?"

This final question allowed the study participants to summarize their closing thoughts or collected feelings at the end of the interview or to go on a tangent—the direction of the response was completely at the discretion of the study participant. Responses were varied, ranging from complaints around vaccine mandates to positive improvements in remote server access. Of the 18 participants, four responded to this question by sharing the experience of their spouse or partner, not their own. Rather than reflecting on their own direct experience, they described their perception of their partners' experience in contact with their own. Participant 114422 shared that their partner did not handle the remote working environment well and "hated working from home" because they did not have other interactions with any people. This was a source of significant stress in the relationship.

Some study participants felt challenged by being their partner's only available social outlet. For those who were more introverted, this became a burden, while those who were more extroverted struggled in a vacuum. Participant 114422 shared,

> One more thing: My girlfriend, who is 100% remote, she finally said she was going crazy, hated being home alone. All the time, she wouldn't see anyone all day, I'd get home and I'd be tired, and she would just be excited to have somebody to talk to, and I would just want to go straight to bed. She eventually ended up getting a workspace just so she could get out of the house, you know, just go into town.

Six study participants stated that they enjoyed, or missed, the practice of simply "going to work." They expressed a fondness for the process of leaving home, going to their place of business, and working there for the day, highlighting a beneficial separation between their work and home life. Participant 123254 shared that they enjoyed their commute to and from the office; without it, they "didn't feel good." They felt that the 15-minute drive to and from the office allowed them time to prepare for their day and decompress on their way home, which helped them shift between "modes." Working from home, the walk across the house from the kitchen to a desk did not appeal to them. Participant 123254 shared,

> I like going to work, I like that, even if it's only a 10- to 15-minute drive, that decompression from home space to workspace and then workspace to home space—is kind of a way that I tune those two brains out and kind of get into a different mode, and a 2-second walk down the hallway just did not do that for me. So it's one of those things that I think that, that could be one of the bigger things about working from home that is probably the most difficult.

All six of the study participants who had missed "going to work" shared that they had difficulty detaching from the office and maintaining a healthy work–life balance in a remote work environment. However, Participant 141020 shared that "I think that the benefits of remote work outweigh the costs."

Participant 180404 had a very specific issue with the trend in web meetings of not turning on one's camera, which gave others the perception that their attention was somewhere else. Participants also shared that, with multiple monitors needed to manage multiple tasks, they felt that it was easy to lose focus when participating in web meetings. By contrast, they felt that the

"multi-tasking email checking" would not have happened during an in-person meeting in a conference room. Participant 180404 shared,

> So, I almost always have my camera on so you can see when somebody's wanting to start talking. Just eye contact, and you can see I use my hands a lot, and it's tricky when people don't, because then are they fully engaged? Are they actually participating? So, if they're on mute and with no camera, they're definitely working somewhere else. So, they were on their phone, you know, or are they—and I'm completely guilty of that, too, that even in some meetings that kind of drone or droning on—check some emails, and I'll do some other stuff, and maybe I'll turn my camera off for a little bit. So that's good that you can get some things done in double time. But at the same time, you're not committed. You're not there, you know.

Participant 191139 felt that it helped some professional staff to step up and take ownership of their work. With no one there to look over their shoulder or supervise them directly, it was up to the management to set expectations and for the staff to exercise more independence in the delivery of results. This participant perceived this to be an unexpected learning opportunity associated with a remote work environment:

> You know, people go to remote work, so they understood my expectation of them was to get the job done, how they did it or when they did it, was not all that important to me. It's just the end product that matters, so I think that that helped me, whereas if you're, I think some people would have struggled if I was more of a micromanager and wanted to know what everybody was doing every second of every day.

Participant 200943 expressed curiosity about the future of brick-and-mortar office locations. If the impacts of the pandemic did not adversely impact organizational performance,

would there be a cost savings associated with eliminating physical office spaces? Participant 200943 also wondered, "If employees are allowed to decide whether or not to return to their workspace, would they?" They mused about the potential impact of 40% of commercial office space in a city ending up vacant, and concluded that, as long as the office space was available, people would come trickling back in. Participant 200943 shared,

There is a lot of pushback from companies wanting to end that practice and not allowed to work from home anymore, and have their employees all coming to the office, and I think part of that push is also sort of ours, the way our real-estate market is set up. You know, if you go downtown in a big city, it's 30% or 40% or 50% commercial spaces, and as long as those commercial spaces continue to exist, there's going to be people that are continuing to work in the office, because otherwise they're sitting there empty.

Auto-Coding Outputs

Auto-coding is a process where research data is analyzed using qualitative data analysis software specifically designed to identify recurring words or phrases present within the interview transcripts (O'Kane et al., 2021). This software benefits from advances in natural language processing and machine learning to conduct analysis of qualitative data. CAQDAS was used to complement the manual coding performed during this research to reduce bias and provide consistency (O'Kane et al., 2021). Figure 6 shows the auto-coding completed for all compiled transcript responses with the interviewer narrative removed from the transcripts.

Figure 6

NVivo Auto-Coding of Combined Transcripts
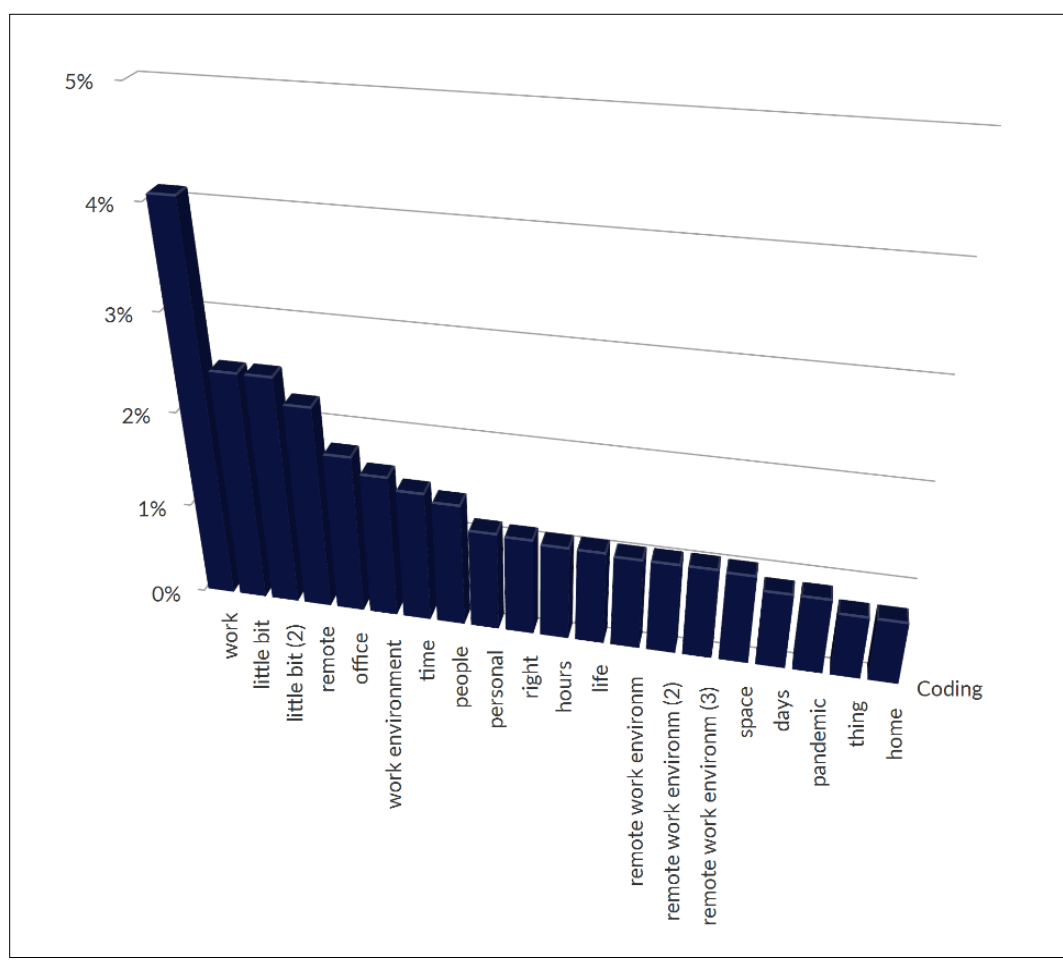
The value of combining the NVivo data with manual codes is illustrated in this figure. As shown, commonly used phrases such as "little bit," "work," and "remote work environment" were common codes that appeared but were filtered out as they were germane only to the language used in the interview process and were of no use in capturing categories or themes that related to the study participants' common lived experiences. These raw data were interpreted by NVivo to demonstrate the value of researcher coding combined with CAQDAS.

Emergent Themes

The 18 interviews in this study totaled approximately 16.5 hours and produced 70 pages
of narrative data to be analyzed. Ravitch and Carl (2021) posited that themes do not simply
emerge from the data gathered by the researcher but are instead actively constructed and
developed by the researcher while analyzing the data. For example, Køster and Fernandez (2021)
used the following example: "Rather than ask how chronic illness shapes one's experience in
general, the researcher may ask how chronic illness shapes one's temporal experience, embodied
experience, sense of self, and so on, and each of these might be investigated in more detail." (p.
152). Following Creswell and Creswell's (2018) method for analyzing the interview data, the
researcher completed the following steps.

- Step 1: Data Familiarization. The researcher was immersed in the collected data,
  through interviews, observations, and the transcript documents. This involved
  reading, re-reading, and reviewing the interview transcripts, so the researcher became
  intimately familiar with its content and context.

- Step 2: Coding. As described earlier in this chapter, coding comprised the systematic
  process of labeling, categorizing, and organizing the data into meaningful categories.
  Thess codes were developed inductively (emerging directly from the data) and were
  obtained through the use of coding by hand and CAQDAS.

- Step 3: Categories and Patterns. The researcher identified categories or patterns
  emerging from the coded data. These categories represented recurrent ideas, feelings,
  or phenomena within the data that helped address the research questions.

- Step 4: Constant Comparison. This technique involved comparing and contrasting
  data within and between different sources to refine and validate emerging categories.

The researcher periodically compared or recoded the raw data with previously coded data to ensure consistency and accuracy.

- Step 5: Memoing. The researcher developed and maintained a narrative log to record thoughts, reflections, and progress during the analysis process. This helped in documenting the analytical journey and aided the researcher in interpreting and developing the findings.

After completing these steps, the researcher spent 13 months reviewing and reflecting upon both the codes (110) and categories (49). Five themes emerged:

- Theme 1: *Navigating Connectivity Gaps and Remote Communication Challenges*. Study participants shared their experiences being disconnected from their colleagues, both physically and functionally. The remote work environment created barriers to accustomed interactions for knowledge workers who participated in this research.

- Theme 2: *Isolation and Social Distance Contrasting with Freedom and Flexibility*. Participants shared both the benefits and drawbacks they experienced while working in remote environments. While these knowledge workers felt a newfound sense of freedom and independence, as well as the ability to manage their own schedule effectively, these feelings of self-determination were counterbalanced by feelings of separateness and isolation. For some, their work became more difficult.

- Theme 3: *The Intersection of a Remote Work Environment and Family Dynamics*. Participants shared positive and negative effects of a remote work environment on family dynamics. For some knowledge workers with children, reduced commutes meant being able to walk their children to school. For other knowledge workers—or

for colleagues trying to collaborate with them—children could be obstructions to work performance.

- Theme 4: *Navigating Remote Work Environments*. Participants observed that the physical space within which they worked was a factor that could influence their work performance. These knowledge workers were thrust into an alternate work environment overnight and had to develop new strategies for performing their day-to-day tasks and create new pathways for communication in the remote work environments they now worked within.

- Theme 5: *Collaboration, Leadership, and Relationships in Remote Teams*. Participants touched on the ways that company leadership and staff management could be done effectively in a remote work environment based on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. For all study participants, this transition created new challenges to maintaining existing professional relationships and to creating new ones. Several of the knowledge workers credited the strength of their relationships prior to the COVID-19 pandemic with their ability to remain effective in a remote work environment.

The titles of the emergent themes capture participants' experiences associated with communication, isolation, work–life balance, performance, and team dynamics in remote spaces. The following sections describe how each theme emerged from the data through the coding process. Each theme is presented individually along with supporting quotes from study participants.

Theme 1: Navigating Connectivity Gaps and Remote Communication Challenges

This theme captures how study participants were impacted by changes in communication brought on by the transition to a remote work environment during the pandemic. The code "communication" was used 40 times in study participants' transcripts and fell within the communication category. Other common codes identified by the researcher associated with this theme included "conversations" (16 times), "interaction" (24 times), "connection" (33 times), "question" (43 times), "screen share" (42 times), "email" (32 times), and "bandwidth" (18 times). Categories contributing to this theme included "communication," "interaction," "emails," "meetings," "connection," and "change." All 18 participants indicated that communication across their organizations changed and required more attention and adaptation for them to remain connected during this transition to a remote work environment. Participants shared that while technologies allowed them to adapt and remain productive, more than half expressed a need or preference for in-person interaction as well as a need to reengage face-to-face to feel connected to their colleagues.

An individual's ability to stay engaged during the performance of their work in a remote environment felt important for the knowledge workers in this study, and a lack of "effective" or "clear" communication made performing their work harder. Study participants felt that a lack of interpersonal interaction was challenging, especially when learning from others or attempting to work on collaborative projects. Participant 200295 believed they would be set adrift working remotely, like

> I'm just totally gonna be floating off in space and not be able to figure out what's going
>
> on and kind of not be able to communicate with people and learn things as quickly as I
>
> could in in person.

Participant 140642 shared that they did not feel comfortable with the process or their working situation, expressing uncertainty and uneasiness within the remote work environment: "I think that communication was definitely different and not as stable as other times in my work experience." Participant 180313 shared the challenge they had "getting responses" from other parties who may not have had the same familiarity with technology or with whom they did not have an existing relationship. They felt like some people withdrew from responsibilities: "I find people are very reluctant to pick up the phone and talk, I find that people are less likely to meet in person." Participant 120411 found that while they may have been willing to communicate, in some instances, their low internet bandwidth was an issue that created a barrier to effective communication: "Bandwidth would get eaten up, so it would definitely impact my ability to communicate."

