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Remote Work and Its Impact on Employee Engagement and Productivity: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

To mitigate the spread of the virus, governments worldwide mandated that individuals work from home unless they were essential workers. As a result of this shift, societies, organizations, and workplaces globally explored "the new normal"—encompassing the "future of work" and the "role of the office"—where WFH becomes standard practice. Hence, during the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home (WFH) emerged as a pivotal strategy to sustain employment, maintain societal functions, and protect public health. The year 2020, therefore witnessed significant increase in the number of people working from home (WFH). Despite its widespread adoption, the effects of WFH on employee engagement and productivity remain inadequately understood, with existing studies being fragmented and contextually varied. This study aims to conduct a systematic literature review (SLR) to comprehensively explore and synthesize existing research on the impact of remote working on employee engagement and productivity. A comprehensive literature search identified 156 potential studies from Scopus and the Web of Science databases (2020-2024), from which 21 studies were selected based on PRISMA guidelines. The review finds that the impact of WFH on employee engagement and productivity is influenced by factors such as job nature, employer and industry characteristics, work flexibility, communication, organizational support, and the physical work environment. While the majority of studies report a positive impact, some indicate no change or a negative effect. The study recommends enhancing technology and IT training to improve WFH outcomes and support its adoption beyond the pandemic.

Keywords: Remote Work, Telecommuting, Work from Home, Employee Engagement, Employee Productivity, COVID-19,

Introduction

Remote work or telework, has become a prominent subject in recent studies, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, contemporary research is increasingly focused on understanding the nuances of remote work or teleworking (TL) during this period. The significant increase in the number of people working from home (WFH) during 2020 was one of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. To mitigate the spread of the virus, governments worldwide mandated that individuals work from home unless they were essential workers. As a result of this shift, societies, organizations, and workplaces globally are now exploring "the new normal"—encompassing the "future of work" and the "role of the office"—where WFH becomes standard practice, with teleworking continuing in either pure or hybrid forms post-COVID-19 (Ipsen et al.,2021). WFH is a specific form of telework where employees are required to work from home due to social distancing measures during the pandemic. Unlike telework, which encompasses various remote work environments, such as working while traveling or on vacation, WFH strictly involves working from home (Singh & Dev, 2023). Understanding how people experience working from home has become more crucial than ever (Ipsen et al.,2021). Experts in the field anticipate that teleworking will emerge as a preferred work model in the future. Over the past year, it has played a critical role in ensuring business and economic continuity and is now recognized as a new approach to work where employees prioritize asynchronous communication and results-based monitoring over the physical location of their work (Dimian et al, 2023).

The unexpected lockdowns acted as a trial for companies across different industries to explore the potential benefits of telework, such as enhanced productivity, better work-life balance, reduced health risks, and lower commuting emissions. The rapid pace of this transformation has made it challenging for researchers, businesses, and policymakers to fully assess the impact of this emerging industrial revolution on corporate productivity (Becchetti et al, 2023). Remote work offers several advantages, such as increased work efficiency, greater control over tasks, and improved work-life balance. However, it also presents challenges, including reduced social interaction, decreased work incentives, longer working hours, and home distractions, which can lead to lower productivity (Nowrouzi-Kia et al, 2024).

This study aims to conduct a systematic literature review (SLR) to comprehensively explore and synthesize existing research on the impact of remote working on employee engagement and productivity. Employee engagement, which reflects the emotional and psychological investment of employees in their work (Kahn, 1990), and productivity, the efficiency with which employee's complete tasks (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993), are critical factors for organizational success.

The rapid evolution of the modern workforce, driven by increased interest in Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs), underscores the need for a comprehensive review of their impact on employee productivity and performance.

Objective

- To synthesize the impact of working from home on employee engagement and productivity.
- To identify the factors influencing employee engagement in remote work settings.
- To analyse the factors affecting employee productivity in remote work environments.

Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to explore the impact of remote working on employee engagement and productivity. The SLR approach ensures a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research on this topic. The methodology follows the guidelines outlined by PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to maintain rigor and transparency. The search was carried out using two primary databases: Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed journals, which are essential for ensuring the rigor and reliability of the literature included in this review.

Search Strategy

The literature search was confined to articles published between 2020 and 2024, ensuring that the review reflects the most current research on the topic. The search was restricted to articles written in English to maintain consistency in the analysis and to focus on studies accessible to a broader academic audience.

To identify relevant literature, a series of Boolean operators were employed, enhancing the precision of the search. The keywords used in the search strategy included combinations such as "remote working" AND "employee engagement", "remote work" AND "employee productivity", "telecommuting" AND "workplace engagement", and "virtual work environment" AND "employee performance". The use of Boolean operators allowed for the inclusion of studies that addressed different aspects of remote working while ensuring that only those directly related to employee engagement and productivity were considered.

Prior to performing full-text reviews, the researchers first evaluated the titles and abstracts of the search results to assess their relevance. To be considered for inclusion, studies needed to examine the impact of working from home on employee engagement and productivity.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The search results were subjected to a set of predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included to ensure the credibility and academic rigor of the studies. Articles focusing on industries unrelated to knowledge work or those discussing remote working in a non-corporate context were excluded. Additionally, studies that did not provide empirical data on employee engagement or productivity were filtered out. The exclusion criteria encompassed papers not published in English, those unrelated to the study's focus, as well as news articles, reports, and dissertations. Additionally, publications that did not address the key research questions of this study were also excluded. This process ensured that the final selection of articles directly addressed the research questions and contributed to a focused and relevant analysis.

