The Influence of Leadership on Remote Worker Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of leadership styles on employee engagement in organizations that practice remote work. Considering the transformation of the employment landscape brought about by technological advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic, this study examined the crucial role of leadership in fostering employee motivation and engagement in this flexible yet challenging work environment. Through a qualitative research approach using thematic analysis methods to analyze data collected from in-depth interviews with employees and managers, this study considered autonomous and transformational leadership approaches as potential models for addressing the challenges of productivity and communication management in the context of remote work, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of leadership and employee engagement in the digital era.

Keywords — Leadership Styles, Remote Work, Employee Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Technological transformation and globalization have drastically changed the landscape of the job market. The emergence of technologies such as digital communication platforms, collaboration software, and cloud computing has made remote work environments the norm, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a study conducted by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022), 67% of organizations in Malaysia have adopted complete or hybrid remote work after the pandemic. This transition has created an urgent need to explore more effective leadership models in maintaining employee engagement. In this context, autonomous leadership has emerged as a potential approach to address these challenges. According to a study by Nguyen et al. (2021), remote work has increased flexibility but also posed new challenges such as productivity management and communication.

Remote work refers to a work model that allows employees to perform their tasks outside of the traditional office using digital communication technology. The rapid development in information and communication technology has opened up opportunities for organizations to adopt this work model. In the modern context, remote work offers various benefits, especially in terms of work-life balance, flexible working hours, and reduced operational costs for companies. However, remote work also presents several challenges, particularly in ensuring a high level of employee engagement. One of the main benefits of remote work is a better work-life balance. Employees have the flexibility to adjust their work schedules according to personal needs, which can enhance job satisfaction and reduce stress. In addition, organizations can also reduce operational costs such as office rent, equipment, and utilities. A study by Abdul Hamid and Ismail (2021) shows that the use of technology in work communication can enhance innovation and employee productivity, especially among millennial workers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of remote work is not something new, but its widespread implementation only occurred with the rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT) over the past two decades. At the global

level, remote work began to be introduced around the early 1990s, particularly in the United States and other developed countries such as Japan and Germany. At that time, this practice was more focused on professionals in the fields of information technology, marketing, and customer service who used email and calling systems as remote communication mediums. However, at that time, remote work was still considered something experimental and not widely practiced in traditional organizations (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016). By 2010, advancements in cloud computing technology, online project management systems, and video-based communication had facilitated interactions between employees and employers even when they were not in the same physical space. In the United States, a study by Global Workplace Analytics (2019) showed that the rate of employees working from home regularly increased by 159% between 2005 and 2017. This change is driven by several key factors, including economic pressure, rising urban living costs, awareness of work-life balance, and increased focus on environmental sustainability through carbon footprint reduction. In Japan, the concept of "telework" was first introduced in the early 2000s, but the Japanese government only began actively promoting its implementation around 2015 as part of a strategy to address the issues of an aging population and labor shortages (Morikawa, 2020).

In Malaysia, before the pandemic, the practice of remote work was still at a low level and was not considered the norm in most organizations. A study by TalentCorp Malaysia (2019) found that only 15% of companies offered flexible work options, including remote work, to their employees. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the main catalyst for this change. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022), 67% of organizations began adopting remote work or hybrid work during the Movement Control Order (MCO) phase. This change revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the remote work model, including the organization's digital readiness, the leaders' ability to manage teams remotely, and the employees' adaptability to the new work environment.

Data shows a significant increase in remote work practices. Since 2009, the trend of remote work has increased by 159%, proving that this work model is not a new phenomenon that emerged solely due to the pandemic. In Malaysia, a study by Cisco found that 86% of workers in Malaysia are happier when employers allow them to work from anywhere, including Working from Home (WFH), as shown in Table 1. Additionally, 60% of respondents believe that the quality of their work has improved, and 55% say their productivity has increased.