This latter sentiment, that quality of internet service impacted their ability to communicate when working remotely, was expressed by 13 of the 18 study participants. One participant shared that there were some challenges with communication when a relationship was not present prior to transitioning to the remote work environment. They felt that office camaraderie suffered, and though, initially, social events were attempted using web meeting services such as Zoom and Teams, these efforts fell by the wayside when, as in some instances, they were found to highlight the lack of in-person interaction. Participant 710404 expressed that connection was an important part of communication: "So just, again, that sense of connection is important, even though we're kind of scattered." Participant 160524 shared that they had to ask more directly to schedule meetings with their supervisors, and this made having normal conversations about resolving issues more awkward and difficult:

If I had an issue with a coworker, normally in person, I could walk up to my manager's desk and be like, "Hey!"—sort of, like, just organically have a conversation and mention something. It's awkward when you're remote because everything's more of a big deal, so I'd have to send him a calendar invite to formally engage.

Participant 130331 shared that, overall, their team was flexible and able to adapt to this new way of working, recognizing there was no alternative and they simply needed to do their best. This participant stated that communication in a remote environment was only temporary:

This was more of just, a temporary thing; we're complying with what the state was doing—that's what it felt like to me—and so I feel like there was a level of like, let's just put up with this because this is what we're being told to—it's like a shelter in place kind of thing.

Similarly, Participant 134950 felt that the interruptions, while noticeable, were minimal and that, overall, the transition to a remote work environment did not have a dramatic impact on communication:

Nothing seemed different. I mean, it's become sort of a meme that you know kids walking, the dog comes in, people are late, internet's broken, internet's down, or people live streaming, and they can't see you or hear—it's just the technical issues.

Participant 200925 observed that communication between senior and junior staff members suffered:

Starting out my career [during the pandemic], I felt really lost, and after bouncing around for a couple of years, I was really looking for some partnership, and to actually, like, learn something and immersed myself in it, and I felt like, for me personally, doing that

in person and, you know, with a team that I could ask all the questions to all the time, made a big difference.

Participant 140642 emphasized the importance of an in-person connection:

I think if you've been in a role for a while and you have had that opportunity to work in person, then I think it's possible to work from home and know what you're doing, but I think coming in new or fresh, or even if you've not been there for a long time, it can be difficult to ask the questions that you need to ask when it's on a virtual format. I think it is a bigger barrier than just hopping over to someone's office and saying, "Hey I have this question."

Another element of communication that one participant identified as a challenge was missing out on not only the in-person communication, but also the non-verbal communication through simply being in the presence of others and observing and listening to conversations. Participant 180524 noted that in a remote work environment, less communication occurred naturally, and interactions with other staff had to be prioritized and intentional:

If you're out to lunch with someone or sitting in a conference room with them, like, you can kind of hang out, things would naturally come up. So yeah, [work from home] definitely created a little extra work because you just have to be a bit more organized in having an agenda and having a plan because you're staring at each other's faces on the screen, and you have to make the best use of that time, can know exactly what's happening, so I hear something and "sort of" absorb it, and yeah, there's no way, you can't just absorb information. You have to be very intentional, immersed in something to really learn it.

As noted in the chapter introduction, one unexpected but universal observation made by the study participations was that when working from home, quality of internet service was one of the major determinants of whether participants felt that they, or others, were effective working remotely. Participant 120411 expressed this clearly: "I would say [with remote work] it was mostly difficulties related more to the availability of reliable internet service." Participants tied the need for quality internet service to how knowledge workers interacted with internal and external stakeholders when the transition to a remote work environment occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even for those who eventually transitioned back to spending time in the office periodically, they were still more commonly holding meetings through a screenshare than ever before. The knowledge workers interviewed in this study indicated that regardless of the location, in a remote environment or in an office setting, they were constantly online. Participant 160524 expressed this feeling:

> When I must go into the office—because I'm on tech team now and I manage all the enterprise applications—I'm constantly meeting with people all over the company who aren't in the office. So, it's like I'm in my office, physically, to then just sit at my desk and talk to everyone on Zoom.

Participant 200925 found that being in a remote work environment prevented them from printing physical copies of documents, marking them up, and handing them directly to other individuals in person. They said they also experienced difficulties communicating changes in a remote work environment. The participant stated,

> I mean, a remote environment definitely can be challenging, especially, I think, with consulting work we do. And, you know, simply just the maps we produce and being able to just draw on something and show them what you want, and in that way versus having a

try to do it over the phone, share your screen or something like that, it's harder [in a

remote environment].

The introduction of new communication platforms and improvements in technology,

coupled with shifting attitudes around work–life balance and the COVID-19 pandemic, have

accelerated remote work arrangements for knowledge workers nationwide. While a remote work

environment can result in positive experiences, it also presents its own set of unique challenges

Many study participants felt that although a remote work environment was suitable for some, it

was not, in their view, suitable for everyone. Participant 141020 shared that not everyone was

able to cope and succeed within a remote work environment: "Working from home works for

some personality types and not for others, and I think it will work well for some positions, some

types of jobs, and not for others." One participant observed that there were generational

differences related to communication, and older team members were often unwilling to adapt to

the new office environment. Participant 130742, who noted that age differences led to challenges

with communication, shared,

Mostly some of our, uh, older staff members or even my partners. It's like, "This is

stupid. What are we doing? This is ruining our business," and so those are the guys, you

know, when I shoot them an email, they don't respond, or they refuse to use Teams or

Zoom or do any of that.

This theme, navigating connectivity gaps and remote communication challenges,

captures how the transition to a remote work environment altered knowledge workers'

interactions with one another. Though the five themes identified by the researcher can be

considered independently, there is overlap across themes, and communication challenges are

present across several other themes, as communication was the most common category identified in the study.

Theme 2: Isolation and Social Distance Contrasting with Freedom and Flexibility

This theme captures the contrast between the freedom and appreciation participants expressed and the drawbacks they experienced associated with a remote work environment. The code "positive" was used 20 times in study participants' transcripts and fell within the category of "quality." The code "negative" was used 20 times in the transcripts and fell within the category of "difficult." Other common codes associated with this theme included "benefit" (24 times), "isolation" (22 times), "flexibility" (43 times), "freedom" (13 times), "better" (41 times), "worse" (23 times), and "social" (29 times). Categories contributing to this theme included "difficult/tough," "performance," "personal," "work/life," "time," and "job." Seventeen of the 18 participants expressed some positive feeling related to a remote work environment, and all 18 participants attached some negative feeling to a remote work environment.

Remote work associated with the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted established norms and served as a catalyst for change on multiple fronts. The experiences shared by workers, employers, and (indirectly) families illustrate that this was a truly unique and transformational event in the history of human work. One common thread in the participants' descriptions of the remote work experience was the balancing act it demanded, offering flexibility to manage one's schedule independently while introducing new challenges, such as maintaining a healthy work–life balance, needing self-discipline and motivation, and struggling with loneliness, isolation, and lack of human contact. Participant 190336 shared their experience being able to do more work from a remote setting:

It wouldn't be like I'm unilateral all positive or all negative, but the benefits were perfect

for me at the time. I was looking to transform my practice anyways, and it gave me the

ability to do that a little easier.

More than half the study participants believed they were personally more productive in

remote work environments. While all participants noted that a remote work environment was

"not for everyone," some expressed this more strongly than others. Participant 200230 expressed

a positive experience with a remote work environment that they had not previously had: "I think

it's great. I think it was something I never tried before COVID hit, and I just find I'm way, way

more productive at home." Not surprisingly, half the study participants expressed that they felt

more productive working independently using new tools that were developed to improve

collaboration between remote workers. Participant 160524 shared,

I feel like I work less, but when I do work, I'm more productive, I guess. Um, especially

because I have Slack at my fingertips, I have Teams, I have Zoom—like, there's nothing I

can't do primarily with those tools.

For those in the senior-level category who had never had experience with a remote work

environment, four participants seemed to be positively surprised. Participant 190336 said,

"Working from home is awesome and, and I wish that the pandemic had happened earlier in my

career so that it would have normalized the ability to work remotely sooner and in my

professional line of work." Ten of the 18 study participants expressed more neutral feelings

associated with their experiences around a remote work environment. One participant expressed

that, generally, it remained business as usual, with a few quirks. Participant 200925 stated flatly,

"I haven't had a ton of issues with remote work." The feeling that steps taken during the

pandemic were necessary and that their experiences were neither predominantly positive nor negative was common within this group of 10 participants. Participant 200943 observed,

> I would say, overall, my opinion is relatively neutral to slightly positive. I do think you know that having the ability and the flexibility to work from home is a good thing in general for, you know, like all workers, not necessarily myself, but just a lot of industries and society as a whole.

Fourteen of the 18 participants viewed a remote work environment as an employment benefit that will, and should, be offered to knowledge workers in the future. They perceived the pandemic-induced shift to a remote work environment as an opportunity to promote remote work as the vision of the modern working world in the near future. Participant 114422 shared the following perspective:

> I like the flexibility, but I don't like it as a day-to-day reality. I, like, you know, if every now and then I could travel, you know, and work, you know, leave for vacation today early and just do a work, working from travel for a day and then get in a 4-day weekend.

Six of the 18 participants stated that remote simply worked for them. Participant 130742 shared, "From my personal experience, I think that it's a good thing to offer to people." Study participants shared a newfound appreciation of the freedom that a remote work environment afforded all employees—a freedom that replaced some skepticism prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 180404 observed,

> I had a really hard time kind of perceiving how are we really going to actually perform as a team. How could this be possible? And obviously, going in with those biases, you know, my opinions certainly changed, for the better, kind of coming out the other side.

For three of the study participants, their direct experience with a remote work environment modified their perspectives of it for themselves and the teams of which they were a part. Many participants also noted that as the remote work environment stretched from weeks into months, they learned about and adapted to their new working environment and found ways to make it work for them, identifying new ways to benefit from their new working environment. Participant 130742 described this evolving perspective:

> I work from home, you know, in the morning for a few hours and go into the office for a few hours, and I think, as long as it can be managed appropriately, it's a good benefit to have. I've spent a lot of time commuting over the course of my career and being able to save that time is super valuable, especially for me with young kids.

> Five of the 18 participants noted that they felt great about the remote work environment at the onset of the pandemic, since they were home and comfortable, but eventually the novelty wore off, and the isolation of working from home began to have a negative impact. Participant 180524 said,

> It's been a lot of up and downs in terms of how I feel about remote work. Currently, I love it. When the, at the onset of the pandemic where we were first at home, I think it was awesome. I loved it for those first couple of weeks and then went through a period of like, "Oh, my God, this is horrible! It's really hard to be separated from my coworkers."

Distractions can present challenges when working from home that would not otherwise be present when working from an office. Most study participants expressed that they and their colleagues developed a mutual understanding and had patience with other staff who experienced unexpected distractions when working in a remote setting. Participant 200230 shared their experience:

One of my partners, he had trouble working from home. You know, it just, when he was

home, you could tell it was just this din in the background, and, you know, dogs barking,

kids screaming, you know. You can see how it's hard to get anything done. I mean

literally. This guy has two little boys. I think they're like 13 and 11, and, like, you know,

you, you're on a phone call, and after about 10 minutes, one of them is gonna hit the

other, and there'll be, you know, screaming in the background.

Study participants shared that other stressors frequently had a negative impact on their

experience with a remote work environment. Not only were they stranded at home, but

oftentimes their household included a spouse or partner and children. They also had the societal

stress or fear associated with the pandemic itself, which had nothing to do with the transition to a

remote working environment. These factors also played a role in the shared experience of

knowledge workers who participated in this study. According to Participant 141020,

That was such a unique time where we all are trying to, you know, let's say, work a 40-

hour work week in, as you know, the typical American world we're in, and now you have

somebody who comes in and expects 20 hours of your work day, and does the same for

your spouse who's in the other room trying to do the same thing? So, in the end, I feel

like, you know, most of us just felt like we were crappy in our job during that time.

Crappy at being a parent at that time, crappy at homeschooling our kids, which none of us

ever signed up for nor thought was a good idea.

Some observed that the remote work environment, namely the use of web meetings, was not as

conducive to resolving complex situations, and the inability to connect face-to-face was noted as

a drawback. Participant 180313 shared,

I'm a bureaucrat, and I have no shame about that, and I can deliver some bad news to

people, and I have found that sitting in a conference room with an agent and their client

delivering bad news as a person with nonverbal communication, that is not as offensive,

this is different than over WebEx or virtual, they can take it differently.

Several study participants expressed challenges separating their personal and professional

lives. They felt they had trouble transitioning from one to the other or working earlier or later

than they would have in a traditional office setting. Some participants felt that those additional

work hours (more than 8 hours a day) were easier to put in, but they did identify this as a

drawback associated with working from home. Participant 130331 shared,

Having that flexibility [to work from home], I thought it would afford me—but working

from home has not been as great, I haven't really leveraged it as much [to create a

balance] because I just, I just, I kind of, like, having that bifurcation of work and personal

life, you don't get that working from home.

Some participants believed that if they did not have a physical office, remote work from

home might become a more standard practice for all. Participants observed consistently that

many people did not have a home workspace that was suitable for performing their job, and that

presented real challenges for some, though not all. Participant 200230 shared, "It's only one of

the reasons that working at home is easy for me, I have a home office that's conducive to work."

Some felt that if they had not invested money and time in a traditional brick-and-mortar office,

they would have been quicker to abandon it. As Participant 123254 expressed,

If we didn't pay to have all the irritation of owning this space and owning all the crap

that's in it and everybody just decided to actually have workstations at home and make it

a real [permanent] thing, I think I would feel more open to doing something along those

lines if that was going to be the case, but I don't like the back and forth [between working

at home and in the office] because I don't have, like, a great setup at home, and I doubt

that many people do.

As noted in the chapter introduction, many participants expressed interest in a hybrid

working environment regarding the physical location where they performed their job. Participant

140642 shared,

I would want to do 3 days a week in the office, but, like, the beginning of my life being

trained up in whatever job I go into, I'd want to be like in person [full time], probably for

the first couple months, but then I'm trying to be able to grow into having a couple days a

week remote permanently.

