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Achieving The Dream Through A Screen: Exploring Employee Engagement And Commitment In Virtual Environments

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Virginia Vanderslice

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Achieving The Dream Through A Screen: Exploring Employee Engagement And Commitment In Virtual Environments

Abstract

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Keywords

virtual employees, remote workers, employee engagement, organizational commitment

Disciplines

Organizational Behavior and Theory

Comments

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Advisor: Virginia Vanderslice

ACHIEVING THE DREAM THROUGH A SCREEN: EXPLORING EMPLOYEE
ENGAGEMENT AND COMMITMENT IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

by

Lacinda M. Benjamin

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,
College of Liberal and Professional Studies
in the School of Arts and Sciences
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the
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Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2020

ACHIEVING THE DREAM THROUGH A SCREEN: EXPLORING EMPLOYEE
ENGAGEMENT AND COMMITMENT IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

Approved by:

Virginia Vanderslice, Ph.D., Advisor

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Up to this point in time, 2020 has been a year full of many unknowns. We are currently navigating our way through political, racial, and social unrest and a pandemic, while also working diligently to leave this planet in a better state than we found it. To the Organizational Dynamics class of 2020, I salute you for continuing to push forward despite all of the chaos.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

For most of my adult life, my work experience has been in traditional office spaces. Compared to my parents, my work experiences have been quite different. I grew up in a small, working class town in Pennsylvania where blue-collar, factory jobs predominated and having a college degree was a rarity. Two of the biggest factories in the area were Rohm & Haas, a specialty chemical manufacturer, and Keystone Lighting, a lighting manufacturer. My father worked at the latter for seven years as an assembly line worker, followed by other types of blue-collar jobs. During my toddler years, my mother worked as a nurse's assistant. She eventually moved on to customer service work as a customer service/sales supervisor at a large and very busy call center. This was her last job before she passed away. My parents worked extremely hard to carve an easier path for me and provide opportunities that they never had.

I am proud to be a college graduate and I consciously recognize that privilege every day. Through my own work experiences, I know how central technology is within the professional realm. Technology has advanced in such a way that a lot of tedious tasks (e.g., calculating, writing by hand, searching for information in an encyclopedia) are now done with just a few clicks on a computer. We can connect to others instantly, no matter where we are in the world. Over my 23 years working, technology has made significant leaps and bounds, such as having the ability to gather information and exchange information instantaneously. While technology advancements will continue, workplaces

have to remain knowledgeable about the newest technologies that are available. Having this knowledge can help organizations stay relevant and efficient ("COVID-19 Work from Home," 2020).

Purpose of Capstone

Due to COVID-19, organizations, no matter the size or industry, confront the virtual realm of work and how to keep the company afloat and profitable with no central office in operation. If access to the World Wide Web is available, the ability to work virtually is possible. When organizations hire virtual workers, companies can reduce overhead expenses; employees acquire flexibility, efficiency, save time; and transportation and child-care costs decline significantly (Greenbaum, 2019).

Determining the best way to improve employees' work-life balance is something into which employers have been putting a tremendous effort (Kohll, 2018). New policies that encourage employees to take time off and manage their own work schedules have been proven to reduce stress and prevent burnout (Kohll, 2018). Offering flexible work options requires organizations to invest in their technology infrastructure and, in many cases, decentralize to redefine what it means to work away from a physical space while promoting engagement and productivity for all. For the industries that can implement this type of working style, virtual work is something that must be offered to promote a healthy work culture and comfortable workplace environment (Kohll, 2018). With virtual work now a concrete reality for many, I've become even more curious about the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors contribute to a virtual employee's level of engagement in their work role?

RQ2: What factors contribute to a virtual employee's commitment to their organization?

Capstone Outline

To set the stage and provide a framework for working in virtual environments, I review literature on employee engagement, organizational commitment, virtual workers, and what employee engagement and commitment looks like for virtual work in Chapter 2. I rely on a variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, and business research. I also rely on a variety of peer-reviewed articles, online articles, and non-fiction books focused on understanding human behavior, virtual work, and the workings of organizations. This will provide a holistic understanding of the field of virtual work and the foundational concepts related to engagement, commitment, and virtual work environments.

In Chapter 3, I provide the methodology I employed to study employee engagement and commitment within the realm of virtual work. Using the Qualtrics survey software, I surveyed 120 workers who work virtually at least four days a week to understand how they feel about their overall engagement and level of commitment to their organization.

Chapter 4 includes a full presentation of my empirical findings and data analysis relating specifically to my research themes. My findings suggest that the alignment between an employee's values and their organization's values directly relates to how committed that employee will be to the organization. This chapter will also discuss themes that reveal the importance of communication, leadership, and technological

infrastructure as important supports to engagement and commitment of people in virtual work environments.

In Chapter 5, I integrate my empirical findings in a discussion with the most recent scholarly work on virtual employment. My findings reveal the importance of key components, such as alignment between employee's values and company mission, strong leadership, and solid interpersonal relationships. This chapter also discusses how organizations can introduce remote work as an option and includes the limitations of my research.

In my conclusion, I review the importance of my topic and how it can be extended in future research and provide insights on how organizations can enhance work experiences for their virtual employees.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Virtual Work?

Discussions about virtual work environments, which use technology to interact with others across geographic, organizational, and other boundaries, are very common throughout modern workplaces (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). The virtual work environment is referred to by a variety of terms, including *telecommuting/telework*, *remote work*, and *work-from-home* (Parris, 2014). Throughout this paper, I use the terms *virtual work*, *telework*, and *remote work* interchangeably because they are all equivalent (see Table 1).

Table 1. Common Terms Used Interchangeably with Virtual Work

Telecommuting/Telework	A person who works primarily from their home office. There may be some in-office work being done by teleworkers.
Remote Work	Worker lives outside of the geographical area of the company's main headquarters or office.
Work-From-Home (WFH)	Implies that an employee will be working from home.

In the early 1970s the term telecommuting made its debut. Gan (2015) asserts that Jack Niles, a former NASA engineer, proposed telecommuting as an “alternative to transportation” and as a way to describe what he was doing. This was at the height of suburban migration where most office and auxiliary workers commuted daily into central business districts that were often located in more urban city centers (Gan, 2015). The high number of cars entering these areas combined with poor urban planning led to stand-still traffic known as “gridlock.” To decrease traffic and energy consumption, many companies agreed to have clerical workers report to offices that were closer to their homes. According to Global Workplace (GW), in 2020 virtual work is most common in industries such as: information technology services; professional, scientific, and tech services; and finance and insurance services. Working remotely in these industries requires minimal technological infrastructure (e.g., a computer and internet access for basic tasks). GW also reported that the typical telecommuter is college-educated, 45 years old or older, earns an annual salary of \$58,000, and generally works for a company with more than 100 employees (Remote Work Stats, 2020). This is important to recognize because virtual workers are a specialized group.