Table 1: Statistics of Malaysian Workers Regarding Hybrid Work

Aspect	Percentage (%)
Happier with hybrid work	86
The quality of work has improved	60
Productivity increases	55
Saving money	82
Physical fitness improves	72
Life is more balanced	71
Family relationships are better	80
The company is very ready for hybrid work	20

This study was conducted using qualitative methods, i.e., interviewing employees experienced in remote work as well as organizational managers to gain an in-depth understanding of how leadership styles affect employee engagement levels. This interview focused on the experiences, challenges, and leadership strategies used in managing remote workers. The findings of this study may help organizations identify the most effective leadership approaches to ensure that employees remain motivated and engaged in their tasks.

METHODOLOGY

This study presented the design used to achieve the research objectives, namely to understand the influence of

leadership style on employee engagement in a remote work environment. It included a discussion on the study design, study population and sample, research instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods. By using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply explore the subjective experiences of respondents and understand the influence of leadership styles on employee engagement in a remote work environment. Through this approach, researchers can gather more in-depth data regarding the feelings, perceptions, and views of employees and managers on the dynamics of relationships in a remote work environment (Creswell, 2021).

Study participants were selected through purposive sampling methods, which focused on selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives. This approach was implemented to ensure that the selected participants are capable of providing in-depth and accurate information regarding the influence of leadership style on employee engagement in organizations that practice remote work models. The criteria for selecting participants are as follows:

Remote Work Experience:

The participants in this study were selected from individuals who have at least two consecutive years of experience working remotely. This period is considered sufficient to allow them to adapt to virtual work routines, experience various forms of digital communication, and fully understand the advantages and constraints of remote work. This experience has enabled participants to provide reflective and critical insights into the type of leadership they have experienced and how it affects their level of engagement in the organization. The study by Liu et al. (2022) supports this approach by stating that long-term exposure to remote work allows employees to more accurately assess the impact of leadership on well-being, motivation, and virtual work relationships.

Departmental Diversity:

Participants have been selected from various departments within the organization, including human resources, information technology, marketing, accounting, and operations. This step was taken to obtain a comprehensive picture and reflect various work contexts. This diversity has allowed the study to capture variations in leadership practices and remote work management, considering that each department operates with different structures, communication styles, and work requirements. The study by Chen et al. (2023) also states that participation from various departments helps identify general patterns as well as specific differences in the impact of leadership on employee engagement based on each department's work environment.

Diversity of Experience:

This study also involved participants who had experience working under various leadership styles, including transformational, transactional, and empowering styles. By examining the experiences of participants who have been under different leadership styles, this study has successfully identified the most effective leadership elements in enhancing employee engagement in a virtual work environment. Participants who have experienced changes in leadership styles have also provided a more critical perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of each leadership style. The study by Thomas and Dorrington (2021) supports this approach by stating that the experience of various leadership styles allows employees to make meaningful comparisons regarding the impact of these styles on motivation and work engagement.

Based on these selection criteria, the study participants consisted of individuals with diverse experiences and work backgrounds. Table 2 shows the list of selected participants based on the provided data:

Table 2: List of participants for the interview

No.	Position	Duration of Remote Work Experience	Department
1	Administrative Officer	3 years	Human Resource Management Division
2	Assistant	2 years	Administration Division

	Administrative Officer		
3	Human Resources Manager	4 years	Human Resource Management Division
4	Operations Executive	3 years	Operations Division
5	IT Manager	3 years	Information Technology Division
6	Public Works Employee (Support)	2 years	Administration Division

The selection of participants with diverse experiences in remote work environments and different leadership styles enabled researchers to identify various patterns in employee engagement based on the leadership style received. Research by Park et al. (2022) confirms that employee engagement depends on the interaction and support provided by leaders, which may vary according to department and type of work. Therefore, this purposive sampling approach provided the study with the opportunity to obtain in-depth data on employee experiences within a broader context.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection in this study was conducted systematically and ethically to ensure the authenticity, accuracy, and reliability of the findings. This process begins with the identification and selection of participants through initial contact with the involved organizations, where communication is conducted via email, phone calls, and official letters to the organization's representatives to obtain permission to conduct the study. After receiving positive feedback, the researcher screened participants based on purposive sampling criteria such as the duration of remote work experience (at least two years), departmental diversity, and exposure to various leadership styles. Each potential individual was provided with an ethics research letter, a participation consent form, an explanation of the study's objectives, and their confidentiality rights. This action is in line with the principles of qualitative research ethics that emphasize informed consent and the participants' right to withdraw at any time without any consequences (Creswell, 2021). After the participants had been identified and agreed upon, semi-structured interviews were conducted online through platforms such as Google Meet, taking into account the convenience and habits of the participants in a remote work environment. The sessions were conducted in a flexible and informal atmosphere to encourage honest and open sharing, with a duration of 45 to 60 minutes depending on the participants' openness. Table 3 shows the interview samples, which were guided by an interview framework developed based on the research theme, but also allowed for spontaneous exploration. Each session was recorded with the participants' consent for transcription purposes, while field notes were also taken by the researcher to capture non-verbal behavior, tone of voice, and relevant environmental context. This approach aimed to enrich data interpretation and support more meaningful analysis (Thomas & Dorrington, 2021).