Some participants who shared these perspectives were still in the process of developing an

understanding of their employers' expectations around when a remote work environment was an

option and defining expectations for when they were expected to be in the office as the pandemic

restrictions were lifted. Participant 200943 stated,

I do think being in the office provides me the benefit of, like, it's easier for me to fill out

my time. Like, if I'm sure, on work it's pretty easy for me to take a few minutes and go

see if someone else needs help with something and kind of get a quick task that can

maybe fill an hour or two out of my day. Whereas if I was working from home, I would

be more likely to take that extra hour to, you know, handle some personal stuff around

the house or, whatever, go and run some errands.

Some participants found that it was convenient working at home in a remote work

environment. The personal freedom it offered seemed appealing, but as one participant

expressed, that novelty wore off and they expressed that occasional remote work was a nice

option to have, but they preferred not to spend their work life in a remote environment.

Participant 114422 expressed this sentiment:

> I like the flexibility [of remote work], and I like it as an option, and I don't like it as a
> day-to-day reality. I, like, you know, if every now and then I could travel, you know, and
> work from wherever.

Two study participants alluded to the energy they perceived when working in a shared
space in close proximity to other people—an opportunity they lost when they transitioned to a
remote work environment. For these study participants, they felt that even with the technologies
available, there was a strong sense of disconnection from others. Participant 134950 shared,

> When you're in the office, you sort of know you left your house to go somewhere and
> focus on something that's not your house and to it's being in an, in a place with other
> people, whether that's, you know, on a basketball court, in the office you're all sort of
> working on the team towards something—even if you're working on separate projects,
> you're still there for the same reason.

The other participant who felt isolated shared that even when the pandemic restrictions began to
lift, others were not going back in to the office. This participant was interested in seeing their
colleagues but, after visiting the office, found it empty and unsettling. Participant 180524 said,

> I'm lucky because our main office is near here, where I live. Um, so I can go in if I want
> to now, and I've done it a couple of times, but I found it really depressing. There is, like,
> there was nobody there, you know, and it was almost eerie.

This theme centers on contrasts in feelings and perceptions of knowledge workers in a
remote working environment. Study participants expressed a newfound freedom and felt
empowered to make their own decisions on what to do independently with their time to be more

efficient and effective at managing their professional and personal lives. On the other hand, they were subject to feelings of isolation, limited contact with other team members, and lack of direct connection with their professional peers while working alone in their homes.

Theme 3: The Intersection of Remote Work and Family Dynamics

This theme centers on the change in dynamics that occurred between professional and personal lives as knowledge workers transitioned to a remote work environment. The code "family" was used 86 times within study participant transcripts and fell within the category of "family interaction." The code "remote work" was used 39 times in study participant transcripts and fell within the category of "work environment." Other common codes associated with this theme included "child" (12 times), "home" (215 times), "kids" (57 times), "parenting" (14 times), "personal" (43 times), and "time" (196 times). Categories contributing to this theme included "regular life," "home," "family," "work/life," "time," and "parenting."

All study participants shared both the positive and negative impacts of remote work on their personal and family lives. As the pandemic transitioned an in-office workforce into a remote workforce overnight, children were also placed in quarantine and schools shuttered, placing everyone within their respective homes for the foreseeable future. The remote work environment can have a complex relationship with family life. Modern technology had already begun to blur the traditional boundaries of work and family life and removing, for some, long commutes and the cubicles. At the same time, all 18 study participants expressed that remote work environments associated with the COVID-19 pandemic blurred the lines between their professional and personal lives. Study participants had trouble experiencing the same level of enjoyment in their professional lives, while 11 of 18 study participants expressed they

experienced an improvement in their personal lives and attributed this to a remote work environment.

One challenge associated with a remote work environment for study participants was managing childcare both in and out of the home trying to stay professionally engaged, and also weather the storm of a global pandemic outbreak. During the COVID-19 pandemic, study participants with children encountered conflicts with home schooling, lack of childcare, and, even when a slow return began, a total lack of stability or consistency. Study participants, even those without children in the home, shared they could have their workflow disrupted by colleagues dealing with a crowded house, interrupt Zoom calls, or impacting access to other team members. One study participant expressed that daycares could be "shuttered for weeks" without notice overnight, even when testing and vaccines became prevalent. Participant 180404 shared that, "I've noticed from some of our other employees with, like, your kids at home, or when daycares were closed or impacted. That's a huge negative impact."

As both managers and employees adapted to the remote work environment, the expectation of being responsive outside of regular business hours was observed to become more blurred because of the transition to a remote work environment. Participants observed that this issue was present prior and is a result of the digital working world knowledge workers are all part of. Knowledge workers are not simply punching out on a clock and going home, people are all connected to our work through emails and text messages, and the tendency is to respond immediately, anytime, and anywhere, and participants felt that this increases employee stress and is has a negative impact on their personal lives. Participant 180313 felt, "It's important for managers and institutions to be mindful of when our emails are getting sent out and if your

employees are sending out emails after core hours." Participant 130419 shared,

> It is harder to disconnect when you work from home. It is easier, I think, for your work to bleed into the times of day that you're trying to designate as non-work time. I think it just requires additional discipline, and I think having a designated workspace really helps.

Participant 191139 expressed a firm ability to simply "shut it down" at the end of the day. For them, not being in a physical office helped them walk away from the computer without feeling they would get pulled into anything at the last minute. As they shared,

> One of the things, I mean, I may start at 5:30 a.m., but pretty close to 4 o'clock, I'm shutting the computer off and moving on. It's Miller time and I'm, you know, unplugging for the rest of the day.

> For Participant 141020, their perception of a positive or negative experience ultimately came down to whether an individual had access to a separate, dedicated, well-equipped workspace in their home where they could perform their work. This was frequently an advantage identified by mid- and senior-level study participants, but many entry-level staff did not have access to such a home office environment, and this was perceived as a challenge for Participant 141020:

> If there are children home, it's a huge negative for remote work. It's just, it's … and, uh, if I'm, for example, doing a lot of writing, I find a lot of times I work better at home because I can just squirrel away. I've always been the type of person who used to just go to the library, you know, and work in a quiet room for 6 hours. An office environment is full of distractions.

Likewise, Participant 130331 observed that they found it challenging to manage their personal and professional lives when working in a remote environment, as their family would expect

attention during the day or continue with their regular routines around the house without any regard for other family members who were trying to work from home. This participant felt that,

> Working from home is harder on my personal life. The office that I have set up … just puts more strain on, you know, I have to tell my wife like, "Hey, keep it down, please don't do your regular life, you know, you can't listen to music." She's home, too, and so that's a little bit of a strain, but you know, I've been fortunate to be able to basically build an upstairs office above our barn, when that's done it will help.

Participant 193339 had difficulty sharing their home with their partner as a common workspace. Without having privacy, away from their partner and children, the couple had difficulty completing tasks and participating in calls and meetings. They felt they were "getting in each other's way," and it was also hard finding any personal space. Participant 193339 shared,

> Both my wife and I work from home full time, and one thing that presents you some of the challenges which is when you don't have a space from your partner. You're dealing with all of the stresses of work and maybe less aware of giving your partner space to deal with that—it can be hard.

One participant (123254) who lived alone found that the pandemic and a remote work environment negatively impacted their personal life by preventing them from being in the same physical environment as friends and family. This disconnection from professional colleagues was also felt to some extent in relation to family, especially for those who lived alone. Participant 123254 stated,

> I would say working remotely had, I don't think, had any effect or impact on some of the other stuff that general life throws at you. And then not really being able to fall back as

much on family and friends and maybe even coworkers as well just because you can't see them, I think that aspect proved a little more difficult than normal times.

Participant 200943 recognized that they would lose track of time and their personal needs entirely while working remotely. Without someone else around to interact with, they would move from one task to the next without any external influence to break them out of the cycle, and their focus on work would keep them engaged. To some degree, they felt a little "too switched on" and unable to disconnect from their professional life. As Participant 200943 expressed,

> I definitely found that, you know, I'd be working from home all day for 7 or 8 hours and that it would be the end of the day and I'll just do my normal evening routine and I realized like, "Oh, I didn't really leave the house at all today; I just was sitting at home, all day." And after that happened for a few days in a row, you know, I just started getting in my head like, you know, I'm just sitting inside all day, I'm not really doing anything.

Conversely, Participant 140642, instead of becoming too busy to spend time with family members, who had also transitioned to a remote work environment, they felt they could interact with family anytime and anywhere and still do their day job. For some, this improved the family's personal lives as a direct result of the transition to a remote work environment during the pandemic. Participant 140642 shared,

> I guess remote work in general, its effect on me was that my brothers could come and see me more. Both my brothers are software engineers, so they can do their work remotely, and they can travel pretty easily, so when we would go to Florida for Christmas, I would take like 2 weeks off, and they didn't have to do that because they could just work from Florida and be there with the family.

Participant 114422 noted positive outcomes for new parents with the transition to a remote work environment:

[Remote work] has been very positive for my friends who have … newborns. One of them has his company; its office lease expired basically in April of 2020, and they just never renewed it, so now another 100% work from home firm, and he had a baby at the same time, and that's been more than fine for him.

Another participant (190336) believed working from home helped them be a better parent. In working remotely, they did not lose time to a commute or being stuck in an office or away on business. They could simply be present, and they felt good about their ability to be there for their children. A remote work environment allowed them not only to be present as a parent, but also to provide for their children by retaining the ability to earn income during the pandemic. Participant 190336 shared,

I was able to effectively parent and be available for my kids. I lost less time to work, and by leaving, like, I'd have sick kids or have to have no daycare, and if I couldn't work remotely, I would not have been able to sustain an income.

Participant 134950, a senior manager, observed that because of the positive perceptions of a remote work environment, work-from-home options are now becoming a determining factor for potential hires. They shared that potential new hires are expecting this as part of their long-term employment expectations:

Everybody we've hired in the last, say, year and a half, remote work was in the package, you know, that ability to "Hey, if you're going away early on Friday just work from home for the first half a day"—that's totally cool, employers having that flexibility, [which] I think is sort of becoming standard.

Twelve of the study participants shared the positive experience associated with avoiding a commute to and from the office. Several of these individuals viewed the commute as lost time; with this travel eliminated by the transition to a remote work, participants saw a positive impact on their quality of life. No longer sitting in traffic gave back to some participants an hour or more a day. Participant 120411 shared,

> In my experience, working from home has basically allowed me to avoid having a commute in the mornings and the evenings, so, like, I can start work, you know, at like 7:00 a.m. and just work straight through until 3 on a day that my kid has a baseball game, and I could, like, get everything I needed to get done.

One study participant (160524) also observed an increase in their ability to address family obligations and to find time to perform necessary self-care. In fact, more than half the study participants commented on this beneficial aspect of transitioning to a remote work environment, whether such activities involved working out or simply cleaning their house. Participant 160524 shared,

> I feel like I'm happier. I mean, yeah, I just like it. I can do everything I want to do, like if I want to take a meeting and overrun your workout, and then they keep wandering and, like, plan dinner ahead.

> Participant 180524's spouse worked as a schoolteacher, and during the later stages of the pandemic, he had returned to work while she remained home. This created "dissonance" in the amount of daily social interaction experienced by the couple, which they viewed as a negative consequence of the transition to a remote work environment—a sentiment shared by other study participants as well. Participant 180524 stated,

I think it's been better for my home life, you know, if I can keep things clean, I can

grocery shop. I get to spend time here and invest in making my home a cozier, like, better

environment for me to spend time in. On the flip side. I think it's interesting because, you

know, my husband is a teacher, and he's with kids all day every day. He comes home,

he's exhausted. I've been home all day with nobody around me. And my social battery,

you know, is the same as when I woke up, so he gets home, and I'm like, "Oh, my God,

let me tell you about—this happened, this happened, and this happened," and he's like,

"I'm so tired, I wanna hit the hay."

In this case, the "social battery" of one partner who worked in a job that was an essential service

that could not be performed remotely was recharged daily, while the remote worker spent the day

alone; consequently, this couple ended up with conflicting needs, interests, and energy levels.

Study participants frequently mentioned the improved quality of life they associated with

the transition to a remote working environment as a result of the pandemic. This was expressed

through their descriptions of personal flexibility and opportunities to be around family. More

than half the study participants had not experienced a remote working environment prior to the

pandemic. Participant 130742 shared,

Prior to the pandemic, I never worked from home. It was never on my mind, never really

thought about it, and I was always, you know, I was always in the office at like 6 o'clock

in the morning, and I worked long days, and I would say the biggest change for me, and

even now, is that I don't do that anymore. I still get up early and work. But just for me it

gives me the ability to, like, walk the kids to school, do something like that.

Study participants shared their world of contrasts related to their remote work

environment. On the one hand, they were effusive about their new freedom to spend more time

with friends and family, but on the other, they struggled with some of the harsher professional and personal realities that come with working from home and being confined in a shared space.

Theme 4: Navigating Remote Work Environments

This theme captures how study participants adapted to the physical remote working environment as well as the challenges and opportunities they encountered as a result of this transition. The code "remote" was used 217 times in study participants' transcripts and fell within the category of "work environment." The code "environment" was used 42 times in participant transcripts and fell within the category of "change in environment." Other common codes associated with this theme included "office" (213 times), "home" (215 times), "new" (45 times), "learning" (31 times), "good" (47 times), and "bad" (19 times). Categories contributing to this theme included "space," "comfortable," "decisions," "people," "team," and "trust."

Participants shared that though the transition to a remote work environment as a result of the pandemic had a negligible impact on completing work tasks, it did have an impact on how they performed their work. As described previously, for some, the remote work environment offered an opportunity to escape the daily commute and gain more control over one's work–life balance. Yet, while a remote work environment allowed participants to maintain workplace productivity, it also introduced a series of challenges that threatened to undermine performance. During the pandemic, the remote work environment appears to have resulted in the perception of heightened productivity and job satisfaction for some; for others, it brought hardship and challenges related to isolation, distractions, and personal and professional burnout. Participant 180404 shared, "I was pretty surprised that we were able to pivot and still meet all our goals and serve our clients pretty seamlessly. Um, you know, I thought it would be a lot of bumps here." One participant (200230) said they felt very good about the opportunity the pandemic provided

to experience what it would be like to work in a remote environment. They had not previously worked remotely, and they perceived that they were far more productive than they had been in an office environment. Participant 200230 shared, "I think it's great. I think it was something I never tried before COVID hit, and I just find I'm way, way more productive at home."