As of March 2020, 88% of organizations encourage or require some or all of their employees to work from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic (COVID-19 Work from Home, 2020). For my friends who were working from home on a regular basis pre-pandemic, not much has changed in how they do their work. However, for those who were accustomed to working in a traditional office setting, virtual work has caused an essential cultural and logistical shift in how they perform their duties. The tasks of adapting to new technology, engaging with co-workers and leaders, and establishing a

work-life balance have steep learning curves, which can be challenging to less tech savvy and older workers (Gurchiek, 2016). Technology, such as various video-conferencing options, cloud-based file sharing, and enhanced processes, is becoming more commonplace in workspaces and even in some homes. Knowing how to navigate these useful tools is highly beneficial for people who must adapt to the technological demands of remote work environments. In addition to the technical aspects of telecommuting, it is also necessary to re-learn social etiquette as it relates to virtual interactions. For example, organizations that clearly define virtual work policies such as availability, data management, and what communication tools to use, can ensure that all employees are in sync and able to do their job in an efficient manner (Garcia, 2019).

Although working virtually is becoming more ubiquitous with the advancement of technology and advent of jobs replacing sustained, in-person labor, the study of virtual work is a moving target. Tencer (2017) cites a 2015 report published by Dell Technologies revealing that 85% of technology jobs have not even been created yet; by 2030, the virtual workplace will be inundated with technological positions that require advanced fluency in programming and digital system skills. Thus, it is imperative for organizations to take the time now to learn how to design processes, management, and comprehensive employee training that can redefine office environments that exist outside of allocated physical spaces.

One of the biggest concerns about virtual work is the idea that employees who work remotely will be less productive without having supervision present. Stanford professor, Nicholas Bloom (2015), facilitated a two-year quantitative study at a large Chinese-based travel company (Ctrip) to analyze and compare 16,000 virtual employees

and employees that worked in the Ctrip headquarters. Bloom and Ctrip co-founder and CEO, James Liang—in an effort to analyze employee productivity—designed a test where 500 employees were divided into two groups: a control group (who continued working at the headquarters) and work-from-homers (who had to have a private room at home, at least six-month tenure with Ctrip, and decent broadband access). Employees were assigned to groups based on their birthdays such that individuals whose birthday fell on an even date (e.g., 2nd, 4th) worked from home and individuals whose birthday fell on an odd date (e.g., 1st, 3rd) continued to work in the Ctrip office.

Bloom's findings demonstrated a robust boost in productivity from the telecommuters; telecommuters tended to work a "true full-shift" compared to office workers who often left work before the end of their eight-hour workday. In addition, employee attrition decreased by 50 percent among telecommuters; they took shorter breaks, had fewer sick days, and took less time off. Lastly, the company saved nearly \$2,000 per employee on rent by reducing the amount of office space at the Ctrip headquarters (Bloom et al., 2015). Overall, Bloom's study helps dispel early myths related to virtual work and productivity; virtual workers actually worked longer than office employees. In contrast, other research reveals the possible downsides to virtual work. In November of 2018, companies such as International Business Machines (IBM), The Bank of New York Mellon Corporation, Yahoo, and Aetna reversed their work-from-home policy and required their employees to return to the office. At that time, IBM noted that 40% of their employees had no office at all (Wilkie, 2019). While this decision was met with pushback from employees, these companies stated that they encountered a number of issues that affected efficiency and employee productivity with employees

working virtually. Several issues including, lack of training and resources, productivity, lack of monitoring, and trust, confronted IBM's mission to provide a profitable and engaging virtual environment. Moreover, most of the employees were frustrated with the lack of face time and the ability to create deep relationships with work colleagues (Wilkie, 2019).

With the outbreak of COVID-19, many workplaces, such as universities and colleges and corporate entities, scrambled to enter the virtual world with no defined blueprint. The quarantine forced work-at-home orders and have compelled a number of industries to realign and redesign their entire system. As states are now in the midst of a gradual reopening, physical workspaces are being redesigned to protect workers' health while maintaining company success and profits. And, importantly, we are in the midst of a country-wide paradigm shift about the relative value and necessities of in-person work. Even still, companies such as Wisconsin-based solutions provider, Camera Corner Connecting Point, that transitioned to work from home during the pandemic, still firmly argue that employees are more productive and collaborative working shoulder to shoulder in an office space (Kovar, 2020). Conversely, the finance industry plans to move at least 5% of their previously employed on-site workforce to remote positions after COVID-19 ("Gartner Survey," 2020). This leaves the question: How can other industries become better equipped to make virtual work a viable and successful option?

Since March, more companies and organizations are in the trenches studying how to achieve better outcomes for both their organizations and employees in regard to virtual work environments. Professional survey companies like Gallup and the Pew Research Center continue to administer surveys to organizations to examine if, and in what ways,

virtual work is most effective. In January 2020, Adam Hickman and Jennifer Robison of Gallup released data to U.S. federal agencies who cut back their telecommuting work options due to “[a] lack of data regarding remote worker’s effectiveness” (Hickman & Robison, 2020). Studying the overall effectiveness of providing employees the option to work remotely, they noted, revealed “...54% of workers say they’d change jobs for the choice to work remotely or not.” Furthermore, they found that companies that give employees the choice to work remotely will be at the top of job candidates’ lists and will give the most talented workers a reason to stay (Hickman & Robison, 2020).

Hickman and Robison also examined ties between employee engagement, job flexibility, and job retention, affirming that engagement increases when employees spend some time working remotely and some time working in a location with their coworkers (also known as a hybrid working model). Moreover, the authors explain that the attrition rate was at an all-time high in 2016 and employees in the US today are quick to leave a company if their needs aren’t met. Specifically, 51% of workers are now actively seeking and are open to new employment opportunities (Hickman & Robison, 2020).

To gain further understanding about the experiences of virtual workers, my capstone explores the primary factors that are associated with engagement by virtual employees and that contribute to their commitment to their team and organization. I assume that individuals need to feel a certain level of psychological safety, security, and trust to remain engaged in their work role, team, and organization. This assumption is based on Psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (see Figure 1), which states that for people to be at their best, there are specific needs that have to be met first (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, self-actualization; Maslow, 1954).

Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



With Maslow's hierarchy model in mind, my aim is to extend current knowledge about what motivates virtual workers to be engaged and committed to their organization. Because virtual work is still a relatively new concept that many organizations are trying to understand, continuing to examine the attitudes and needs of virtual workers in various industries is essential. As time moves on and more technology-based jobs become prevalent, so will the need and people's desire to work virtually (Abrams, 2019).