Table 3: Table of Sample Interview Questions and Rationales

| No.	Main Interview Question	Follow-up Question	Rationale
1	How would you describe your leader's leadership style during remote work?	Can you give an example of a specific situation?	Identifying participants' perceptions of the leadership experienced.
2	What kind of support do you receive from your leader?	How does that support affect your work morale?	Evaluating the role of support in building engagement.
3	Do you feel actively engaged in tasks while working from home?	Why do you feel that way? What contributes to that feeling?	Assessing the level of engagement and the factors influencing it.
4	What are the main challenges in maintaining work engagement	How does your leader help	Identifying obstacles and the role

		while working virtually?	you in facing this challenge?	of leadership in overcoming them.
5		What kind of communication do you expect from leaders in remote work?	Is the current communication style sufficient for you?	Examining communication styles and their impact on engagement.

Table 4: Interview Implementation Protocol Schedule

No.	Participant Code	Position	Interview Date	Duration (Minute)	Platform Used	Main Challenge
1	P01	Administrative Officer	03/02/2025	50	Zoom	Issue of slow internet connection
2	P02	Assistant Administrative Officer	05/02/2025	45	Google Meet	No significant disruptions
3	P03	Human Resources Manager	07/02/2025	60	Zoom	Background noise
4	P04	Operations Executive	10/02/2025	55	Google Meet	Technical microphone issues
5	P05	IT Manager	12/02/2025	60	Zoom	Slow internet connection issue
6	P06	Public Works Employee (Support)	14/02/2025	40	Google Meet	Slow response, need to repeat the question

The information in Table 4 shows that the implementation of interviews was conducted systematically and according to various participant backgrounds to achieve a diversity of experiences relevant to the study's objectives.

The data analysis process in this study used a six-phase guided thematic analysis approach as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The first phase involved thoroughly reading and reviewing interview transcripts, field notes, and supporting documents to understand the overall context of the data. In the second phase, initial codes were systematically generated with the help of NVivo software to identify meaningful units related to the study's objectives, such as "supportive leadership style," "open communication," and "initiative engagement." These codes were then combined and analyzed to form initial significant themes, including "empathy in leadership" and "the influence of support on motivation." The next phase involved reviewing and refining the themes to ensure consistency with the raw data and the represented meaning. After that, each theme was clearly defined and named according to its main essence and supported by direct quotes from the participants. Finally, the findings were presented in the form of descriptive and analytical narratives, with each theme directly linked to the study's objectives and explained based on previous theories and literature to produce a comprehensive and evidence-based interpretation.
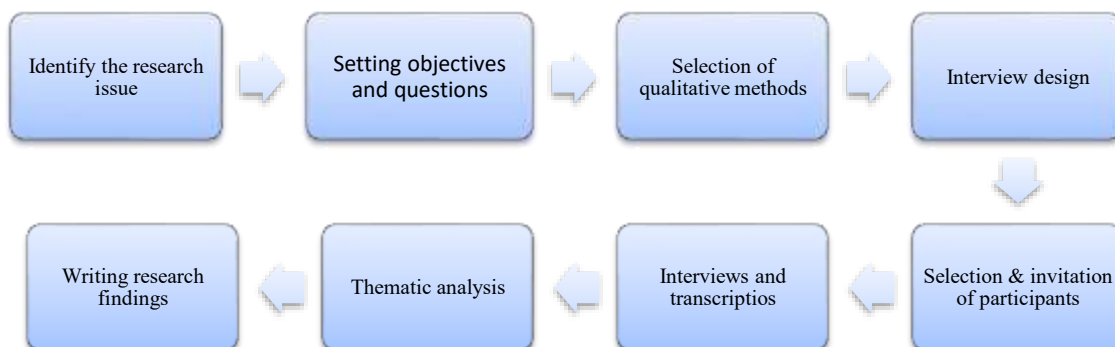
Figure 1: Research process flow