Half the study participants (i.e., nine of 18) believed they were more productive working in a remote environment and likely to work longer hours if they were working from home than if they were working in a traditional office setting. Some of the reasons participants gave included fewer distractions, the ability to spend more time working, and working at the time of day during which they personally felt most productive. Participant 160524 stated succinctly, "I just feel like I'm a lot more efficient [in a remote environment]." Participant 180313, referring to their spouse, said,

> She's willing to give her company 9 hours a day, because she appreciates the opportunity to work from home, she doesn't have to commute. She doesn't spend money on fuel, she doesn't spend time on the road, and so, in her mind and heart, she justifies a nine-hour workday because of the opportunity.

Participant 191139 felt that "I think [working remotely is] positive. I mean, because I, especially, I typically start at 5:30 in the morning, and that 5:30 to 7-ish is my most productive time."

By contrast, the other nine of the 18 participants felt that their ability to perform their job was diminished in a remote work environment, and they felt disconnected from other team members. Indeed, communication-related challenges were prevalent among these study participants. In addition, some of them mentioned frequently that they struggled to work with others who were unresponsive or seemed to lack a work ethic. These experiences seemed to have

had a negative impact on their overall perception of a remote work environment. As Participant 123254 expressed,

> I think … it affects my productivity, yes, I don't think I'm as productive at home, as I am in the office I, there are other people even in our office that I think have the same output at home or at work, and I think that's just a personality trait.

Participant 140642, shared,

> I've had friends that were remote that I don't think benefited from being remote. So, I have a friend from college who already is not like the best worker, and I think she struggles with motivation, and she really thrives with, like, being with people. I don't think she holds herself accountable very well.

One study participant (130331) observed that some of their work performance was adversely impacted since their role required in-person meetings and interactions, and the pandemic eliminated their ability to perform this work as effectively. They felt that a lack of a personal connection made it more challenging to accomplish tasks that were simpler pre-pandemic. They perceived that the traditional approach of conducting business face to face was lost, and that was a major drawback. Participant 13033 shared,

> We were traveling to different towns meeting landowners, thankfully central Maine, and you know, the further north you got, the less people cared about COVID restrictions, So you know, in that respect, that allowed us to be good at what we were doing, allowed us to leverage our strengths to be there in person in spite of the pandemic.

Participant 200943 alluded to the contrast between public perception and their direct experience with a remote work environment. Their comment referenced mainstream articles touting the benefits of remote work environments, articles that, early on, reflected a "We're

never going back" mentality, that remote work was here to stay and that all employees would be better off adopting a remote work environment wherever possible. As Participant 200943 expressed,

> I think [remote work] affected my ability to do my job, a little bit. I do think that I was able to still be efficient and efficiently get my job done while working from home. You know, there's a lot of claims that it's increased efficiency with people working from home, and I don't necessarily think that means getting more work done.

Twelve of the study participants associated positive or negative outcomes with the team dynamic, a factor relevant both within or outside a traditional office setting. Four study participants believed the effectiveness of a remote environment specifically came down to the personality of the individual worker. They believed that some individuals were not self-motivated or qualified to work in a remote environment and that the team's overall performance could suffer due to an individual's personality. Participant 120411 said, "I think it depends on the person. So, I would [say] remote work can impact performance, but it's all employee dependent. So, like, I feel like I'm able to work remotely and still be very productive."

Three study participants had some direct experience with the drawbacks that a remote work environment can have on personal performance, including not being able to maintain focus, not being around other team members, and being distracted by family members who were not working. They also identified communication as a complicating factor; for instance, waiting on a response from others prior to initiating a task created performance challenges. Participant 190336 shared,

I might be more inclined to get distracted because I'm home, because I'm not as engaged,

or I'm not as intellectually stimulated in some of my work with these particular folks, and

so working remotely, I've got access to lots of different distractions via technology.

Participant 180524 commented,

There were definitely, and still are, times when I'm frustrated because in a face-to-face

environment, I could walk over to somebody and get an answer to a question in 10

seconds, whereas now it's something that is a more delayed process.

As noted in the chapter introduction, several study participants believed that the transition

to a remote work environment did not have any impact on the actual performance of their

organization, even though it did frequently alter their overall experience (e.g., "I didn't like it as

much"). Ultimately, from their perspective, while the experience may have been different, the

work still got done, and the overall outputs remained relatively unchanged. One study participant

seemed unsure of the overall outcome indicating that the "dust has yet to settle" and they had not

reached a conclusion on whether a remote work environment had ultimately impacted the

performance of their organization. Participant 130742 shared that "I don't think there were any

impacts to company performance as a result of remote work. I think it was … I'd say it was

comparable."

Nine of the study participants had experienced a remote work environment prior to the

onset of the pandemic. These individuals believed this had eased their transition into a fully

remote work environment, and they generally had more positive experiences to report. These

participants felt that their prior experiences working in a remote environment positioned them

better than others to remain productive when the transition to a remote work was mandated due

to COVID-19. Participant 193339 shared,

I would say, because I made that transition to remote work prior to the pandemic, it wasn't a hard step to take during the pandemic. I've been doing development from a home office over the past decade, and the transition from, you know, showing up to the office once or twice a week to whenever you need important partner meetings was pretty much the extent [of] my use of a traditional office.

Every participant, in some way, identified communication as a performance area where they faced challenges maintaining interactions with others at the same level they had prior to the onset of the pandemic. Discussions that previously could have been completed in person now need to occur online, over the phone, or, in some cases, not at all. Participant 200925 shared,

I absolutely think remote work has an impact on the performance of my job. I mean, I, like, I was just saying it all comes down to communication, I mean, I think, I mean, no matter what you're doing, there's gonna be some level of communication that that needs to be done. A remote environment affects that.

Similarly, Participant 200925 said,

Just thinking about what we do, and if everyone was working remote, and you're trying to file an application and, like, you have to, who is going to be going into the office to print it? I can't imagine how, you know, and just the scrambling it takes when you're all here, getting the work done together. I can imagine how that could easily result in these deadlines being missed, if you weren't just here doing it.

While all study participants observed these challenges, the most common perspective was that they learned that a remote work environment could work for them, and that having remote work as tool they could now access was of tremendous benefit. Participant 114422 had not previously had access to this tool: "I think [remote work] is a huge benefit. I think if a company

can offer it, people generally seem to perceive it as a perk, a nice thing, you know—the hybrid

model is well perceived." Participant 130419 felt that the benefits were not automatic and that, in

many instances, success in a remote environment required calculated efforts. Company policies

and management must be aligned so that remote work environments can be structured for

success. They believed that the best way to perform in a remote work environment was with

intention and taking personal responsibility for oneself: "I think [remote work] can be done

effectively with the right support, culture, and technology. However, it is not for everyone, and I

think it requires a degree of maturity and staff for it to be effective."

Participant 141020 felt that the transition to a remote working environment led to feelings

of separateness, but this varied depending on the other party. They felt that these feelings of

being apart from other team members were reduced when their colleagues or team members tried

to be available and responsive. Participant 141202 shared that:

There's sometimes more of a detachment when working from home, but that said, it

really varies by the individual. Some people working remote are readily available all the

time. So, they're as available sitting in a different state as they would be if they were

down the hall, and some people, you know, when they work from home, are, you know,

don't follow that method.

Study participants described the challenges they faced transitioning to a physical remote

working environment, which, for some, varied dramatically from what they had previously been

accustomed to in traditional work settings. They shared the benefits and drawbacks they

experienced trying to remain connected to their colleagues and performing their work at a time

when their office spaces were no longer accessible. Some were better prepared based on past

remote work experience and access to more conducive workspaces in their homes.

Theme 5: Collaboration, Leadership, and Relationships in Remote Teams

This theme captures how study participants' team dynamics and traditional approaches to staff management were altered as a result of a transition to a remote work environment and also highlights some of the leadership adaptations they made to remain effective despite the rapid change in working conditions. The code "management" was used 43 times in participant transcripts and fell within the category of "work decisions and performance." The code "collaboration" was used 33 times in participant transcripts and fell within the category of "team communication." Other common codes associated with this theme included "leader" (33 times), "relationship" (29 times), "junior" (17 times), "train" (24 times), "starting" (25 times), and "team" (64 times). Categories contributing to this theme included "team," "people," "productive," "managing," "interaction," and "decisions."

Generally, study participants observed that the pandemic-induced transition to a remote working environment impacted team dynamics and presented challenges related to spur-of-the-moment interactions with colleagues and managing staff remotely. Four participants felt strongly that personality and level of experience were the determining factors in whether an individual was, or would be, successful working in a remote environment. Participants who were early in their career (entry-level) when they transitioned to a fully remote environment stated that the prospect of entering the workforce was very intimidating and required an increased personal commitment to be an active contributing team member.

Many social interactions that participants experienced in the workplace were not always structured or planned. For some study participants, these "water cooler" conversations had been important parts of their daily pre-pandemic experience. Twelve of the 18 participants outlined significant challenges managing personnel and onboarding new staff after the transition to a

remote work environment. For the remaining six participants, they did not express any concern about the loss of this component of in-person management; that is, though they recognized the change, they did not view it as having had any real impact on their work performance. Participant 191139 stated,

> I think [remote work] was a negative impact on team dynamics. There was only a weekly check-in I'd have with staff one-way remote, but when we're in the office, you know, we bump into each other, I bump into them every day. It's on those, just those impromptu interactions like. That's the, that's the one downside, the big downside of remote.

While the use of web meetings and other digital sharing tools "made it easier to connect" when working remotely, participants still expressed an interest in, and need, for human contact. Some felt that team members would not make a concerted effort to stay connected if they were not in a shared office space. They also felt that their team members would not take the initiative necessary to stay socially connected during remote work. Participant 120411 shared,

> I would say that it makes it more difficult to maintain work relationships because you're not in the office every day. And so, I think there's a tendency for people in the office to reach out to you less because you're not there.

Participant 130331 observed that some people became more disconnected during the pandemic: "Even though we had more tools and technology than ever to remain in contact, some people made themselves unavailable." Some relationships suffered because colleagues became isolated and withdrew themselves from discussions with others. Participant 130331 shared,

> We had a meeting scheduled, [and my colleague] was like, "Hey, can we push this out a few months, I'm just not comfortable leaving my house, right now," and I think that's a relationship that suffered, you know, it's like, "Well, why don't we get on the phone, why

don't we just do, like, a Zoom call," and so this, like, fear of the other and the fear of kind

of the world had an impact.

For all study participants, this became (and still remains) a day-to-day part of how knowledge

workers interacted with each other. For many knowledge workers, web meetings became

commonplace, and for Participant 180404, the use of these tools was frequent and often

expected. They felt that the pandemic increased their opportunities to participate in social

gatherings online in both their professional and their personal life. As Participant 180404 said,

If you can't be there in person, you can still watch, or maybe watch a recording after the

fact. Like church services, a church I attend again. We're kind of in that hybrid format

where you can attend in person if you like, or you can stream, so again, so far more

remote, physically distant parishioners can attend and still participate.

Participants noted some drawbacks in professional relationships around expectations to

be more connected and responsive than they felt was reasonable. Participant 180313 found it

frustrating that during the pandemic, traditional business hours were not observed when

messaging with or interacting with staff members. Participant 180313 commented,

[Managers and leaders] doing the 6 o'clock at night emails or 9 o'clock or Saturday

afternoon and again, you know, it is a tool, it's remote, they're probably at home, not in

the office, and now they have this tool. But how appropriate is it and what is the message

to your staff if you're a 40-hour-week employee sending emails out on a Saturday?

Regarding onboarding new hires or interacting with younger employees, study

participants had mixed feelings and experiences. On the one hand, Participant 123254, for

instance, believed that younger team members in their office favored a remote work

environment: "I have noticed it's more of our younger employees that would prefer it or even

own it and take advantage of it more if we offered it more, but we haven't the sense of need since everybody kind of came back into the office."

On the other hand, four study participants believed that though they may have preferred to be remote, some entry-level staff may not have had the self-awareness to know that their professional development was being impacted. There were not the same opportunities to interact with new hires or staff who had things to learn about performing their work. Simply being able to connect with other people was "more difficult" in a remote environment, as Participant 140642 shared:

> There was one co-worker, he works remote [full-time] and I think it would have been helpful to have him in the office. You just are able to have those conversations more easily. I felt I could call them whenever I wanted to and, like, ask the questions I needed to ask when they came up, but I think even just having, like, those random one-off conversations makes a difference in, like, knowing your colleague, but also, like, learning random things from your colleague.

Participant 130742 reflected that personality had an impact on the ability of employees to get or stay connected when joining the workforce. They perceived that some would stay quiet and, because of this, did not get the mentoring or support they may have needed. Their perception was that these individuals suffered adverse consequences due to the remote work environment associated with the pandemic. Participant 130742 expressed,

> I would say, um, we had a few kind of young, younger employees that weren't super outgoing that just kind of, like, went home, and you weren't sure what they were doing, or if they were really getting what they needed in the mentoring environment. I would say that that was probably the hardest part of remote work.

Another study participant (193339) felt that the adverse impacts were temporal, and while new hires may have lacked direct experience with the work, their acumen with new technologies helped them bring a skillset that some more experienced staff might have lacked. From their perspective, team members have many skills to share with each other. Participant 193339 said,

> You'll get a lot of younger folks that are entering into the profession during this, and I believe that there will be a negative impact on them, but I don't necessarily think it's going to be 100% of the negative impact. They're wicked smart, right, and they're tech savvy, and their first experience of work is selecting Johnny, who's 62 years old, that you know, whatever, it takes you a little bit longer to, you know, to make that transition to using tools for remote work, so it's a mixed bag.

Participant 200925 felt that access to mentoring and support for a new hire was entirely up to the individual. That is, if one does not actively seek to grow professionally, then they will not, especially in a remote work environment. Opportunities were still there; individuals just needed to actively search for them in a new way during the pandemic. Participant 200925 shared,

> You have to be kind of self-motivated, especially if you're more junior. I think, if you're working remotely, to just kind of seek out more learning opportunities, and just kind of work generally to do so. I think that that, I think you definitely need to have a drive to do it, even as someone who wanted to learn, or it won't work.