Employee Engagement Explained

When discussing the best way to encourage employees to perform as well as possible, the term *employee engagement* is integral to the conversation. The concept of employee engagement was introduced in 1990 by organizational behavior professor, William Kahn. In his paper, "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work", Kahn explores how people physically, emotionally, and

cognitively assert themselves into their work roles. Kahn observed participants' behaviors in two different workplace settings: a summer camp and an architecture firm. He chose these environments because of the differences in how they are structured. The camp, a temporary system dedicated to the education and enjoyment of adolescents, had little hierarchical structure and was a total system where work and nonwork boundaries blurred. The architecture firm was a permanent system that had rigid hierarchical structures and project teams with an ebb and flow rhythm based on projects and negotiations (Kahn, 1990).

Through his observations and in-depth interviews with employees, Kahn defined engagement as “an employee’s ability to harness their ‘full self’ at work” (Kahn & Fellows, 2013, pp. 108). Kahn identified meaningfulness, safety, and availability as the three psychological conditions to make it possible for employees to be their full selves at work. Kahn’s elements of safety, meaningfulness, and availability appear to me to complement Maslow’s (1954) idea of trust. I believe all are necessary elements needed in the workplace to propel employees to reach their full potential.

In addition, there are internal attributes, such as interest and motivation, that drive individuals to be engaged. In his 2009 book “Drive,” business and human behavior researcher, Daniel Pink, focused on intrinsic motivation and how it connects to an individual’s level of engagement in a task. Pink’s Motivation Theory (also known as Motivation 3.0) includes three key components that contribute to intrinsic motivation: autonomy (the need to direct one’s own life), mastery (the desire to improve), and purpose (working toward something more important than oneself; Pink, 2009). As humans, we crave the need to feel safe, belong, and that we matter (Maslow, 1954).

When individuals are provided with work environments that have all of these elements, they can increase the effort they put into their work.

Another important aspect of employee engagement is the role of communication. For workers to achieve any task effectively, their role needs to be clearly defined. When an employee's role is ambiguous, this can increase an individual's dissatisfaction with his or her role, hesitation over decisions, anxiety and confusion, resulting in ineffective performance (Qian, Li, Wang, Song, Zhang, Chen, & Qu, 2018). Unclear communication often leaves employees feeling confused, discontented, and distrustful (Krause, 2019). To avoid this, a work environment where employees feel socially supported by colleagues and leaders, receive performance feedback, and have the opportunity to voice their ideas needs to be constructed. Doing so keeps workers engaged, decreases attrition, and raises work quality and performance (Bakker, 2011).

Companies are making employee engagement a high priority, recognizing that a highly engaged workforce can increase bottom-line performance while reducing costs related to retention (Impact of Employee Engagement, 2013). An organization that has engaged employees has a better chance of those employees remaining committed to the organization (Harter & Mann, 2017).

How Does Employee Engagement Show Up in Virtual Work Settings?

Recent research within the last few years suggests that virtual workers experience higher levels of workplace engagement when they feel that their personal values align with the organization's mission and their coworkers are not just colleagues, but also like family. Dr. Aaron Lee (2018) investigated how leaders can better manage the engagement level of their remote workers. Lee (2018) conducted an exploratory case

study of incidents that are critical for workplace engagement for remote workers using critical incident technique (CIT). CIT is a set of procedures used for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles (Flanagan, 1954). Using the CIT, Lee devised a taxonomy of responses to incidents that are critical for maintaining, strengthening, or eroding workplace engagement, such as interactive communication tools and face-to-face meetings when possible.

Lee's empirical findings revealed that employees felt that their engagement strengthened when they (a) received tools to communicate with one another in real-time, (b) had a good organizational "fit," (c) had the freedom and flexibility to set their own work schedule, and (d) felt like their colleagues were more like friends and family than just co-workers. Conversely, employees reported that their workplace eroded when their organizational leadership restricted their autonomy; that is, when they couldn't set their own hours, office colleagues made them feel like outsiders, and when they felt isolated and left out of the social communication loop (Lee, 2018). Moreover, misalignment between an employee's values and their organization's values, can also diminish employee engagement. According to Chris Edmonds (2017), CEO and founder of The Purposeful Consultant Group, without values alignment, work cultures rapidly foster stress, erode employee engagement, and destroy productivity.

Organizational commitment and employee engagement in virtual settings are concepts that continue to rapidly expand. At this crucial moment in time, companies are realizing the important role that both play in the success of their business. Economists at McKinsey Global Institute predict that by 2030, most people will work completely

remotely or have hybrid schedules that make full-time office work obsolete (Selyukh, 2019). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we may hit that percentage sooner than expected. Knowledge about virtual work is imperative if a company wants to succeed. When it is implemented well, virtual work improves performance and increases employee satisfaction, which will benefit a company's overall bottom line (Abrams, 2019).

Two-Way Street: Employee Organizational Commitment

The first time that I ever felt committed to a job was when I was self-employed. I had a small cleaning business for a few years. While there were a lot of growing pains, I still found myself feeling committed to doing what I needed to do to keep it alive. There was a sense of pride that I had, a determination to achieve that surpasses all my other work experiences. I was committed to making my business succeed. But what exactly is commitment? The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2020) defines it as "the state or an instance of being obligated or emotionally impelled." Commitment is intrinsically linked to one's dedication, devotion, allegiance, and loyalty in all realms of life.

It's one thing for an individual to be committed to an organization that they own, but what makes someone feel committed to an organization they do not own? Several early researchers agree that there is a positive association between organizational commitment and employee retention (Mowday, 1982; Allen & Meyer, 1990; Cohen, 1993).