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the research findings based on semi-structured interviews conducted with six respondents from various positions, including Administrative Officers, Assistant Administrative Officers, Human Resource Managers, Operations Executives, IT Managers, and Civil Servants (Support). Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach that identified key themes (as shown in Table 5) related to transformational and transactional leadership styles, as well as their influence on employee engagement in the context of remote work. These findings are discussed with reference to theory and previous studies.

Table 5: Theme and Subtheme with the Number of Respondents Touching on the Issue

Theme	Subtopic	Number of Respondents
Transformational Leadership Style	Visionary Communication	5
	Empowerment of Workers	4
	Motivation and Inspiration	3
	Online Recognition	2
Transactional Leadership Style	Focus on Tasks and SOP Compliance	4
	Monitoring and Reward System	3
Stage of Employee Engagement in Remote Work	Less Guidance and Emotional Support	3
	High Engagement (Transformational)	3
	Low Engagement (Transactional)	3
Challenges and Suggestions	Communication Constraints	2
	Lack of Structured Guidance	2
	Dependence on Strict SOPs	2
	Suggestion: Regular Communication	2
	Suggestion: Opportunity to Voice Opinions	2
	Proposal: Digital Leadership Training	1

Transformational Leadership Style

The transformational leadership style was identified as an approach that has a positive impact on employee engagement in a remote work environment. Leaders who practice this style are seen to be able to provide inspiration, motivation, and development opportunities to employees, even without face-to-face interaction. Interview results showed that visionary communication, employee empowerment, emotional support, and online recognition are core elements that enhance employee engagement and well-being. For example, Respondents P01 and P02 from the human resources and administration department emphasized how their leaders frequently share the organization's vision clearly and convey motivational messages through video calls. This reflects the key elements of the transformational style, namely inspirational motivation and idealized influence (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Visionary communication provides direction and meaning to daily tasks, thereby fostering strong emotional connections even in a digital work environment.

This interpretation is supported by the studies of Ibrahim and Zulkifli (2022), as well as Tan et al. (2023), which state that clear communication about the organization's vision can enhance commitment and job satisfaction in the context of flexible work. The Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) and the LMX (Leader–Member Exchange) theory also emphasize the importance of open communication and mutual trust between leaders and employees. The element of empowerment also becomes a significant feature in transformational

leadership. Respondent P03 stated that the leader's trust in making decisions autonomously enhances a sense of responsibility and intrinsic motivation. This is in line with the studies by Rahman et al. (2022) and Wong and Yip (2023), which show that autonomy in work strengthens job satisfaction and commitment to the organization. This empowerment style aligns with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), where psychological needs such as autonomy and competence contribute to sustainable motivation. Emotional and motivational support was also emphasized by Respondent P04, a human resources manager who stressed the need to ensure that employees always feel valued and engaged even when working from home. Studies by Noor and Ahmad (2021) and Lee and Tan (2024) confirmed that inspirational leaders in a virtual work environment can enhance employee morale and work performance, especially in tasks that require self-initiative. In the context of the information technology sector, Respondent P05 valued the freedom to propose new ideas and plan digital innovations. This shows how transformational leadership that supports autonomy and creativity can foster an innovation culture. The studies by Lee and Kim (2023) and Rahman et al. (2022) also emphasize that authentic and empowering leadership styles can enhance innovation, especially in a digital environment. Finally, the element of online recognition was also emphasized by Respondent P06, who stated that open recognition on the company's digital platform enhances the sense of appreciation and work spirit. This aligns with the findings of Lim et al. (2021) and Tan et al. (2024), who found that recognition in a virtual environment can strengthen leader-employee relationships and enhance organizational commitment. The transformational leadership style emphasizes the need for appreciation and positive reinforcement as catalysts for intrinsic motivation.