Participant 200943 noted that if using a remote work environment had been voluntary and not an immediate government mandate, knowledge workers would have had more positive experiences with remote work environment. They believed that the external stressors of a global pandemic presented additional challenges that created negative perceptions because workers did

not have the choice. Being forced out of a work location where one may have been comfortable caused stress that, from their perspective, influenced the experiences of those impacted. As Participant 200943 described,

> I think working from home overall is a good thing for the majority of people. I think the engineering industry, in particular, has certain aspects to it that work from home doesn't really work well without, you know, sort of that face-to-face collaboration. I think part of the struggles with working from home that came about because of the pandemic maybe sort of happened because it was forced.

Likewise, Participant 114422 shared that professional and personal relationships were strained as a result of the pandemic-induced remote work environment. Some of this strain resulted from feelings of isolation and disconnection due to limited social interactions. Some participants had maintained numerous social connections prior to the onset of COVID-19, and many of these interactions and outlets for socializing ended abruptly, practically overnight. Participant 114422 shared,

> My girlfriend is 100% remote. She finally said she was going crazy, hated being home alone all the time. She wouldn't see anyone all day, I'd get home and I'd be tired, and she would just be excited to have somebody to talk to, and I just want to go straight to bed, so she finally ended up getting a workspace and in a co-working space in Portland just so she could get out of the house and connect with other people.

> Participant 190336, who had had experience with a remote work environment prior to the

pandemic, left their job because they believed their employer was not implementing a fair and balanced workplace policy. This was certainly a negative outcome for the employer and may

become more common in the post-pandemic world, with employers that do not offer the benefit

of remote work seeming less appealing to potential hires. Participant 190336 expressed,

> I felt that a former workplace was too rigid [regarding their remote work policy]; they
>
> were not willing to allow this because they didn't want to, and this would set a precedent
>
> for other employees that they should expect to be compensated for at-home work and,
>
> and, so they, like, wanted me to work but without getting paid. I ended up leaving the job.

Participant 160524 felt that while they were comfortable working in a remote environment

because they had experience working remotely in their role with their current company, they

would hesitate to take on a new role in another company if the position was fully remote.

Participant 160524 stated,

> I worked at this company for like 5 years in person, prior to going remote, so I might get
>
> people that can succeed, it's sort of a progression that I can do everything remote I can in
>
> person. But I don't know how it would feel to be 100% remote in a new job.

> Study participants continued to revisit how challenges with interpersonal communication

impacted their professional development and relationships. As Participant 180524 said, many

interactions "took more time" in a remote environment; "spur of the moment" problem solving

was a thing of the past, and this added time to completing tasks that previously could have been

addressed through a quick discussion in a shared physical space. Concerted efforts were required

to resolve an issue or question independently, and then eventually it was escalated to another

team member. What would have previously been a 15-minute conversation might have taken

days to resolve in a remote environment. Participant 180524 said,

> When we were in the office, I could walk over, stand at someone's desk, watch them pull
>
> it up, fix the problem, tell me why it happened, and it was resolved right then and there.

> Now I have to schedule 30 minutes on someone's calendar that they blocked out, so I can't actually see when they're available, when they're not available, whereas in the office, I could go over there, see if they were on a call.

Study participants observed that communication in a remote work environment required more planning and intention but also reduced some of what they viewed as frivolous interactions. If someone approached them with an issue or question while working remotely, they felt that inquiries were more thought out and structured, resulting in more efficient communication—which they perceived as an unexpected benefit. Participant 200230 felt that,

> People have to, if people are, you know, needing my time, my employees need my time, they have to call me, and they have to, like, get their thoughts together and actually not just nag me, actually think about what they want. So, I get coherent questions, and because they are coherent questions, it's actually productive, and it turns into billable time—make the project move forward.

All study participants expressed and understood that they were going through a temporal event together, and if all parties were invested in a positive outcome, those were often the results. For instance, Participant 130331 stated,

> I think it was more of just a temporary situation; we're complying with what the state was doing, that's what, that's what it felt like to me, and so I feel like there was a level of, like, "Let's just put up with this together and we'll get through it, because this is what we're being told to, it's like the shelter in place kind of thing." I think about partners that I work with, that I was working with, you know, subcontractors that, that were working from home too.

Each individual experienced strain in real but different ways. Everyone went through many of the same experiences, and knowledge workers had already been moving organically in the direction of more remote work; the pandemic simply forced a more rapid change. As Participant 130419 expressed,

I think it's a matter of trusting your team, and people can work remotely without a negative impact to their overall job performance. And I think having that extra degree of flexibility is a little bit of an equalizer so that people who are talented do not feel that they are sort of pushed out of the workforce if they can't be there in person.

One challenge that several study participants faced was maintaining meaningful connections with colleagues—a challenge that required active effort to address. Participant 160524 said that, in their experience, efforts to maintain connections to their team members felt forced and became monotonous. They felt these forced regular interactions were not productive if not focused. To hold web meetings with no express purpose was not an efficient use of time and resulted in resentment from staff who were forced to participate. Participant 160524 shared,

So, we have, like, an every-morning check-in. We all had to go on Teams or Zoom, and then we had, like, another after doing the check-in, and it was just, like, really horrible, left like a bad taste, with that daily, yeah, daily.

Another study participant believed that a positive or negative perspective on the remote work environment came down to the individual's level of experience. For those with more experience, the transition was broadly viewed as less impactful to their performance, while many viewed entry-level staff as struggling with the transition to a remote environment. Participant 140642 said,

I think if you've been in the role for a while and you have had that opportunity to work in person, then I think it's possible to go back to your home and know what you're doing, but I think coming in new or fresh, or even if you've not been there for a long time, it can be difficult to ask the questions that you need to ask when it's on a virtual format.

For some, whether they had a positive or negative experience with remote work, it came down to personal preference. One participant stated that they would have preferred to remain in the office if allowed. They openly recognized that some people were having great experiences with the remote work environment, but it simply was not something they enjoyed. Participant 134950 felt that,

For me, working from home] wasn't great. I know other people are loving it, you know, certainly kids at home, makes a difference, but I also think it's hugely dependent upon the person's individual discipline.

Conversely, another study participant was strongly in favor of a remote work environment. They felt that, overall, they spent more time with family and less time commuting. While they acknowledged that work relationships could suffer, they seemed to question whether that really mattered. For them, they had more time and ability to focus on what, for them, mattered most in their life. Participant 120411 shared,

I would say that working from home makes it easier to kind of like maintain, um, a connection with, like, you know, kids, family, and stuff like that because you're spending less time on commuting. I would say that it makes it more difficult to maintain work relationships because you're not in the office every day.

All study participants shared both their positive and negative experiences around performance and motivation in a remote work environment. Some were individual perceptions

while others were shared in common across most participant responses. Techniques for creating structure and setting boundaries to remain productive without overextending working hours was a common theme. Additionally, all study participants noted that, in order for teams to succeed in a remote environment during the pandemic, they felt that employers and team leaders needed to foster a culture of trust and accountability and to increase efforts to maintain open lines of communication.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to document the lived experiences of knowledge workers who underwent a rapid transition to a remote work environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Eighteen knowledge workers from the New England region were interviewed to gather their perspectives and shared experiences associated with this abrupt transition to remote. All study participants shared their experiences and insights through semi-structured interviews.

Participants identified both benefits and drawbacks associated with their remote work environments related to, for instance, communication and team interactions. However, the majority (17 of 18 participants) felt that a fully remote work environment would not be their preferred method of work after their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only one of the 18 study participants reported any interest or value in a fully remote work environment.

Five themes emerged from the data analysis, which was conducted both manually and through the use of CAQDAS. The five themes in included navigating connectivity gaps and remote communication challenges; isolation and social distance contrasting with freedom and flexibility; the intersection of a remote work environment and family dynamics; navigating remote work environments; and collaboration, leadership, and relationships in remote teams. The

researcher explored these themes further to generate a narrative of the lived experiences and perceptions of knowledge workers who had rapidly transitioned to a pandemic-induced remote work environment.

Chapter 5 explores the findings of this research study and offers an interpretation of the interview data collected, describes implications of the results, and recommends future action as well as directions for further study related to the rapid transition of knowledge workers to a remote work environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to document the shared experience of knowledge workers who rapidly transitioned from an in-person working environment to a remote work environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In remote work environments, individuals can feel isolated and disconnected and are more likely to leave their position compared with their peers working in more traditional office settings (Schwabel, 2018). Cooper and Kurland (2002) found that, just after the turn of the last century, remote workers commonly felt isolated from their coworkers and lost out on possibilities for organizational learning more often than those who worked in traditional offices. These findings were corroborated by Golden et al. (2008) and Carillo et al. (2021) regarding feelings of separateness and isolation among remote workers. Environmental surroundings, such as office space and other aesthetics, influence the experience of a remote work participant, and the physical and mental aspects of working remotely may help or hinder a remote employee's performance (Hickman, 2019). Workers who more effectively communicate with each other and express their appreciation for help and caring for each other's well-being have been shown to have the most success in increasing engagement and motivation ("Increasing Employee Engagement," 2015).

Previous research documented workers' experiences, including those of knowledge workers, with remote work environments; however, no pre-pandemic studies were extrapolated to provide insights into the impacts of remote work on knowledge-based industries in emergency contexts such as those experienced during the pandemic (Teodorovicz et al., 2021). In this study, the phenomenon of pandemic-induced remote work among knowledge-industry workers was cataloged to better understand how this rapid shift in work environments affected those within the modern workplace. Specifically, this phenomenological study collected interview data to

explore the shared experiences of participants who underwent a full or partial transition from office work to remote work during the 18 months from March 2020 to August 2021. The abrupt adoption of a remote working environment separated participants from heir accustomed interpersonal interactions, changing the ways that business was conducted and how team members communicated and interacted with one another (Espitia et al., 2021). Gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of knowledge workers who transitioned to a remote work environment can add value to the existing literature, especially as remote work continues to evolve in the face of changing interpersonal contact restrictions associated with the pandemic (Teodorovicz et al., 2021).

The researcher interviewed 18 knowledge workers who held entry-level, mid-level, or senior-level positions in their respective workplaces. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each transcription was coded, categorized, and then analyzed to identify common themes through the use of NVivo. The data were collected and analyzed and then viewed through the lens of the literature review and conceptual framework to draw conclusions discussed in this chapter. All study participants had direct experience with remote work and provided input through their responses to a series of standard interview questions (Appendix B). The semi-structured interviews (conducted via Zoom) encouraged participant feedback by utilizing open-ended questions. The study participants were knowledge workers all based in New England who experienced a rapid transition to remote work environments in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their placement in one of the three categories (entry-, mid-, or senior-level) was based on their time in their professional position. Entry-level participants had limited professional experience, were just starting their career (1–3 years) and required oversight in the performance of their work. Mid-level participants had several years of professional experience in

their industry (3–8 years), required minimal oversight, and may have had oversight of entry-level personnel. Senior-level participants had long-term professional experience (over 8 years), were considered proficient to perform their work independently, and may have had oversight of teams or entire practices. The years of work experience for the participants ranged from two years to 38 years. Of the 18 participants, six met the criteria for an entry-level position, six for a mid-level position, and six for a senior-level position. Regarding gender breakdown, 12 participants were male, and six were female. Age was not a datapoint collected for this study.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to document and better understand the lived experiences and perceptions of knowledge workers who underwent a transition in their working environment because of COVID-19. The individual lived experiences and perceptions of these knowledge workers were viewed in the context of them encountering the same phenomenon, in an effort to identify commonalities in their experiences. That is, the study documented the feelings and events that individuals experienced while working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What was the experience of knowledge workers who experienced a required change in their work environment from a traditional in-person physical setting to a remote at-home work environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2: How did knowledge workers perceive work performance relative to their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research documented both positive and negative experiences associated with working in a remote environment, producing an overall neutral picture of the participants' shared perspectives. The most commonly shared opinion of study participants, 14 of all 18 participants, was that a hybrid approach was the preferred approach to remote work. Ten of the 18

participants shared favorable feedback about the flexibility offered by a remote work environment, allowing them to spend more time with family, achieve a more reasonable work–life balance, and eliminate unpleasant commutes to and from the office. Some participants experienced difficulties with the transition, sharing that communication presented challenges and that trying to maintain connections with other staff members sometimes resulted in strained relationships. Some participants found that remote interactions took more time and could be difficult, depending to a great extent on personality or the strength of the relationship that existed prior to the transition to remote work. To maintain effective working partnerships, study participants expressed a need to collaborate with coworkers and other professionals in a meaningful, intentional way; otherwise, the relationship would suffer. This required team members to check in frequently with each other, not just for a specific reason, but to find new ways to connect in a remote environment, which prevented them from spending time together in a shared physical workspace. During the interviews, study participants recognized that some individuals might not be as engaged because of level of experience or capability, personality, or distractions in a home work environment.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

This research study sought to document and better understand the shared lived experiences of knowledge workers who transitioned to a remote work from home environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, the researcher presents an interpretation of findings related to the study's two research questions. The first question centered on the lived experiences of knowledge workers who transitioned from an in-person working environment to a remote setting. The second question focused on knowledge workers' experiences and perceptions

around the performance of their work and whether the remote work environment affected their daily work or the functioning of their organizations.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked, "What was the experience of knowledge workers who experienced a required change in their work environment from a traditional in-person physical setting to a remote at-home work environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic?" All study participants underwent a rapid transition to a remote work environment due to the. Eleven of the 18 participants expressed that the pandemic quarantine had changed their opinion about remote work, with six of the 11 perceiving remote work more favorably as a tool for remaining productive and five perceiving remote work less favorably now as a direct result of having been immersed in a remote working environment. This mixed result suggests that there is not a "one size fits all" approach. Parker et al. (2020) found, and this study corroborated, that for approximately 70% of knowledge workers some components of remote work had already become a part of day-to-day professional life prior to the onset of the pandemic.

This study found that 13 of 18 of the study participants expressed a preference for a hybrid work environment, spending time working together in a shared office, and having the flexibility to work remotely when needed. This preference for hybrid work demonstrates that a hybrid approach could be a suitable practice for the whole of knowledge workers, as opposed to an exclusively in-office or a remote-only environment, both of which would leave a majority of a large team dissatisfied. This satisfaction with their working environment could correlate with job satisfaction (Donley, 2019). Judge et al. (2005) found that job satisfaction was generally understood to be related to core self-evaluations (i.e., positive self-regard) and that individuals

with positive self-perceptions were more likely to pursue goals for intrinsic and value congruent reasons.