Psychologists John Meyer and Natalie Allen (1991) further explained that "Employees who are strongly committed are those who are least likely to voluntarily leave the organization." Meyer and Allen introduced their Three Component Model of

Commitment in “The Human Resource Management Review” in 1991. The model explains that commitment to an organization is a psychological state that has three distinct components: affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The difference between the three types of commitment is as follows:

- Affective commitment = Affection for your job
- Continuance commitment = Fear of losing your job
- Normative commitment = Having a sense of obligation to stay

Throughout our careers, most people are more than likely to experience one—if not all three—of these types of commitment. To retain employees, organizations must make sure that commitment is reciprocal (Juaneda-Ayensa, Emeterio, & Gonzalez-Menorca, 2017). According to Meyer and Allen, employees who have a high level of affective commitment to their organization and feel a sense of belonging and will be more likely to stay (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

In *Employee Engagement and Commitment* (2006), Robert J. Vance, a consultant in human resources and organizational management, explained that there are similarities between a relationship of commitment between two people and an employee’s relationship with an organization. Vance suggests that the exchange between the organization and employees is built on reciprocity. In exchange for an employee’s skills and commitment, organizations provide some form of value, such as job security, benefits, and fair compensation (Vance, 2006, p. 4). Furthermore, to maintain high levels of employee engagement, CEO and President (respectively) of Fishbowl, David Williams and Michelle Scott, offer the “5 Rs” from the *Harvard Business Review* as a good tactic

that organizations can use to build a stronger relationship with employees. The 5 Rs include:

- *responsibility*, showing employees that they are trusted by giving them responsibilities that allow them to grow;
- *respect*, making it a priority to show outward respect for employees on a regular basis;
- *revenue-sharing*, tying a part of employee's wages to the company's performance to help align their interests with the company's revenue and profit;
- *reward*, rewarding employees with something that speaks to their emotional needs and that goes beyond monetary compensation (e.g., recognition in front of the company, handwritten notes, company and department parties); and
- *relaxation time*, being generous with and providing sufficient time off (e.g., sick days, family vacations, parental leave).

David Williams and Mary Scott (2012) argue that employers that make an effort to show their employees that their well-being is a priority, by establishing a culture focused on building strong relationships, have a better chance of keeping employees for the long-term (Williams & Scott, 2012).

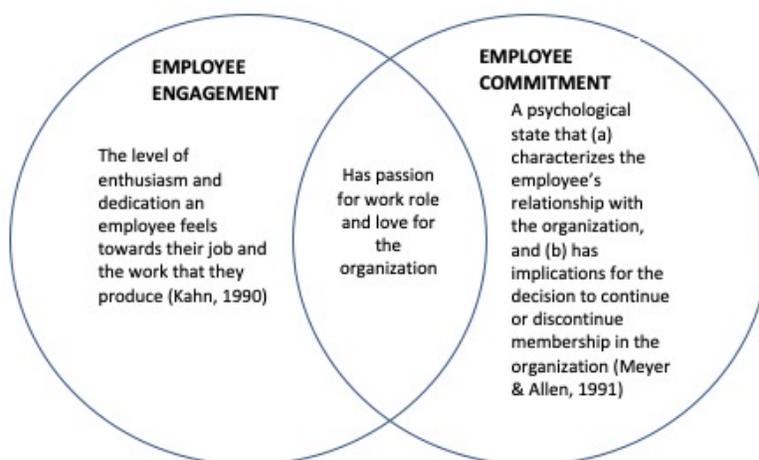
The "5Rs" concept resonates with Barbara Romzek's findings in her 1989 article "Personal Consequences of Employee Commitment." Through a two-wave panel study that surveyed the attitudes of a random sample of 485 public employees in 1982 (and re-surveyed in 1984), Romzek discovered that high levels of organizational involvement resulted in higher non-work (i.e., life outside of work) and career satisfaction. Romzek states:

When individuals feel committed to their work organizations, they share the organization's values. They derive personal meaning from their work experiences because pursuing organizational goals is consistent with their personal values (Romzek, 1989, p. 650).

Employee Engagement and Employee Commitment Overlap

Employee engagement and employee commitment are two concepts that tend to overlap. Both concepts revolve around the level of satisfaction an employee feels for their work role (engagement) and for the organization that they belong to (commitment). As evidenced in my review of the literature, the optimal goal for an organization is to devise work environments and policies that retain employees who are both passionate in their work role and really love their organization (see Figure 2). Just because an employee is engaged in their work, does not mean that they are committed to their organization. Reversely, an employee can be committed to their organization while not feeling engaged in their work (Smith, 2015). Employee engagement and employee commitment are similar, but not synonymous.

Figure 2. Employee Engagement/Employee Commitment (Benjamin, 2020)



In their 2013 article “Creating the Best Workplace on Earth,” organizational culture experts Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones discuss elements that should be considered when designing the best company on earth to work for. Goffee and Jones highlight six elements that organizations should strive for: (1) letting people be themselves, (2) unleashing the flow of information, (3) magnifying people’s strengths, (4) standing for more than shareholder value, (5) showing how the daily work makes sense, and (6) having rules that people can believe in. According to Goffee and Jones, the suggested elements sound very obvious; however, they are not a common practice in most organizations (Goffee & Jones, 2013). By focusing on the elements that were mentioned above, companies have a better chance of bringing out the best in their employees and motivating them to stay indefinitely.

Most of the literature on virtual work explores these two concepts in regard to employees who regularly work in traditional office spaces. Recent works by Mautz (2018), Wilkie (2019), and Hickman and Robison (2020) outline strategies to increase employee engagement and commitment within a virtual setting. To acquire a deeper understanding of the nature of work in virtual environments, it is important to hear from individuals who work remotely on a regular basis. The goal of this paper is to present a comprehensive portrait of how remote workers feel in regard to their interactions with their coworkers and team members, interactions with organizational leadership, feelings of commitment to their organization, and opinions about working virtually. I assume that factors that are important to employees in traditional work environments are even more important in virtual ones, with consistent communication with coworkers, good leadership, and aligned values being the top factors that need to be present. This study

explores what factors are, in fact, paramount and positively associated with increased feelings of engagement and commitment for individuals who work remotely on a regular basis.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Overview

The aim of my research is to uncover factors that contribute to a virtual employee's commitment to their organization, along with their individual engagement to their work roles and teams. These two factors are directly related to employee productivity (Vance, 2006). The information that I have reviewed thus far has led me to the following hypotheses:

H1: The more aligned an employee is to their organization's values, the more committed they will be to the organization.

H2: Virtual teams that have clear communication between coworkers and leadership, and proper technological support, will experience team members who are more engaged.

In the 2018 *Harvard Business Review* article "Do Your Employees Feel Respected," Kristie Rogers discusses the connection between employees feeling respected and valued, and their commitment to the organization they work for. Rogers states, "A respectful workplace brings enormous benefits to organizations. Employees who say they feel respected are more satisfied with their jobs and are grateful for-and loyal to-their companies" (Rogers, 2018). Specific factors such as autonomy and passion need to exist for individuals to feel engaged in their work role, while strong leadership must motivate employees to produce their best work. This is even more important today as the world figures out how to successfully and productively engage a global pandemic.

Kahn et al. (2013) contends that “Workers need to be psychologically available if they are to engage. And, they need to feel safe enough to say what they think and feel. But to be available and safe is not sufficient; there must also be the internal drive, the desire to engage. The sense of meaningfulness is that drive” (Kahn et al., 2013). These concepts are reinforced by Pink (2009).