Transactional Leadership Style

Transactional leadership style in the context of remote work was identified as an approach based on adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs), clear task assignments, and a structured system of rewards and punishments. Among the respondents of this study, this style was reported to have a mixed impact on employee engagement. Respondents among Assistant Administrative Officers and support staff stated that their leaders focused more on task execution and adherence to work guidelines without providing much guidance or space for interaction. Quotations from Respondents P01 and P02 indicate that an approach overly focused on performance and work directives makes them feel undervalued and not given the opportunity to contribute creatively:

"The leader is too focused on task achievement without giving us space to discuss or make suggestions. We feel we are not given the opportunity to grow". (P01, P02)

Although this approach provides a clear work structure, it is also seen as stifling engagement and the potential for self-development. In the context of remote work, this leadership style has the potential to be counterproductive due to the lack of trust and autonomy elements that are crucial in promoting productivity and intrinsic motivation. A study by Johnson et al. (2023) shows that excessive monitoring increases employees' psychological stress and reduces job satisfaction. Meanwhile, Garcia and Martinez (2022) emphasize that trust in remote workers is positively correlated with engagement and work performance. Respondents from the human resources department also acknowledged that transactional elements such as the use of KPIs and performance reports are still practiced, but they realized that these approaches are insufficient to maintain staff morale and engagement. Respondent P04 stated:

"We still use KPIs and performance reports to evaluate employees. Although it is important, I feel it is not sufficient to ensure employees remain motivated while working from home." (P04)

This style has also been reported to create pressure in an environment that requires innovation and creativity. In the field of information technology, Respondent P05 stated that although there are rewards based on project achievements, strict SOP constraints hinder opportunities for innovation:

"Leaders often reward us when we achieve certain targets in digital projects. But, when we are too bound by SOPs, it reduces the space for creativity." (P05)

Meanwhile, for support workers, a leader's approach of merely giving instructions without interaction or guidance is seen to reduce their emotional engagement. One respondent stated, "The leader only gives instructions and waits for us to carry them out without much guidance. This makes us feel less involved." (P06)

Comparison of Transformational and Transactional Leadership Style

Transformational leaders emphasize the achievement of long-term vision, employee empowerment, as well as continuous motivation and inspiration. This style aims to transform and empower employees, encouraging them to reach their full potential and strive to achieve the organization's shared goals. On the other hand, transactional leaders are more focused on a clear and structured exchange between the leader and the employees. Leaders of this type give rewards or punishments based on the achievements and performance of employees in meeting the set targets. This style is more inclined towards compliance and obedience to established instructions and procedures. Therefore, transformational leadership is more focused on long-term development and changes in employee attitudes, while transactional leadership is more focused on short-term results and clear exchanges between work and rewards. Both have a place in the organization, depending on the context and the needs of the organization and individuals.

The Impact of Leadership on Employee Engagement

Research findings indicated that the leadership style practiced by leaders has a direct impact on employee engagement levels, particularly in the context of remote work. The transformational leadership style has been identified as the most effective approach in enhancing overall employee engagement. Employees led with this approach report feeling more valued, empowered, and intrinsically motivated. Characteristics such as visionary communication, granting autonomy, recognition, and consistent emotional support from leaders create a positive and inclusive work environment. Respondent P06 stated:

"Our leader not only gives instructions, but also provides us with space to discuss and contribute ideas. I feel appreciated and more involved in the decisions being made. This makes me feel more responsible for my work." (P06)

This statement reflected that employee engagement is not only built through directives or control, but through active involvement in the decision-making process and recognition of their contributions. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes two-way relationships, empathy, and the development of individual potential, is seen as capable of increasing commitment levels and encouraging employees to contribute more than usual expectations. On the other hand, the transactional leadership style is reported to have a limited impact on long-term engagement. Although this approach can improve performance in the short term through rewards and task compliance, it has less impact on employees' intrinsic motivation. The main focus on achieving targets and adhering to procedures makes employees more focused on external rewards rather than personal development or the value of their work. As stated by P06:

"My boss is more inclined to give rewards when we meet our targets, but I feel it's more about 'working for a paycheck' rather than a genuine appreciation for my efforts. Even though I achieve the targets, I feel less recognized as an individual." (P06)

This showed that a lack of personal appreciation and close interpersonal relationships can lead to minimal involvement and reliance solely on rewards.