In this study, participants who pointed out that they felt more effective in their working environment (in-person or remote) experienced an improved self-evaluation. Glisson and James (2006) indicated that improvements in self-evaluation lead to an improved psychological climate; they also suggested that a positive psychological climate correlates directly with job satisfaction as well as other positive employee outcomes, including engagement, productivity, and organizational commitment. Additionally, when people feel positive and experience job satisfaction, they report increased self-efficacy, autonomy, higher levels of personal accomplishment, and organizational commitment (Grawitch & Ballard, 2016).

This research study corroborates that a positive psychological climate benefits knowledge workers, while a negative psychological climate can have adverse effects (Glisson & James, 2006). Those who felt they were thriving expressed positive feelings and the belief that they, and their teams, were performing well under the circumstances. Study participants who expressed dissatisfaction with remote work also expressed negative feelings about their performance and, in some instances, the performance of others, this was also demonstrated in previous studies (Hogg et al., 1995; Korschun, 2015; Stets & Burke, 2000). This finding makes a compelling case for a hybrid working environment as the preferred scenario for all knowledge workers, as also found by Galanti et al. (2021). Beyond simply being the reported majority preference, it offers both work environments to all team members (Espitia et al., 2021). Arguably, this would benefit those who prefer to work remotely and those who prefer to work in a shared office space, resulting in an improved psychological climate for all knowledge workers.

Aesaert and van Braak (2015) found that differences in communication styles and comfort with technology created challenges within the workplace and within the personal lives for many individuals in their study. These findings were confirmed by this research. All 18 study participants expressed that they had issues with communication while working remotely. For instance, Participant 141020 expressed that the remote work environment during the pandemic had negative consequences on all aspects of communication: "It was kind of an acute situation, so I would say, it was negative on all fronts."

Three separate studies found that electronic communication was less effective than a dialogue between two individuals in the same physical location (de Vries et al., 2019; Golden et al., 2008; Müller & Niessen, 2019). A pre-pandemic study conducted by Jalilvand and Heidari (2017) found that remote interactions ranked below face-to-face communication across all demographics (age, gender, social class) in terms of information richness because it is difficult for parties to deliver and capture the complete information intended to be exchanged via remote means. Likewise, all study participants shared challenges they had experienced with communication, which was the most common issue referenced by study participants (using similar language and descriptions). For example, one study participant expressed challenges they had encountered with older colleagues, who appeared to have difficulty using new technologies and, in some instances, were unwilling to learn new ways to interact with other team members. Another study participant described an experience in which a co-worker was simply not available during typical working hours, and their inaccessibility created frustration for their colleagues who were unable to reach them. Although study participants expressed communication challenges in different ways, the common belief was that maintaining

professional relationships and positive team dynamics required effort and that without open lines of communication, the team was adversely impacted. Participant 130331 shared,

> I remember trying to get together with one of the partners. Just like a "let's talk," and then something spiked, with, like, weather, or it was, like, Omicron or something, it was, like, maybe August and she was like, "Hey, can we push this out a few months, I don't, I'm just not comfortable leaving my house, right now," and I think that's a relationship that suffered, you know, it's like, "Well, why don't we get on the phone, why don't we just do like a Zoom call," but it never happened, and we still haven't connected.

Relationships can be maintained to some degree without the need to share a common in-person office space; however, one study participant expressed that more diligence, or direct action, is required to maintain these positive relationships in remote environments. This was a change from pre-pandemic interactions, where those interactions occurred more naturally in a shared workspace. Participant 130742 shared, "In order to maintain a strong team dynamic, you have to put in effort, be persistent, and work more to maintain meaningful connections when you are not in a shared physical environment."

Nine of the 18 study participants observed that internet connectivity or broadband speeds had a direct impact on their ability to perform their job in a remote environment. This feeling was not limited to any single category; it was spread evenly across both gender and level of experience. Lack of ability to access consistent and reliable internet service compounded challenges for some knowledge workers who were already unfamiliar with digital interactive technologies for communication.

All 18 study participants shared positive and negative aspects of their experiences in remote work environments. One research study completed prior to the pandemic showed similar

findings regarding benefits of a remote working environment, namely that it provides individuals the ability to flex their time to achieve a personal work–life balance while still contributing to the success of an organization (Allen et al., 2015). Teodorovicz et al. (2021) showed that reduced times commuting to and from work resulted in workers spending more time on personal activities, but for others, an increase in work time was the result of recovering the loss of extemporaneous interpersonal interactions that would have occurred in person but could no longer. These benefits, however, contrasted dramatically with some remote employees' decreased ability to disengage from work because their home has now become their office as well (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007). Six participants in this study self-reported an inability to "unplug" from their work and found it difficult to achieve a clean break between their work and personal lives. This phenomenon was found to be an issue for remote workers prior to the pandemic; one cross-validated occupational survey conducted in 2014 found that those working from home were performing work outside of business hours to a point of self-reported health impairments (Arlinghaus & Nachreiner, 2014).

Research conducted by Bloom et al. (2015) provided insights into remote work experiences. The call-center participants in their study—who volunteered to participate—were responsible for responding to external stimuli, which was a natural fit for a remote work environment (Bloom et al., 2015); yet, after completing the study, many participants were eager to get back into the office and work in a shared environment with their peers. The COVID-19 pandemic required that employees work remotely—they did not have a voluntary choice (Mills, 2020). Notably, 17 of the 18 study participants expressed interest in seeing a return to an in-person working environment, at least some of the time. Research performed by Kossek and Lautsch (2018) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic found that most of those who could voluntarily

choose remote work did so out of convenience and were afforded the opportunity based on occupational status. In this study, eight of the 18 knowledge workers had the ability to choose their working environment and still expressed the need to have some in-person contact.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked, "How do knowledge workers perceive work performance relative to their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?" All study participants were asked if they preferred an in-office, hybrid, or remote work environment. Out of 18 total responses, one chose a fully remote work environment, four chose a full-time in-office work environment, and 13 chose a hybrid work environment.

Study participants were asked if the remote environment affected either their personal or team performance or if they experienced a change in the enjoyment of their work. With all factors considered, this study demonstrated that a full-time remote work environment was not the preferred environment for 17 of 18 study participants. One participant shared that while their perception of their personal performance was not affected, their perception of their team's overall performance suffered due to lack of interpersonal interaction. Kour et al. (2019) identified several factors that can impact worker performance, including general optimism, feelings of well-being, and personal strength. These factors were found to significantly increase an employee's organizational productivity and performance (Kour et al., 2019). In this study, participants referenced and discussed these factors as potentially being affected by a transition to a remote working environment.

One study participant shared that without being present in an office, they found themselves working less, not because they were more or less efficient, but because there was a lag in receiving new assignments. Their perception was that the same amount of work was

ultimately completed in less time than typical, and they found themselves with free time available between tasks. This reflects the results of Shahidan et al.'s (2016) study, which found that the relationship between work environment, team and co-worker relationships, and organizational well-being are all levers that directly influence employee engagement.

For one participant in this study, remote work during the pandemic had negative consequences on all fronts. Some consequences were tied to stress around personal safety and fear for loved ones, which shifted their focus away from professional activities; they also expressed feeling depressed and disconnected from other people as a result of the imposed isolation. Participant 141020 shared,

> The pandemic period, that was a unique, kind of, very acute situation. I would say it was negative on all fronts. That was such a unique time where we all are trying to, you know, let's say, work a 40-hour work week in, as you know, the typical American world we're in, and now you have somebody who comes in and accesses 20 hours of your work day, and does the same for your spouse who's in the other room trying to do the same thing? So, in the end, I feel like, you know, most of us just felt like we were crappy in our job during that time. Crappy at being a parent at that time, crappy at homeschooling our kids, which none of us ever signed up for or thought was a good idea in the first place. So, it, you know, that has the negative effects across your life, you know, and your career and your relationships, your family life, the whole thing, just bad.

This sentiment reflects Riyanto's (2020) findings, which suggest that when working remotely, employees may experience substantial workplace isolation that disengages them from their work and ultimately disrupts their performance and general well-being. Kour et al. (2019) found that these factors increased an employee's organizational productivity and performance in a

substantial way. Indeed, isolation can lead to a reduced commitment to the goals of the organization, and the quality of work can suffer (Müller & Niessen, 2019).

Sixteen of the 18 study participants shared that the transition to remote work had an impact on the dynamics of their teams, while two participants shared that they did not perceive any impact associated with the transition to remote work. Müller and Niessen (2019) found variations based on personality in the effectiveness of staff and indicated that these personality variations can be magnified by the work-from-home environment, having direct positive and/or negative consequences for performance and job satisfaction.

Of the 18 participants interviewed, eight expressed that the transition to a remote work environment had an adverse impact on their organization's performance. Another eight study participants had a neutral view of the impact associated with the pandemic, with the most common response being "Not really, no." Two of the study participants believed that the remote work environment had an overall positive impact on the performance of their organization; they believed that the use of online meetings opened doors for them to perform their work in a home or office environment and would help expand their professional work beyond their local geography in the future. Yet, the remote work environment may only be suitable for those who are professionally prepared for it. Workers must be self-sufficient and independent to be able to maintain mutually beneficial outcomes when presented with a work-from-home environment (Golden & Gajendran, 2019; Krauss & Fussell, 1990).

The common lived experiences and perspectives of the knowledge workers in this study were divided in their assessment of the impact of remote work environments on organizational performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ten study participants expressed a dislike for remote work environments, citing isolation, communication challenges, and lack of

connectedness as drawbacks. However, five study participants felt they were thriving because of remote work and viewed the transition as a positive experience that increased their efficiency, allowing them to be more self-directed in their work. These findings are consistent with those of Bloom et al. (2015), who found that the remote workers in their study performed slightly better in terms of quality and volume of work, though they did express a preference to work in a shared office environment with their peers. Knowledge workers who participated in this study indicated a strong preference to work together in person in a shared space for some of their time while believing firmly that remote work is a tool that can (and should) be selectively employed to improve work–life balance and increase performance and productivity. Participant 130331 shared that,

> Look at one of my former companies, I think they had their own outside problems with some other subsidiaries, but many of those subsidiaries were working from home, working remotely, they weren't really in the office as much, and if they were there certainly wasn't any pressure to come back into the office and so I guess that's just a nice black and white example where one subsidiary was thriving, we were killing it, because we working together in person, I think we all need to get back to that.

Implications

This study represented the timely collection of qualitative data as part of a phenomenological exploration of shared knowledge worker experiences impacted by an abrupt shift to remote work that occurred in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The future of work will continue to involve an ever-increasing amount of digital collaboration, stakeholder interaction will continue to evolve, and the knowledge base around remote work must continue to expand so employees and supervisors are aware of the real experiences associated with remote

work environments (Athanasiadou & Theriou, 2021; Ligthart et al., 2016). The day-to-day

environment of a knowledge worker in 2023 included numerous web meetings (e.g., Teams,

Zoom, Skype), and working from home has been normalized as a result of the pandemic (Bloom,

2020). All 18 study participants expressed that the remote work environment associated with the

pandemic changed the way knowledge workers performed their work now and in the future.

Participant 190336 shared,

> I wish that the pandemic had happened earlier in my career so that it would have
>
> normalized the ability to work remotely sooner and in my professional line of work.
>
> Remote work was not something that was normalized until the pandemic occurred, and
>
> then it became the only way to serve clients during the pandemic.

Clearly, how knowledge workers interact with each other has changed, and remote work will

remain a part of their professional reality.

All study participants interviewed noted that the remote work environment presented

both benefits and challenges. Many of the positive and negative aspects of remote work shared

by study participants have also been highlighted in the literature (as discussed in Chapter 2).

Therefore, it is expected that study participants—and knowledge workers more generally—will

keep their options open and that remote work will remain a component of their professional

environment for the foreseeable future (Blundell et al., 2020). In the literature, common

challenges associated with remote work have included isolation (de Vries et al., 2019; Golden &

Gejendran, 2019), issues with communication (Jämsen et al., 2022), and difficulties with career

development and mentoring (Marshall et al., 2007). The participants in this study corroborated

positive aspects of remote work identified in previous research, including a perception of

increased productivity (de Klerk et al., 2021), improved work–life balance (Larson et al., 2020),

and improvements associated with reductions in time spent commuting to and from the office (Teodorovicz et al., 2021). Five of the 18 participants felt that the immediacy of the pandemic-induced transition created drawbacks that did not persist long term and remote work would improve in the future. Participant 180404 shared,

> It was new, you know, technologically speaking, and practically speaking, and it worked. You know, we had the tools that we needed to work fully, remotely, which was good. But, um, kind of that human interaction was completely gone. But within, like, a month or two or once, I realized, like, this was longer term. There was a lot of things that, that I did enjoy. I didn't miss the commute, don't miss driving, or, you know, back and forth every day, save all that time, you know. I was able to focus much more on what I had to do.

As the stress associated with the global pandemic subsided and the crisis shifted to matters of inconvenience, study participants felt their personal and professional lives returned to a more balanced state. Remote work is constantly evolving, both in terms of new technologies and workers' increasing comfort with remote work and the opportunities it presents for staying connected in ways not previously possible (de Klerk et al., 2021). In many ways, the pandemic paved the way for the modern workplace to incorporate remote work as an option for many employees and positions into employment policies; however, the end of 2022 saw many industries seeking to bring their personnel back into the office, believing that remote work was not beneficial for the performance of their organizations (Harfoush, 2021).

A study conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM; 2021) found that supervisors developed "negative perceptions" of the work-from-home trend and expressed they would prefer their staff to operate from an in-person office setting. More than two

thirds of the supervisors of remote workers surveyed by SHRM, or 67%, admitted to considering remote workers more easily replaceable than onsite workers at their organization, 62% believed full-time remote work was detrimental to employees' career objectives, and 72% percent said they preferred all their subordinates to work in the office (SHRM, 2021). Similarly, in this study, 13 of the 18 participants expressed negative perceptions of remote work, and that they believed a remote work environment was detrimental to mentoring and career development.