To explore this further, I designed a survey informed by researchers Greenbaum (2019), Bloom (2015), Meyer and Allen (1991), and others to dissect various aspects of what employee engagement and organizational commitment looks like for virtual employees. Additionally, I referenced new articles (within the last year) in periodicals, such as *Harvard Business Review* and *The New York Times*, to help tie in new developments in virtual work.

Data Collection Through Survey

Using surveys to collect data is a comprehensive way to gather information, revealing trends and patterns on specific subjects (Schuman, 2002). In an attempt to find trends among virtual employees, their feelings in regard to working virtually, and their relationship to their co-workers and their organization, I constructed a 44-question survey using the Qualtrics survey platform. The questions included 24 likert-type scale questions, which is a popular research instrument for measuring people’s attitudes, beliefs, emotions, feelings, perceptions, personality characteristics, and other psychological constructs (Lewis-Black, Bryman, & Liao, 2004).

To minimize bias or misinterpretation of the close-ended questions, I included 10 open-ended questions so participants could elaborate on their true feelings in regard to some of the questions asked. In addition, I included seven demographic questions, and

three multiple choice questions that inquired about frequency of meetings with a supervisor, work environment preferences (virtual or traditional), and anticipated longevity at their organization.

For the purpose of my research, my target demographic was individuals that worked virtually, or away from their organization's central office at least four or more days of the week. In an attempt to reach a large population of people, I used both snowball and convenience sampling methods. Snowball sampling is achieved by participants recruiting others to participate in a test or study ("Statistics How To," 2020). Convenience sampling is achieved by including people who are easy to reach and that the researcher has direct access to (i.e., co-worker or classmates; "Statistics How To," 2020).

To recruit my sample, I relied on the Organizational Dynamics community email listserv as well as various social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn). These venues enabled me to reach a diverse demographic of virtual workers, including individuals who work online for pleasure, are entrepreneurs, or are business owners; and people who are online for pleasure, may work virtually themselves, or know others who work virtually. Individuals were given a week to complete the survey. The final sample included 120 participants; six participants did not fully complete the survey and were excluded from survey results to achieve better accuracy with analyzing the data.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

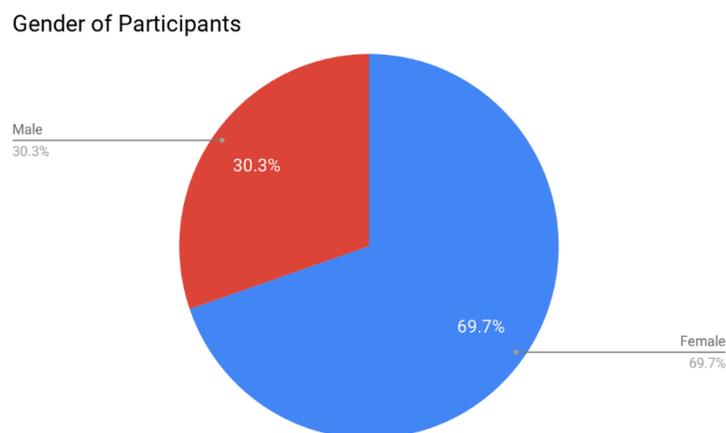
Who Are the Virtual Workers?

Out of the 120 participants, 30.8% of participants were in the 40-49 age range, followed by the 30-39 age range at 22.5%. The lowest percentage of virtual workers fell into the 20-29 age range (8.3%; see Table 2). Generation X and Baby Boomers in my sample is approximately 20% higher than the number of Millennials. In addition, women comprise the majority of the sample at 69.1%, respectively (see Figure 3).

Table 2. Participants' Age

Age	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	Total
# of Participants	10	27	37	25	21	120

Figure 3. Gender Demographics



While there is a dearth of research on why more women or men work virtually overall, a current article, “4 Ways Remote Work is Better for Women by Deb Tennen-Zapier” (2020), discusses how beneficial virtual work can be for women. Specifically, Tennen-Zapier focuses on how virtual work enables women to close in on the wage gap; they don’t necessarily have to leave the workforce to tend to family life. Moreover, Tennen-Zapier (2020) contends that new technology like email and instant messaging inspires a more level playing field for gender equity at all levels. Studies have shown that women are more likely to be interrupted by both men and women during in person interactions (Tennen-Zapier, 2020).

Most Common Industries for Virtual Workers

My data indicated the largest presence of virtual workers in three industries: consulting (14.2%), sales & marketing (14.2%), and other (29.2%). Using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to aggregate the “other” industries listed, those participants worked in professional and business service, financial activities, or educational service (Industry Sector Employment, 2020). These industries are more technology-based and better suited for remote work with higher travel requirements to meet clients in various locations (Abrams, 2019).

Employee Engagement with Team Members

Research by Bakker (2011) explored predictors of employee engagement. Bakker finds that social support from colleagues, performance feedback, and communication are essential factors that enhance an employee’s engagement. To test this finding, my survey included specific questions about team synergy, to better understand how participants

engaged with their team members and how that related to their virtual work experiences (see Appendix A).

When asked about how well their coworkers communicate, 83% of my survey participants agreed on some level (agreed, strongly agreed, somewhat agreed) that their co-workers communicate their expectations and needs clearly. In addition, 87% of participants agreed that they frequently receive positive feedback from their co-workers and that their co-workers are considerate when doing so.

Survey participants also reported that they have a good relationship with their colleagues overall. Interestingly, 83.3% reported that they feel connected to their co-workers, with 90.8% agreeing on some level that the use of collaboration technologies/web-based tools makes them feel more connected to their team and organization. When asked what organizational strategies help them and their coworkers feel in sync, participants who answered this question cited the following top five responses: (1) frequent meetings and consistent contact (45%), (2) use of technology (email, instant messaging, phone, video-conference; 39%), (3) open communication (35%), (4) engaging in non-work chats (18%), and (5) meeting in person when/if possible (12%).

Conversely, 13 (11.4%) participants reported that they do not feel connected to their coworkers. Out of the 13, six work in the Sales & Marketing industry. Five out of the six reported that they don't have frequent communication with their coworkers, which leaves them feeling disconnected. This can be due to fact that salespeople are rarely in the office even when they do have traditional office space and, more often than not, a portion

of the sales team lives in another state or country. Without efforts to forge connections with other team members, disconnection will set in (Gese, 2020).