Situations where Transactional Style Works or Fails

Transactional leadership style was more effective in situations that require strict control over performance, for example, in environments with clear and structured task orientation. It is very suitable for routine tasks or jobs that require quick and measurable results, such as in the manufacturing industry or customer service that requires strict KPI achievement.

P02: "In my previous workplace, the transactional leadership style was more suitable because there was a lot of work that needed to be completed within a short period. We were rewarded when we met our daily targets, and it motivated us to achieve our goals."

However, this style failed in an environment that requires innovation, creativity, or deeper engagement from

employees. In organizations that promote continuous learning and change, transactional leadership can hinder employee engagement, as it places more emphasis on results and rewards rather than individual development or the need for creative thinking.

P06: "In the new workplace, I feel less freedom to contribute new ideas." A more transactional leadership style makes me feel limited in my creativity, even though I know I can do better.

The comparison between transformational and transactional leadership styles showed that both have advantages and disadvantages depending on the situational context. Transformational leadership is more suitable for encouraging long-term engagement and motivation, while transactional leadership is more effective for achieving short-term goals and performance. In a work environment that requires innovation and creativity, the transformational style tends to be more effective, while the transactional style is more suitable for routine tasks that require close monitoring of performance.

Stages of Employee Engagement in the Context of Remote Work

The study findings indicated that the level of employee engagement in remote work was greatly influenced by the leadership style practiced by their respective leaders. Respondents led by individuals with a transformational leadership style reported high levels of engagement even when not physically present at the workplace. They described themselves as more motivated, feeling appreciated, and remaining committed to the tasks and goals of the organization. For example, one of the respondents stated that their leader often provides encouragement through digital communication, which boosts morale and a sense of belonging to the organization:

"Although we don't meet face-to-face every day, my leader always motivates us through voice messages and brief texts. It makes me feel valued and important in the organization." (P01)

The ability of leaders to consistently convey support through digital channels is seen as a factor contributing to the increase in intrinsic motivation and emotional attachment to the organization. These findings supported the view that effective communication is central to employee engagement in a remote work environment. Additionally, the granting of autonomy has also been identified as a driver of engagement. Respondents who were given the trust to make their own decisions in operational situations stated:

"I am given the freedom to make decisions in certain situations. This makes me more responsible and feel like my voice is valued." (P03)

This statement showed that autonomy not only provides space for creativity and initiative but also creates a sense of ownership over the work done. This element of empowerment aligned with the principles of transformational leadership, which emphasizes individual growth and mutual trust. On the other hand, respondents under transactional leadership reported lower and inconsistent levels of engagement. In many cases, their engagement depends on external rewards as well as adherence to strict work instructions. Although there are cases where the reward system provides temporary motivation, the lack of interpersonal communication and emotional support negatively affects long-term engagement.

One respondent stated, "My leader is very strict with KPIs. Everything is evaluated through reports, but there is no casual communication or quick calls that make me feel 'connected'. Feels like working alone." (P02)

This statement showed that performance monitoring alone is insufficient to create a sense of attachment, especially in the context of remote work. This effect is also shared by respondents from the support staff category:

"We just follow the given instructions. No one asks about our situation or discusses the challenges of working from home. Sometimes it feels unimportant." (P06)

All these statements reflected the need for a more holistic and relationship-oriented leadership approach. Transactional leadership, although suitable for highly structured and results-oriented work environments, has been found to be less effective in enhancing the emotional and psychological engagement of employees in remote work settings that require flexibility, empathy, and continuous support. Overall, transformational leadership style

has proven to be more suitable in fostering remote worker engagement through effective communication, empowerment, and recognition. On the other hand, the transactional style, which relies heavily on rewards and monitoring, is seen as more suitable for short-term routine tasks but is less capable of fostering intrinsic motivation and long-term engagement. These findings reinforced the need to adapt leadership styles to the changing demands of the work context, especially in the current era of flexible and digital work.