Study participants also shared that they observed that a remote work environment created barriers for new hires (i.e., entry-level staff) to build independence and capability. Oftentimes, entry-level staff want to participate, even peripherally, or have more direct access to more experienced staff to ask questions and learn on the job. The knowledge workers in this study, however, perceived that such "hands on" experience was less effective in a remote work environment, as shared by Participant 200925,

> For me, especially kind of starting my career, definitely, like, right at the beginning of the pandemic, working remotely, even though I didn't really know doing it. That much was obviously the huge thing. So, I kind of intentionally wanted to avoid [remote work] because I feel like, especially starting out a new job, I was like, I'm just totally gonna be floating off in space and not be able to figure out what's going on, and kind of not be able to communicate with people and learn things as quickly as I could in, in person, and so I kind of sought that out, just as personally I felt like it would be a better situation for me to just be around people and work as a team and try to learn things starting out, considering that I knew nothing, and now a little bit of something now, but so, personally, that was difficult.

Compounding this challenge, study participants shared that they found that their organizations preferred that entry-level staff have the option of working remotely, based on the research, creating a conflict between personal preference and access to mentoring opportunities.

The implications of the findings from this study, which sought to document the lived experiences of knowledge workers who transitioned to remote work environments practically overnight, may be helpful for internal and external stakeholders in better understanding their own and others' positive and negative experiences and perhaps identify ways to improve outcomes in the future. Each participant in the study shared their feelings and experiences associated with the remote work environment they experienced, how the remote environment impacted their communication, work performance, and relationships with colleagues, and their perspectives relative to the benefits and drawbacks associated with remote work. The following implications grew out of the researcher's extensive synthesis of the interview data and reflection on participants' shared experiences.

Implication 1

The difficulties associated with remote communication, as compared with in-person interactions, implies a need for individuals and organizations to recognize and develop methodologies to address the known shortcomings associated with electronic communication (Jalilvand & Heidari, 2017). Unlike face-to-face communication, remote interaction lacks nuanced cues present in physical interactions, such as body language, facial expressions, and immediate feedback (Stich et al., 2018). This absence can lead to misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and a potential breakdown in effective communication. Even though some knowledge workers in this study expressed a preference for working virtually, whether all or part of the time, several pitfalls exist. First, although communication is critical, *clear* communication

is even more challenging when employees work remotely (Nyberg et al., 2021). Second, employees may have more difficulty acclimating to the organization and learning the skills and practices specific to that organization when starting in a virtual environment (Nyberg et al., 2021). Third, organizations face challenges establishing their preferred culture and orienting newcomers to that culture (Nyberg et al., 2021).

Implication 2

Most of the participants in this study felt that in-person social interactions, both personally and professionally, were important and believed that full-time remote work created feelings of isolation. As mentioned earlier, isolation can lead to a reduced commitment to the goals of the organization, and ultimately the quality of one's work can suffer (Müller & Niessen, 2019). The lack of spontaneous conversations, camaraderie, and the unplanned social aspects of simply being in the same physical space with colleagues can negatively impact job satisfaction (de Vries et al., 2019).

Working in a remote environment blurs the lines between professional and personal life, making it challenging for some individuals to establish clear boundaries (Arlinghaus & Nachreiner, 2014). Moreover, remote work environments may have little or no physical separation between the workspace and living space, which may lead to difficulties "switching off" from work, resulting in both burnout and adverse impacts on a knowledge worker's personal life (Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). The presence, or lack, of a suitable home office, adequately separate from one's living space, can have pronounced positive or negative outcomes on their experiences with remote work (Segal, 2021). Factors such as limited space, lack of physical comfort, needed technology (e.g., external speakers, cameras, monitors, scanners), unwanted

distractions, or the lack of a dedicated home office can adversely impact concentration and professional performance.

Implication 3

Knowledge workers are defined by their need for collaborative, adaptive, and spontaneous teamwork (O'Donovan, 2020). These highly adaptive teams rely on brainstorming, immediate feedback, and in-person collaboration, and the remote work environment can add stress and frustration related to delays and communication barriers that can impact team performance (Sârbu et al., 2021). Informal collaboration that would typically occur in an in-person office setting is limited by the transition to a remote work environment, and working in a remote environment eliminates opportunities for unplanned interactions, which has an impact on social well-being and mentoring opportunities (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Remote work environments reduce the potential for impromptu learning opportunities and unplanned social interactions, making it challenging for individuals to stay connected and find meaning in their work (Rich et al., 2010). The absence of daily interactions with coworkers and regular time spent together in a common workspace can contribute to a feeling of professional and, in some circumstances, personal loneliness (Donnelly & Johns, 2021).

Implication 4

The primary advantage of a remote work environment for knowledge workers is that they have the freedom to perform their professional work from almost any location with a suitable internet connection (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020). The ability to work remotely eliminates the time, cost, and consumption of fossil fuels needed to commute to a physical office and allows knowledge workers to work where they work and when. The remote work environment also provides increased flexibility in work hours. Professional personnel may not be

required to adhere to a strict 9-to-5 schedule, and staff may have the freedom to adapt their work hours to better suit their personal routines and peak productivity times. Employees may need to be present to address family concerns with children, or parents, who may be at home unexpectedly during work hours (Couch, 2020). Additionally, remote work gives staff the flexibility to align professional activities with their natural biological rhythms, such as when they wake up or when they are most focused/energetic, promoting efficiency and effectiveness in completing daily tasks. Knowledge workers have increased autonomy around scheduling and performing their work, leading to a sense of ownership and empowerment that has been shown to improve outcomes (Grawitch & Ballard, 2016).

<div align="center">**Recommendations for Action**</div>

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to document the lived experiences of knowledge workers who transitioned from traditional shared office spaces to remote work environments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on a review of the literature, the collection and analysis of data from 18 one-on-one interviews, and the identification of emergent themes associated with the participants' shared experiences, the researcher presents the following recommendations for action. Importantly, the data gathered in this study came from 18 knowledge workers across 16 separate organizations that underwent a transition to remote work in March of 2020.

Recommendation for Action 1

Improving communication when working remotely is crucial for maintaining productivity, fostering collaboration, and ensuring a positive work environment (Donley, 2019; Grawitch & Ballard, 2016). Thirteen of the 18 study participants expressed a preference for, and suggested the use, of a hybrid work environment to allow knowledge workers to take advantage

of the benefits of both in-person and remote environments. Participants shared the feeling, which corroborates with Larson et al. (2020), that using a shared schedule to develop times when available and staff commitments to specific deliverables and tasks could improve productivity as well as work–life balance. Participants also expressed the importance of setting consistent targets as one would within a traditional office environment instead of allowing those working remotely to simply "go with the flow"; they felt this would garner improved positive results, a finding that aligns with Limón (2020). Participant 134950 shared,

> The overall goals tend to be the same [in a remote environment]; it's sort of specific to the client project, the company, and we're all working together to achieve those set goals. I think it's just that it's two things, it's just when you're in the office, you sort of know that you left your house to go somewhere and focus on something that's not in your house. In a remote environment, you're all sort of working on the same team towards something; even if you're working on separate projects, you're still there for the same reason.

As also found by Nyberg et al. (2021), study participants shared that consistent and open communication with leadership and between team members must occur frequently and intentionally to maintain effective working relationships. One study participant expressed that these interactions should neither be scheduled too often, nor occur too far apart; awareness of the needs of each team member must be carefully considered; and one-on-one interactions as well as team meetings should be implemented. Focus on improved communication and workplace relationships were shown to enhance the work environment and ensure the well-being of the organization if staff are fully engaged (Shahidan et al., 2016). Research has also suggested that workers who more effectively communicate with each other and actively show their appreciation

for each other have the most success in increasing engagement and motivation ("Increasing Employee Engagement," 2015).

Recommendation for Action 2

Knowledge workers and their organizations should openly identify and respect differences within their teams (Lecours et al., 2021). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to remote work; thus, organizations should develop and adopt flexible policies that take into consideration both the needs and preferences of their personnel. Workers must be self-sufficient and independent to maintain mutually beneficial outcomes when presented with a remote work environment (Krauss & Fussell, 1990). While some individuals thrive in remote settings, others may face challenges that adversely impact their work and personal lives, such as isolation, difficulty maintaining work–life balance, or a decrease in productivity (de Klerk et al., 2021). Participant 140642 shared that, "I think having a set expectation where it's flexible for people who need flexibility, but it's encouraged to be in the office. I think would be like my ideal, my ideal work environment."

Remote work, or work from home, policies should be developed under the auspices of establishing positive habits around communication practices, working hours, workplace culture, and performance expectations (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Denison, 1990; Kotter, 1996; Kour et al., 2019; Larson et al., 2020). Seventeen of the 18 participants indicated they would not choose to work in a fully remote environment; rather, suggesting that their preferred approach would involve offering a mix of remote and in-person work options while implementing strategies to foster a sense of community and connection within the team. With these expressed preferences in mind, organizations should evaluate candidates based not only on their skills and qualifications, but also on their suitability to participant in remote work, considering factors such as self-

motivation, communication abilities, and adaptability. When a strong culture is in place, staff have a clear understanding of who they are and what their roles consist of, with clear direction and purpose, and performance improves markedly (Appelbaum et al., 2012; Denison, 1990; Kotter, 1996).

Recommendation for Action 3

There is a need for open and honest recognition that remote work often leads to feelings of isolation (Riyanto, 2020). Some knowledge workers felt pressured by popular opinion, which seems to hold that if one is not enjoying this "new way to work," there must be something wrong with the individual. Participant 130331 shared that, "early on in the pandemic, you would see articles flying around that would say office offices are dead or do we really need offices anymore. I feel like we're such a distracted and fragile society, these days, that we jump onto one quick thing it seems popular." Organizations need to promote awareness of the potential adverse outcomes of remote work and support the well-being of remote workers (Segal, 2021).

Remote work can result in negative outcomes for team members as well as employees, and the simple acceptance of this fact can help facilitate adaptive strategies for addressing the problem. Isolation impacts employee morale, engagement, performance, and overall job satisfaction and can lead to decreased productivity, burnout, and even workforce attrition (Watson, 2018; Zhang, 2016). This could involve regular virtual team-building activities, overlapping hybrid work schedules, and newly opened channels of communication. Organizations may need to rethink their culture and workplace policies to address inclusivity and rebuild the sense of teamwork and purpose that may have been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A hybrid work environment can provide a potential best-of-both-worlds solution, offering opportunities for knowledge workers to be enriched by the benefits of a shared

physical space along with the flexibility of occasional remote work. There needs to be ample

opportunity for knowledge workers to remain flexible within the bounds of a workplace culture

based on connection and collaboration, with overarching goals tied to the success of the team

rather than the success of the individual.

Employees seek work that has meaning (Kotter, 1996). Setting clear goals and

expectations that give knowledge workers access to increased autonomy will foster a productive

and pleasant work environment for high-functioning teams. The creation of clearly defined goals

for both teams and individuals could result in a mutual understanding and team acceptance of

what ultimately needs to be achieved and the individual efforts required to meet the objective.

This is accomplished by also embracing team member autonomy, improving performance of the

overall team by trusting individuals to make decisions and execute their own tasks

independently. Being fully embedded in, and of critical importance to, the team objective or

initiative improves performance and, ultimately, reduces turnover (McNaughton et al., 2014).

This approach not only empowers individuals to take ownership of their work, but can promote a

sense of responsibility and accountability, allowing staff the personal freedom to work anytime

in any place and still contribute to the team in meaningful ways.

Recommendation for Action 4

Not everyone has equal access to reliable high-speed internet connections, or the tools

needed to succeed in a remote work environment (Bloom et al., 2022). Unanticipated technical

issues can create frustration and dramatically impact productivity, particularly for those who lack

access to high-quality internet because they live in remote areas or do not have the experience or

technical proficiency to overcome these obstacles (Lecours et al., 2021). Expansion of broadband

access is therefore a necessary structural improvement to allow knowledge workers to remain

efficient and effective in either the office or a remote environment. Nine of the 18 study

participants cited broadband access as an obstacle to successfully performing their work in a

remote environment. Substantial investments in infrastructure and extensive installation of fiber-

optic cables, wireless networks, and satellite systems that can increase speeds in both urban and

rural areas would be necessary.

Recommendations for Further Study

This research study documented the shared experiences of knowledge workers who

transitioned rapidly from an in-person work environment to a remote work environment as a

result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a once-in-a-generation event (Trzupek, 2020). The study

results are relevant to and valuable for knowledge workers, managers, leaders, organizations,

consulting companies, public institutions, and, more broadly, the future workforce. However,

future research could help deepen the understanding of how knowledge workers interact with or

are impacted by remote work environments. Some areas of exploration might include evaluating

the performance of knowledge workers in different working environments and evaluating their

experiences based on age, gender, or ethnicity. Additionally, it would be worth determining what

leadership or management styles are most effective for staff working in remote environments and

evaluating how remote work has impacted the knowledge industry since 2020.

Recommendation for Further Study 1

Future research could seek to expand understanding of the relationship between remote

work and productivity. Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data related to the factors that

influence productivity in remote settings, such as work environment, task autonomy, and

communication effectiveness, could provide insights into optimizing performance in remote

work environments. A control group of individuals performing work in an in-person office

setting would represent a dataset that was not collected during this research but that would add value to the literature. Working from home can evoke a range of emotional experiences, which can vary depending on individual circumstances and preferences. Working from the comfort of one's own home can create a sense of familiarity and security, and being in a familiar environment, surrounded by personal belongings, can contribute to a relaxed state of mind, which can positively impact emotional well-being. Additionally, a remote work environment often provides individuals with a greater sense of autonomy and control over their work since they have the freedom to structure their day, set their own pace, and create a workspace that suits their preferences. This autonomy can lead to feelings of empowerment and satisfaction. As 80% (or 14 of the 18) of the study participants reported, one of the significant benefits of working from home is the elimination of a daily commute, alleviating the stress and time constraints associated with traffic or crowded public transportation. The saved time and reduced stress from commuting contributes to a more positive emotional state. While perception and preference may be clear, they do not equate to improved professional performance among knowledge workers.

Recommendation for Further Study 2

Future examination of how remote work impacts social connections, teamwork, and collaboration would benefit from studies conducted over a longer term and with a greater number of study participants. Investigating the effectiveness of virtual communication tools, interactive team dynamics, and successful strategies for building and maintaining strong relationships in remote settings could improve understanding of how effective collaboration is achieved by knowledge workers in remote environments. In light of the increasing number and kinds of professional collaborations and work opportunities across timelines and continents, a question

arises: How do people build and maintain relationships effectively with individuals they may never meet in person?