These findings are consistent with the literature on the importance of communication and employees needing to feel a sense of inclusion with their co-workers (Khan & Fellows, 2013; Krause, 2019; Maslow, 1954; Qian et al., 2018). It is not surprising that participants who did not have “frequent communication with team” or any “common interests with their co-workers” did not feel connected to them. Research conducted by Roy Lewicki and Barbara Bunker (1996) on trust building, reveals that trust is the glue that holds most cooperative relationships together. With remote teams, calculus-based trust (team members trust fellow workers to behave consistently across different team situations), knowledge-based trust (team members become known to one another well enough that their behaviors can be more easily anticipated), and identification-based trust (team members understand and share each other’s values, needs, goals, and preferences), are needed for teams to operate effectively (Zaccaro & Bader, 2003).

When survey participants were asked about how much time they spent in a week communicating with others using collaborative technology (email, instant message, phone, video calls), 28.8% indicated 2-8 hours of communicating with collaborative tools as their weekly average. While there is not much research on how many hours are the right number of hours to interact with others, there is research that expresses the importance of employees creating clear work/life boundaries to avoid burnout (Heinz, 2020).

Engagement with Leadership

A positive and strong relationship between an employee and their leadership is another important factor associated with employee engagement. The majority of participants in my survey indicated that they have a positive relationship with their supervisor. This was apparent with 82.3% reporting that they enjoy working with their supervisor and 74.4% reporting that they meet with their supervisor on a biweekly basis at the very least.

Interestingly, 31% of participants reported that their supervisor does not talk to them about their professional development. Forty-seven percent of participants agreed on some level that the only time they receive feedback from their supervisor is during their performance review.

Moreover, 18% of participants reported that their supervisor doesn't take interest in how they are doing inside and outside of work. This data suggests that there may be a disconnect between supervisors and their virtual employees regarding their well-being or concern for their employee's professional growth. While I was unable to explore if this dynamic occurred at the same level for employees who work in traditional office spaces, I was surprised to find that the overall engagement and commitment level of employees was not affected by these factors. This finding is unexpected since research has shown that managers with poor interpersonal skills or who don't take an interest in assisting their employees to grow professionally tend to have disengaged employees who eventually decide to move on to better opportunities due to not feeling cared about or valued (Harter & Adkins, 2015).

What Keeps Employees Engaged?

Participants rated their level of engagement on a five-point scale from *extremely high* to *extremely low*. My results indicate that 70.5% of participants believed their engagement is extremely or somewhat high. The top reasons for high engagement that these participants identified in ranked order were caring/connected to role (26%), great team members and leadership (18%), and schedule flexibility (16%). In addition, employees who stated that they felt highly engaged were most often 30 years old and older. In terms of low engagement, 12.5% participants listed—in order of frequency—lack of good leadership (5%), misaligned values (3%), and poor interactions with coworkers (6%) as top reasons for their disengagement.

The survey data correlate with findings of Khan (1990), Pink (2009), and Harter and Mann (2017) regarding factors that lead to employee engagement. Survey participants felt more engaged with both their coworkers and supervisor when they had frequent contact with them, open dialogue and communication, and a clear understanding of goals. These findings confirm how significant open and clear communication is to employee engagement. When communication and frequent contact are missing, according to the survey data, people become disengaged (Bakker, 2011; Krause, 2020; Qian et al., 2018).

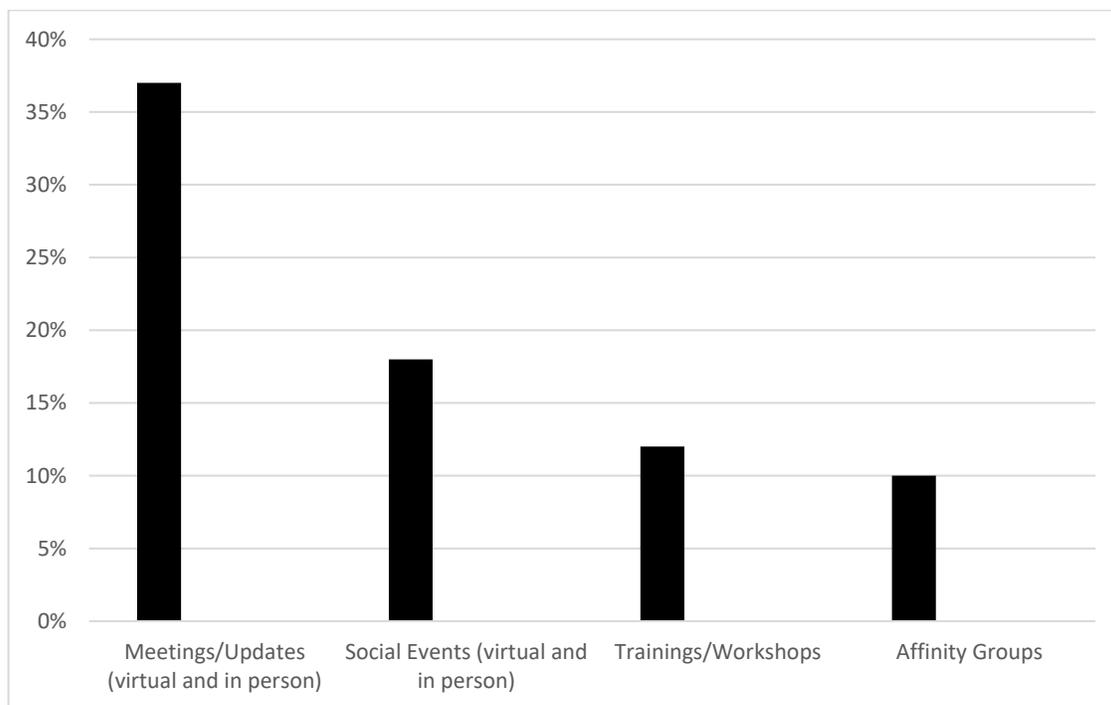
Commitment to the Organization

Research by Romzek (1989) finds that employees who feel committed to their organization share their organization's values. My survey data supports that claim, with 57% of participants stating that they felt loyal to their organization and 62% of participants agreeing with the following statements: "I find that my values and my

organization’s values are aligned” and “I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization.”

When participants described strategies that their organization uses to help them feel more connected to others in the organization, the elements cited most frequently related to communication and building social connections. This was followed by the virtual and in-person social events and affinity groups. Figure 4 displays the most common elements that participant’s cited.

Figure 4. Summary of Strategies Used by Organizations to Enhance Connections



Employee Commitment and Retention

The survey data revealed that there is a connection between employees who are engaged and the amount of time they will stay at an organization. Eleven participants who stated that their engagement was somewhat or extremely low, on average, have been in their organization for no more than nine years. Of the 61 participants who claimed to be highly or somewhat engaged, 22 of those participants reported that they have been in their organization for at least ten years. This finding suggests that when employees are engaged in the work that they do, they will stay in an organization long-term.