Challenges and Recommendations

This study also identified several critical challenges faced by employees in the context of remote work, particularly those related to leadership and engagement. Through an in-depth analysis of the conducted interviews, three main issues have been identified: communication constraints, lack of structured guidance, and excessive reliance on Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). These challenges were found to have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the relationship between leaders and employees, which in turn affects the level of engagement within the organization.

Communication Constraints

Respondents consistently reported that infrequent and irregular communication between leaders and employees is the main barrier to maintaining a high level of engagement. An Operations Executive stated, "Uncertainty in task direction often arises due to infrequent communication with the leader." This caused a sense of aimless work.

Lack of Structured Guidance

Respondents also expressed a lack of direct guidance, especially in the execution of new tasks or when facing technical challenges. A Public Servant said, "There is uncertainty whether the tasks being carried out are right or wrong due to the lack of review or guidance." In an office environment, questions can be asked directly. However, in remote work, immediate feedback was difficult to obtain.

Dependence on a Strict Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

For respondents working under transactional-oriented leaders, overly strict SOPs are seen as hindering creativity and work autonomy. An IT Manager shared, "Excessive adherence to SOPs creates a sense of limitation in trying new approaches." This stifles individual initiative and reduces the sense of ownership towards the project.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study consistently showed that transformational leadership style has a more positive impact on employee engagement, particularly in the context of remote work, which has now become the new norm in many post-pandemic organizations. Transformational leaders, who typically exhibit characteristics such as vision, inspiration, emotional encouragement, open communication, and task autonomy, are seen to be capable of maintaining employee engagement even in a physically separated work environment.

Interviews with study participants found that employees felt more valued and motivated when their leaders granted them the freedom to complete tasks in their own way, while consistently providing encouragement and constructive feedback. This approach not only fosters a sense of trust but also enhances employees' intrinsic motivation. This is in line with the findings by Nguyen et al. (2021), who emphasized that frequent two-way communication and a focus on employees' emotional well-being are key factors in maintaining their engagement. Li et al. (2023) also confirmed that trust between leaders and employees is a critical element in organizations that operate in a hybrid or fully online manner.

On the other hand, the transactional leadership style, which was more focused on performance management based on rewards, strict monitoring, and adherence to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), was seen as less suitable in a remote work environment. Although a clear structure can help ensure clarity of responsibilities, this style indirectly creates a rigid work environment that is purely task-oriented and reduces human connections within the organization. In this context, employees reported feeling pressured due to excessive monitoring, as well as a loss of work motivation due to the lack of recognition for their efforts beyond quantifiable work results.

A study by Johnson et al. (2023) shows that an excessively performance-control-based leadership style contributes to dissatisfaction and increases the desire to leave the organization. This is also supported by Garcia & Martinez (2022), who found that employees are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion, decreased productivity, and social isolation when leaders focus solely on achieving short-term goals without considering interpersonal relationship aspects.

Employee Engagement Stage

The findings of this study also indicated that the level of employee engagement is greatly influenced by the leadership style practiced within the organization. Among the respondents who worked under transformational leadership, there are signs of high engagement such as self-initiative, team spirit, and a sense of ownership towards their work outcomes. Employees not only strived to complete tasks but are also willing to take on additional roles without being asked. This situation clearly shows that employees feel more responsible for the success of the organization when they are given consistent trust and recognition by their leaders. In fact, this leadership style had also proven successful in reducing the negative effects of remote work such as "Zoom fatigue," social isolation, and decreased intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, among respondents under transactional leadership, employee engagement was more mechanical and task-oriented. They only did what they were instructed, without any additional initiative or deep emotional connection with the organization. This situation proved that in a remote work environment that heavily relies on self-initiative and online collaboration, an overly rigid leadership style can dampen work morale and disrupt interpersonal relationships between employees and the organization.