Study participants reported that professional efficacy in a remote work environment depended on personality and work ethic. It can be difficult to disconnect from work, resulting in extended work hours or a constant sense of being "on-call." The home environment poses various distractions that are absent in a traditional office setting. Household chores, family members, pets, or other personal obligations can compete for a remote worker's attention, potentially impacting their concentration and productivity. Without the structure and routines of a physical workplace, individuals may need to establish new strategies to maintain focus and manage distractions effectively.

Working from home offers increased flexibility in managing work and personal obligations (Bloom et al. 2015; Mariotti et al., 2022). This flexibility can lead to a sense of freedom and the ability to align work schedules with personal needs, enhancing overall satisfaction and well-being (Kotter, 1996). At the same time, remote work environments rely heavily on technology for knowledge workers, and technical issues or connectivity problems can be frustrating and impact emotional well-being. Dealing with these challenges, troubleshooting, and adapting to new digital tools may require patience and resilience. Personal preferences, individual circumstances, and the availability of suitable home workspaces all influence how individuals perceive and navigate the emotional aspects of a remote work environment. This research study found that the challenges and feelings shared by study participants did not equate to shared solutions. Developing a clearer understanding of effective ways to address these challenges could improve the professional lives of many knowledge workers.

Recommendation for Further Study 3

Research exploring leadership styles, managerial practices, and strategies for effectively managing remote teams is important, both today and looking ahead as remote work continues to evolve. Understanding how leaders can foster engagement, motivation, and cohesion in remote work environments is valuable for those responsible for managing remote teams. Historically, when the workforce shifted from production facilities to data processing in offices, new management approaches were needed to achieve objectives (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Kotter, 1996). What new methods will prove effective at achieving desired outcomes for professionals engaged in the knowledge workforce who are now performing their responsibilities in remote work environments? Is it true that leadership can employ similar approaches to improving workplace productivity to enhance the quality of work for staff in any environment (Kotterman, 2006). While the participants in this study discussed issues related to management, the temporal nature of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to encourage them to avoid the longer-term implications of managing remote staff members. Participant 130331 shared that, "It felt temporary to me, it didn't feel natural, it didn't feel like the kind of environment that I would want to persist in for more than you know a few months."

Recommendation for Further Study 4

Investigating the impact of remote work on equity, diversity, and inclusion is an important topic that merits additional attention (Buttner & Lowe, 2017; de Vries, 2019). Future research should explore how remote work affects underrepresented groups, individuals with disabilities, and those with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Examining potential disparities in access to resources, opportunities for advancement, and experiences of inclusion in remote work environments could inform strategies for promoting equity and diversity. For those who

cannot afford a home office or the highest speed internet, addressing how remote work opportunities can be offered in equitable ways could be useful. Indeed, it will be important to identify inequities that could lead to disadvantages with any sector of the workforce. Therefore, addressing how remote work can be used fairly in the knowledge industry to achieve optimal results in the future is recommended for further research endeavors.

Recommendation for Further Study 5

Understanding how remote work environments influence organizational cultures and employee engagement can inform how organizations communicate and motivate their employees. Attending to how organizational values, communication practices, and team structures impact remote work environments could contribute to this knowledge base. Knowledge industries would benefit from a clear understanding, or process, that outlines how an organization can achieve positive outcomes for both employee satisfaction and organizational performance by fostering a corporate culture that supports personnel working in a remote environment. Study participants credited organizational culture with helping to carry them through the pandemic, but it also suffered due to a lack of contact with others. Participant 130419 shared that, "Work from home is fine, as long as they're doing their job, performing their responsibilities, but I don't think you ever get the same kind of, or I think it's difficult to get the same kind of culture (as an in-person environment)."

Recommendation for Further Study 6

In examining the role of technology and infrastructure in supporting remote work, future research could explore new technologies that would best help workers adapt and excel in remote work environments, with an emphasis on evaluating the usability and effectiveness of remote work tools and platforms. For instance, exploring what software provides the best functionality,

and why. Developing a more robust understanding of the impact technology has on productivity, communication, and work processes is critical. Additionally, it will be important for future research to address what tools and technologies would be suitable to improve outcomes for employees as well as the organization where remote work remains part of the professional environment. Exploring new ways that organizations could overcome the shortcomings of external variables, such as low bandwidth or lack of access to data on remote servers. Knowledge industries and knowledge workers alike would benefit from a clearer understanding of the best available tools that can enhance collaboration between knowledge workers in remote environments. Clearly understanding how these tools and technologies could enhance how they would function and collaborate with each other, and what primary purposes these new tools and programs would serve to resolve or improve. Developing a better understanding of the attributes and advantages of new technologies and how they can be improved upon for use in the knowledge industry will be an important focus for future studies.

Recommendation for Further Study 7

Exploring the potential shifts in work arrangements, organizational structures, and employee expectations can inform discussions around the future of work and guide policy and decision making. Additionally, the examination of the effects of remote work on employee well-being, including mental health, stress levels, and work–life balance could still be expanded. Understanding the factors that contribute to positive well-being in remote work settings can help inform strategies for supporting employee satisfaction and overall health and well-being. Knowledge industries and knowledge workers should be looking at where they are today and the direction the future may be headed, some questions to consider would be: Have remote work arrangements remained in place beyond pandemic requirements? If so, how are they impacting

the knowledge workforce, for better or for worse? This research found that study participants held a common belief that the remote work environment associated with the pandemic was temporary, but this researcher poses several questions related to that common belief: Has that indeed been the case? Did remote work implemented in knowledge industries have longer term impacts on their organization or the implementation or current use of remote work? Five years beyond COVID-19, what will the transition away from traditional offices "look like"?

Expanding research in the seven areas recommended for further study could contribute a deeper understanding of remote work environments to the literature by highlighting evidence-based practices and policies for guiding knowledge workers in the implementation and use of remote work, supporting employee well-being, and enhancing organizational effectiveness. Future knowledge work will be data-driven and increasingly performed from home offices and diverse locations. Twenty-first-century global society saw the advent of the Digital Age, much of the work performed has changed from paper and production lines to computer-driven remote networks, and this transition will continue at an exponential rate (Kurzweil, 1990).

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study focused on the lived experiences of individuals who experienced a rapid transition to a remote work environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The overarching goal was to provide a rich understanding of how people made sense of and gave meaning to their shared experiences during the pandemic, offering valuable perspectives for further research and theory development, as well insights into practical applications. Through the collection and analysis of interview data, this research study identified shared experiences and common themes. Arguably, these common themes offer insights into the experiences of other knowledge workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research process began with the formulation of research questions to examine in depth the phenomenon of remote work from the perspective of knowledge workers who experienced it during the pandemic. Eighteen study participants were selected who had relevant experiences associated with a rapid transition to remote work; this sample was adequately sized and diverse enough to capture a range of perspectives and experiences. This study relied on semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. The interviews provided participants with an opportunity to share their experiences, thoughts, and emotions related to the pandemic-inducted transition to remote work. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for the data analysis, which involved several iterative steps.

The researcher immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcriptions to gain a holistic understanding of reported perceptions, experiences, and emotions. Through a process of categorization and thematic analysis, several commonalities, patterns, and five themes emerged from the data (as detailed in Chapter 4). They include Theme 1: Navigating Connectivity Gaps and Remote Communication Challenges, Theme 2: Isolation and Social Distance Contrasting with Freedom and Flexibility, Theme 3: The Intersection of a Remote Work Environment and Family Dynamics, Theme 4: Navigating Remote Work Environments, and Theme 5: Collaboration, Leadership, and Relationships in Remote Teams.

This study found that the unique lived experiences of remote workers during the pandemic were transformative for many individuals, including the researcher. The pandemic necessitated a sudden shift to remote work for many individuals and organizations as government mandates took effect requiring non-essential workers to work from home (if they could). For study participants this abrupt transition brought about a range of emotions, including confusion, uncertainty, and anxiety. It also became essential for all knowledge workers to adapt

quickly to new technologies and to remote work environments—in which the boundaries between work and personal life became blurred, especially for those with little or no pre-pandemic experience with remote work. Practically overnight, the physical separation between home and office disappeared for study participants, and these individuals had to navigate the challenges of balancing work responsibilities with personal obligations, such as childcare, household tasks, and other forms of caregiving. Juggling multiple roles within the same space, for some study participants, led to heightened stress and feelings of being overwhelmed. Remote work relied heavily on technology to maintain productivity and communication, and these knowledge workers had to adapt quickly to virtual meetings, video conferencing, collaboration tools, and remote access to work resources. Technical difficulties, particularly connectivity issues, and the obligation to learn new tools became part of the remote work experience, potentially creating further frustration and stress for study participants.

This research study found that the pandemic brought with it a heightened sense of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety around personal safety, well-being for individuals, their families, and society as a whole. In their remote work environments, knowledge workers were not immune to these emotions. Concerns about health and safety, job security, and the impact of the pandemic on personal and professional lives contributed to study participants' stress and emotional strain. Remote work during the pandemic meant being physically isolated from colleagues, friends, and extended social networks. For these knowledge workers, the absence of face-to-face interactions and the loss of the social connections and support systems that had been available in the office workplace led to feelings of loneliness and a sense of disconnectedness.

The transition to remote work also presented a unique opportunity for increased flexibility. Individuals had the freedom to design their workday and adjust schedules to

accommodate personal needs and responsibilities. Barrero et al. (2022) found that employers have seen improved productivity through the use of remote work arrangements, accounting for a 5 percent productivity boost in a post-pandemic condition. This flexibility positively impacted work–life balance and contributed to a greater sense of control and well-being. This new working environment pushed individuals and organizations to explore and implement innovative ways to collaborate and communicate. Virtual meetings, digital collaboration tools, and remote project management became the norm. Learning to effectively communicate and collaborate in a virtual environment posed challenges, but it also offered new opportunities for creative problem solving and collaboration over distances. Data from this study's participants indicate that working from home during the pandemic required individuals to be resilient and adaptable. Navigating the uncertainties, maintaining productivity, and managing the emotional toll demanded flexibility and the ability to adjust to rapidly changing circumstances.

The lived experiences of the study participants during COVID-19 varied widely, depending on individual circumstances, such as living arrangements, job roles, access to resources, and personal support systems. While some individuals found remote work to be a positive and productive experience, others faced significant challenges and struggled to adapt. This research made clear that study participants' preference for a hybrid work environment, allowing them to remain connected and productive while juggling their personal and family life. Recommendations for action to address some of these challenges include an increased focus on communication for any team still participating in any form of remote work. Communicating effectively with other team members on roles, expectations, and timelines can help to alleviate potentially problematic disconnections. Knowledge workers need to accept that remote work is not the panacea that it may have once been purported to be, no one is immune to feelings of

isolation and the first step in addressing that issue is accepting it exists. Future research is needed to fully understand the relationship between remote work environments and work productivity and quality. Knowledge industries would benefit from additional studies to better understand how social interactions with fellow team members or digital collaborations could enhance knowledge workers capacities and competencies when performing professional tasks in remote environments. Leadership approaches would need to be evaluated and adapted to identify the most effective strategies to manage staff working in remote environments. Much like the transition from industry to office spaces, the American workforce in undergoing a new transition that will require more research to better understand. This "new way" to work is certainly not going anywhere, and companies that find a way to allow for remote work while still retaining opportunities to work together in a physical space will be best suited for the future of knowledge industries.

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APPENDIX A

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES TIMELINE (GAMMA & METZINGER, 2021)

Formative Influences Timeline Introduction (Completed Prior to Interview)

1. Imagine the line on this paper is a timeline of your life [or of the organization/program over time]. I would like you to identify the events and memories that you believe shaped who you are today as a [employee, manager, leader, etc.] [or what your organization/program is like today]. Please take about five minutes and jot down notes about these events. These notes are not for me. You will use these notes to prompt your memory as you describe these events and memories to me.

2. Now, please describe each of the events and memories you have identified as influencing who you are today as a [philanthropist, volunteer, board member, etc.] [or what your organization or program is like today]. I may stop you at certain points to ask for clarification or more details.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (DICICCO-BLOOM & CRABTREE, 2006)

<u>Core Questions (50 Minutes)</u>

1. Do you have an opinion about working from home?

2. Does a remote environment effect your ability to do your job?

3. Have you had any experience with issues communicating with staff who are working

   remotely?

4. Did you choose your current working environment?

5. If you could choose, would you choose in office, hybrid, or remote?

6. Has a change in work environment had any impact on team dynamics?

7. Have there been any impacts to company/organizational performance?

<u>Interview Closure (10 Minutes)</u>

1. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about remote work, or your

   experiences since March of 2020?

APPENDIX C

STUDY PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear [Staff Member],

My purpose in contacting you today is to invite you to participate in a voluntary study to share your experiences associated with the transition to remote work that occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is associated with my Doctoral studies as a student at the University of New England and the title of my research is Knowledge Workers Experiencing Remote Environments During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

As we all remember clearly, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created a rapid transition overnight for the majority American workforce, as government ordered quarantines took effect and work from home was instituted for all workers considered non-essential and capable of working remotely. The proposed study will document your lived experiences with our rapid transition to remote work environments in March of 2020. The purpose of this proposed qualitative phenomenological study is to better understand and document the lived experience of people who experienced a change in their work environment from a traditional physical environment to a remote work at home environment, due to COVID-19.

If you agree to support this study, I will invite you to participate in a confidential Zoom interview, for no longer than one hour, at a mutually agreeable time. Your decision to participate is voluntary and confidential, and you can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. If you are willing to participate in this study, please let

me know by replying to this email. I will then set up a time for the interview. I appreciate your

consideration and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Dale F. Knapp

University of New England - Doctoral Student

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Institutional Review Board
Julie Longua Peterson, Chair

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
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Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
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DATE OF LETTER: May 23, 2022

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dale Knapp
FACULTY ADVISOR: Debra Welkley, EdD

PROJECT NUMBER: 0522-05
PROJECT TITLE: Knowledge Workers Experiencing Remote Environments During the COVID-19 Pandemic
SUBMISSION TYPE: Exempt Project
SUBMISSION DATE: 5/8/2022

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: 5/23/2022

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2(ii) & 3B

The UNE Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

Additional IRB review is not required for this project as submitted. However, if any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the protocol, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other IRB-reviewed documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment to the IRB to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

Please feel free to contact me at (207) 602-2244 or irb@une.edu with any questions.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director, Research Integrity