In addition, when participants were asked how long they plan to stay in their organization, out of 30 employees who were somewhat or highly engaged, 23 stated that they plan to stay at their organization for at least 3 more years. The top three reasons—in order of frequency—for wanting to stay had to do with (1) having a sense of security in the organization, (2) feeling valued and cared for, and (3) genuinely loving what they do. Referring back to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, these participants are part of organizations that are meeting their basic and physiological needs, which allows them to be their best self, happy, and committed (Maslow, 1954).

The remaining seven highly engaged participants stated that they plan to leave their organization in 1-2 years. Interestingly, looking at those seven individuals, they all reported positive feedback to questions about interactions with their coworkers, supervisor, and organization. From this, I believe it is possible that their wanting to leave the organization may be related to factors other than dissatisfaction with their current work.

Participants' Thoughts on Virtual Work

When asked whether they feel more efficient working virtually or in a traditional office setting, 58% of survey participants reported feel that they work more efficiently in a virtual setting. When asked to elaborate on why that is, the top three reasons cited were: more flexibility with their schedule (10%), less distractions and more productivity overall (37%), and no time wasted commuting to an office (11%).

The top two reasons provided by the 42% who prefer a traditional office setting were: love having the chance to interact and connect with other coworkers (10%) and easier to collaborate with others and work out problems or issues (15%). Other single answers included a better focus in the office and better ability to use company systems.

Finally, I gave participants an opportunity to leave comments regarding their virtual work experience. Surprisingly the participants who left a comment stated similar thoughts, such as “I miss regular people contact in the traditional setting, but I get a lot done without distraction in my virtual set-up” and “I think having both works well; just knowing how to use either and when is important to me.”

Two main takeaways from my findings are:

- (1) Many participants felt that working virtually is more beneficial than working in an office. While there may be elements that they miss about working in a traditional office setting (i.e., having the opportunity for in person social contact), the benefits that come with working virtually outweigh what they miss in a traditional setting.
- (2) Most participants feel that nothing can replace the bonds and connections that take place when physically working with coworkers in the same space.

Having access to video conferencing and other technology greatly helps, but building connections is easier when done in-person.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In this chapter I discuss the key elements from the literature on virtual work that complement my empirical findings on employee engagement and commitment. This discussion focuses on how organizations and employees can achieve positive experiences for all who work in virtual environments.

Why Should We Care About Virtual Work?

Understanding the nuts and bolts of virtual work has become an important area of research over the past couple of years. As of April 2020, 66% of the U.S. population found themselves working from home due to COVID-19 (Pickard-Whitehead, 2020). With so many people now working remotely, it's imperative to understand virtual environments so that we can work efficiently productively in this new milieu. This topic speaks to me personally because I think that most people desire a better work-life balance and having the opportunity to work virtually can provide that. Allowing people to have more autonomy when it comes to how, when, and where they do their work leads to happier and more motivated employees (Pink, 2009).

Ingredients for Engagement and Commitment from Virtual Employees

Communication and Building Connections

Forging a connection with coworkers through a screen can be difficult task, but it is not impossible. Not surprisingly, 91% of survey participants reported that the use of collaborative technology, such as email and video conferencing, made them feel more connected to their team and organization. Participants with access to collaborative

technology and who had good communications with coworkers and leaders expressed higher levels of engagement than those that didn't have these resources. Collaborative technology is the essential way for remote employees to interact and communicate with each other. The need for communication between team members is a requisite in both traditional co-located teams and virtual teams. However, it should be recognized that specific efforts need to be targeted to enhance the effectiveness of virtual teams (Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001). With the absence of water-cooler conversations that gives employees the opportunity to engage with each other within traditional office settings, finding ways to build trust when working virtually is another essential factor that can enhance communication between not only team members, but all members in an organization (Raghurama, Garud, Wiesenfeld, & Gupta, 2001).

Clearly Stated Goals

For teams to effectively achieve their goals, stating a clear plan to team members is imperative. Leadership must devise policies and objectives that are clearly communicated to their employees. Survey participants who stated that they felt disengaged, listed "lack of clear goals" in communication with team members and from the leadership in their organization as one of the primary reasons for their disengagement. If there is a breakdown in communication and ideas are not shared, employees cannot perform optimally (Krause, 2019). A way to avoid this is for teams and leaders to take the time to fully understand individuals' communication style. For example, collaborating over email may be a great way to communicate for some members on a team, but it may not be as effective for others. Discussing a method that works for everyone is the best way to ensure that everyone is on the same page (Kluch, 2020).

Meaningful Work

A number of participants in the survey indicated that their engagement was related to the fact that they love what they do. Tasks are achieved more effectively when employees feel motivated and want to give it their all. Purpose, along with autonomy and mastery, as evidenced in Pink's (2009) Motivation 3.0 Theory reveal the intrinsic relationship between passion and commitment. Virtual workers who have control over their schedule and workflow feel engaged, motivated, and mentally well (Demeter 2020). Organizations that create work environments that encourage autonomy are more than likely to have more engaged and loyal employees.

Work-Life Balance

Romzek (1989) concludes that individuals' work and non-work attitudes are related. Survey participants articulated that they like working remotely because they have a good work-life balance. Many of them appreciate the fact that they no longer have to take long commutes to get to and from their office, they can work at their own pace, and they can tend to family obligations without great disruption to their work for things like child or pet care. Not having to worry about these details can alleviate stress. This in turn can allow space for employees to have better focus when working and be more productive.

Alignment of Values

Employees who are in alignment with the values and mission of their organization are more likely to feel a sense of pride to work there and will want to stay longer than those who are not aligned (Edmonds, 2017). Participants from my survey whose values did not align with their companies planned to leave within the next two years.

Participants who felt they were in alignment with their organization planned to stay for at least the next three years, as did those who strongly agreed that their values aligned with their company's values. My survey findings indicated that people who feel committed to their organization feel that their own values and their organization's values are well aligned, and they believe in their organization's mission. When an organization makes their values concrete, transparent, and operates from those values, employees who believe in those values will want to do their part to help the company reach its goals (Edmonds, 2017). Research also suggests that revenue-sharing based on the company's performance can help with aligning an employee's interests with the company's interests (Vance, 2006).