Challenges and Improvement Suggestions

The three main challenges identified in this study—communication constraints, lack of structured guidance, and reliance on strict SOPs—are the primary barriers to the effectiveness of remote work and negatively impact overall employee engagement. Communication constraints arise when communication channels are not used optimally, causing information to be either not received or misinterpreted. In many cases, employees report that they do not clearly understand the direction of tasks or the organization's objectives. The lack of structured guidance causes new employees or those with less experience to feel neglected and unsure about completing their tasks. Furthermore, reliance on overly rigid SOPs makes it difficult to adapt to current challenges and reduces creativity and innovation among employees. Based on interviews with respondents, several suggestions have been put forward to address these issues. Among them was the implementation of regular communication through more than two-way online meetings. The creation of a digital platform for employees to express their views openly and safely. Finally, digital leadership training for managers and supervisors enables them to understand the psychological needs of workers in a virtual work environment.

This suggestion aligned with the recommendations by Patel & Smith (2022), which emphasized the importance of empathy, clear communication, and employee empowerment in digital organizations. Leaders need to play an active role not only as task supervisors but also as facilitators of interpersonal relationships and the holistic development of employee potential. Overall, the findings of this study reinforce the argument that in the dynamic era of remote work, the effectiveness of leadership depends on how well a leader can adapt their approach to current needs, as well as build relationships of trust, motivation, and emotional connectivity with employees.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to understand how leadership styles—specifically transformational and transactional—affect employee engagement levels in organizations that adopt a remote work model. Based on a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews, the findings indicate that transformational leadership has a far more positive impact on employee engagement compared to transactional leadership. Characteristics such as inspiration, empathy, open communication, and granting autonomy have proven to enhance motivation, a sense of appreciation, and employee commitment to their tasks, even when operating in an environment without physical interaction. On the other hand, transactional leadership that overly emphasizes SOP compliance and performance rewards is seen as less suitable in the context of remote work. The lack of interpersonal communication, guidance, and space for creativity has been identified as factors contributing to the decline in long-term engagement. Respondents in this study also voiced the challenges faced, such as communication

constraints, the absence of structured guidance, and reliance on strict SOPs. The proposed improvements include the implementation of digital leadership training, the creation of a two-way communication platform, and a more empathetic and flexible management approach.

In terms of theoretical implications, this study contributes to the development of literature in leadership theory, particularly by emphasizing the relevance of transformational style in digital and hybrid contexts. This study also supports the development of a digital leadership framework that integrates technological aspects with human relationships online. These findings reinforce the view that transformational leadership style, when adapted to virtual reality, can enhance the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of employee engagement.

From a practical implications perspective, this study provides important guidelines for organizations to strengthen human resource management strategies in the era of flexible work. Empathy-based leadership training, mastery of two-way communication, and inclusive use of technology are important steps in ensuring the effectiveness of remote employee management. Organizations are also encouraged to practice regular self-assessments and build a leadership culture that supports employees' emotional well-being.

Meanwhile, the implications for organizational policy involve the need to formulate an inclusive, flexible, and trust-oriented remote work policy. Rigid policies should be replaced with a work outcome-based approach and psychosocial support. Organizations are advised to establish a unit to monitor flexible work policies in order to adapt policies to changing employee needs and operational environments.

Additionally, several proposals for further studies have been put forward to deepen understanding in this field. Among them are the implementation of comprehensive digital leadership training programs, strengthening communication and feedback between leaders and employees, and fostering an innovation culture within digital organizations. A review of the reward system and performance monitoring also needs to be conducted to place greater emphasis on intrinsic motivation and the emotional well-being of employees.

Finally, future studies are recommended to use quantitative or mixed approaches to strengthen the empirical relationship between leadership styles and employee engagement, as well as to explore alternative leadership styles such as authentic and empowering leadership. Cross-industry studies should also be conducted to identify contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of leadership in various organizational settings. Overall, this study reinforces the importance of responsive, empathetic, and employee-centered leadership in managing the challenges of the dynamic digital work world. The effectiveness of a leader in the era of remote work lies not only in technical skills or task management but also in the ability to build strong emotional relationships and create a supportive, inclusive, and meaningful work environment. Contemporary organizations must dare to shift towards a more humane and adaptive leadership model to ensure sustainability and competitiveness in the future work landscape.

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