Effective Leadership

A team is only as strong as its leader. Leaders play a pivotal part in how engaged and committed an employee feels. In virtual environments, it is necessary for leaders to set clear expectations upfront, provide employee with a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, and make sure that their employees are all on the same page (Hirsch, 2019). Doing so helps employees understand the importance of their role and how their actions impacts others. Another helpful tactic that leaders should encourage and create space for is non-work team interactions such as a virtual happy hour or celebratory event to assist employees forging stronger interpersonal connections across the organization. Survey participants reported that taking time to celebrate with others and have non work-related chats helped build stronger interpersonal connections. Strong team connections can enhance a person's overall work experience and make them feel emotionally and psychologically connected (Hirsch, 2019). Leaders who keep this in mind, along with

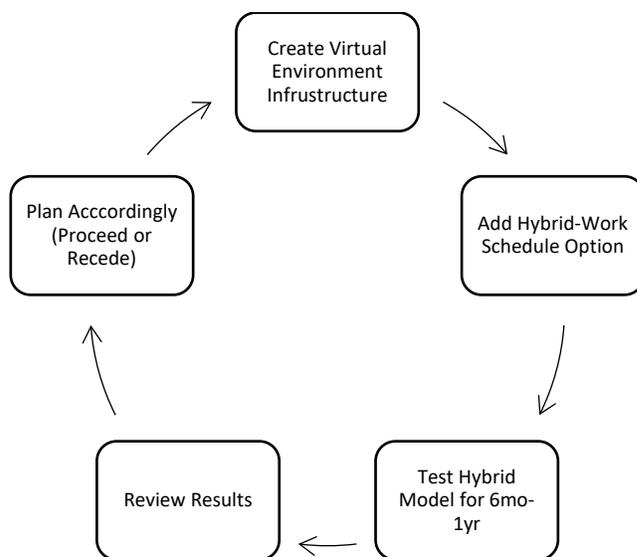
thorough communication, create teams that are more engaged and perform at higher levels than teams that are missing these aspects. Overall, leaders of remote teams need to remember to communicate their expectations, foster team connections, be involved and available, and trust that their team is fully capable of achieving assigned tasks.

Implementing a Remote Work Option into an Organization

While my capstone focuses on virtual work, not all people like to work virtually and not everyone has a home situation that allows for working without distractions (e.g., strong internet, a private space to work, no young children at home). There are some people who prefer to work in a traditional office setting. Furthermore, my survey findings reveal that there are a number of virtual workers who would actually prefer a hybrid model with some in-person office time. A hybrid-work model could be a great transition for companies considering remote work options. Organizations' lack of knowledge about how to effectively manage remote workers is perhaps one of the main reasons why organizations do not offer this work option. This lack of knowledge leads to a climate of distrust: not trusting that an employee will be responsible to do their work without having a watchful eye on them. What if this thinking was reversed? What if organizations and leaders operated from a space of trusting employees and allowing them to prove themselves trustworthy? Doing so could potentially lead to more satisfied employees, higher retention rates, and enhanced productivity.

In thinking about this, I came up with a simple virtual work implementation plan. Implementing virtual work into an organization takes strategic planning which can start with the figure shown below (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Virtual Work Implementation Plan (Benjamin, 2020)



To start, companies will need to figure out what will and will not work for their particular organization. From this tailored plan, an infrastructure that supports remote work can be created to include tech support, manager training, and information sharing processes. From there, a remote-work option for employees can be introduced. Next, a hybrid-work model can be tested for six months to one year, or however long a company needs for everyone to get adjusted to the new arrangement. After the agreed upon time, the organization can measure the results and see how the hybrid model works for their specific needs as an organization: Did productivity increase or decrease? Are employees feeling happier? Has the work culture improved? Finally, depending on the results, a decision can be made whether to continue to offer the hybrid work option or to discontinue it.

I do not present this plan as a one-size-fits-all plan. Different industries have different requirements when considering remote work for their employees. Also, for employees in positions that require them to report to an office, some type of incentive should be provided (e.g., additional PTO) to ensure that conditions are fair for both remote and office workers. The objective of this implementation plan is to serve as a starting point to help assist leaders to think about simple first steps with considering virtual work as a viable part of their future success.

Limitations and Role of the Researcher

Limitations to this study include the style in which the survey was distributed using social media platforms. Administering the survey in this way enabled participants who responded on those platforms to self-select into the sample, which can result in biased responses. Questions clarifying exactly how often participants worked remotely and if working remotely was their choice should have been included to ensure that participants who completed the survey completely fit the targeted demographic. Also, the sample size made any quantitative analysis of the results challenging. A larger and random sample is suggested for future researchers interested in these questions.

Future research strategies should include qualitative interviews to examine the “how’s and why’s” behind virtual workers attitudes and experiences. Lastly, it may be beneficial to simultaneously study traditional office workers’ experiences in contrast to virtual worker’s experiences in a specific industry or corporate domain to grasp a myriad of other factors that may contribute to engagement and commitment.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Virtual work is here to stay, and numerous companies have had to dive into it headfirst. At first, it was a major inconvenience due to organizations not having the infrastructure in place for employees to work efficiently at home, employees not knowing how to connect to Zoom meetings, and other annoyances. Now after four months, people are getting more comfortable and settling into what will likely be the new normal for quite some time. Companies that thought remote work would be impossible to achieve are discovering that it actually can work well when done right. Continuing to explore better and effective ways to keep employees engaged through a screen instead of face-to-face can be challenging, but is very possible (Hirsch, 2019).

There are a few gaps in my research that I feel would be beneficial to address as virtual work continues to gain traction. Future research should explore the feelings of inclusion and exclusion in regard to connecting with teams and leadership. For example, examining the experiences of people of color in virtual workspaces may provide valuable insights regarding inclusion initiatives. Exploring whether individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds are inadvertently excluded from work opportunities due to lack of internet access should also be considered. Working virtually might yield advantages for women and people of color if judgements of work are more likely based on quality of work or performance rather than who people are. One other issue that should be explored is how to build or maintain organizational culture if workers are mostly virtual. With the removal of face-to-face contact, building a strong organizational culture that devoid of employees feeling isolated will take finesse.

My hope is that my capstone can add value to the current research on employee engagement and commitment in regard to virtual workers. Yet, there are many facets that need to be explored on this topic. Continuing to learn how to make the most of virtual workers is not only a smart business move, but an essential move to stay ahead of the curve.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

ENGAGEMENT WITH COWORKERS SURVEY QUESTIONS

In an average week, how much time (in hours) do you communicate with internal organization members using collaboration technologies (e.g. company intranet, internal chat rooms, video calls, instant messenger, phone, etc.)
Using collaboration technologies/web-based tools makes me feel more connected to my team and organization.
I interact with one or more co-workers every day.
I frequently receive positive feedback from my co-workers.
When my co-workers give me feedback, they are considerate of my feelings.
I feel that my co-workers communicate their expectations and needs clearly.
On occasions when I make a mistake at work, my co-workers tell me.
I feel comfortable asking my co-workers for feedback about my work performance.
I feel connected to my co-workers.
If you disagree with the last statement, please state why.
What strategies, if any, are used between you and your co-workers to help everyone feel in sync?