Data Extraction and Analysis

The selected articles were thoroughly reviewed, and key data were extracted, including the authors, publication year, research methods, sample characteristics, and key findings related to employee engagement and productivity in a remote working context. This data was then synthesized to identify common themes, trends, and gaps in the literature. The analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of how remote working influences employee engagement and productivity, highlighting both positive and negative outcomes, as well as identifying areas for future research.

Finding

A total of 21 studies were included in this systematic review, with no restriction on the geographical location of the studies. Initially, 156 potential papers were identified. From these, 6 duplicates were removed, and 14 titles and abstracts were excluded due to their lack of scientific relevance. Out of the remaining 136 papers, 65 were not fully accessible. The final 62 papers were then evaluated against the eligibility criteria, with the researchers reviewing the full texts to identify relevant material related to the topics of interest. After a thorough evaluation based on these criteria, 26 papers were retained for inclusion. The PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1 illustrates this process in detail.

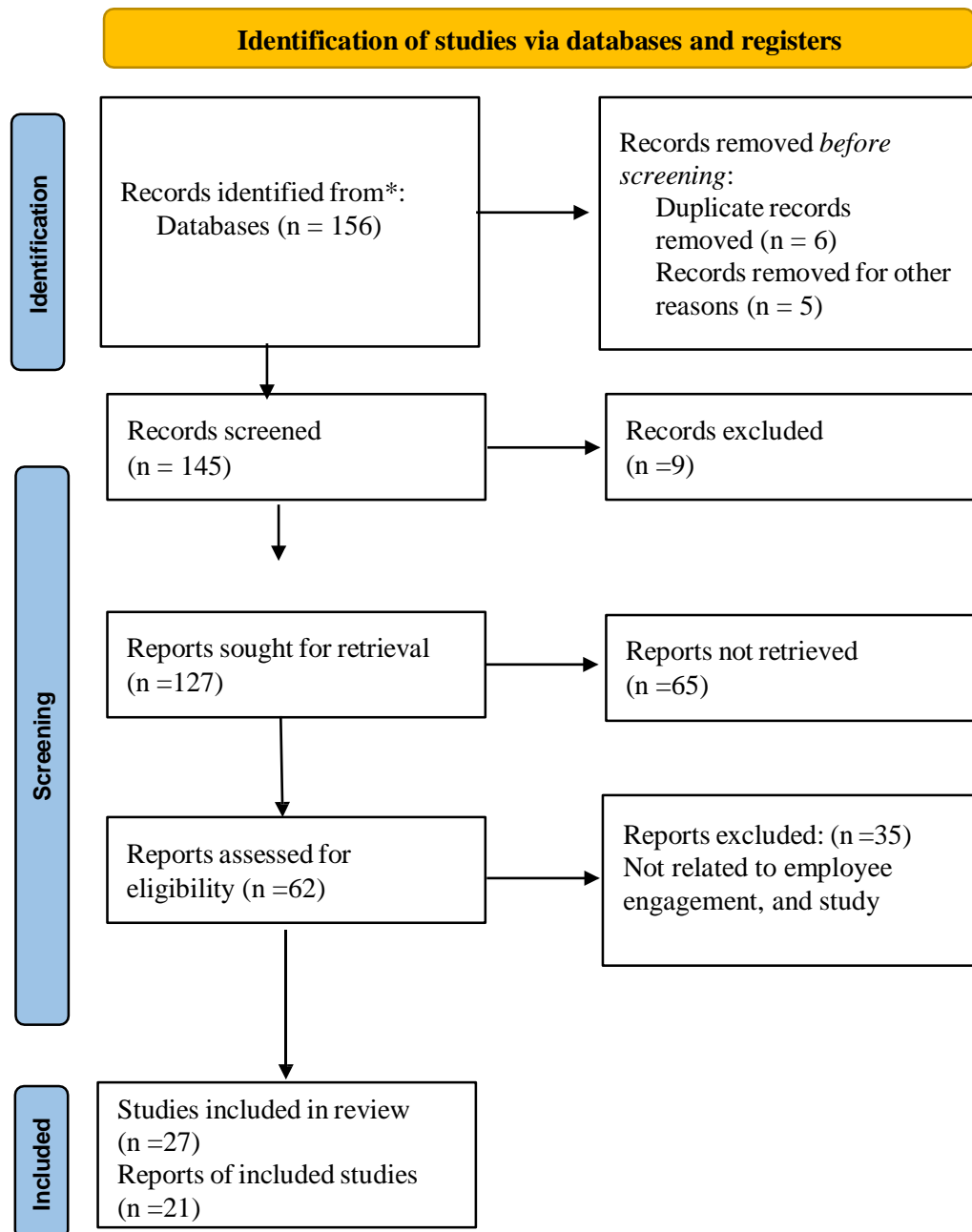


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of study search and selection.

Research on the impact of working from home (WFH) on employee productivity and engagement encompasses a diverse range of locations and countries, each with distinct societal norms and individual characteristics. This includes studies conducted in countries such as Saudi Arabia, India, Indonesia, Romania, Europe, Morocco, Italy,

South Africa, USA, and Slovenia. The existing research comprises a variety of study types. These include qualitative studies (Dimian et al, 2023), which explore in-depth perspectives and experiences; quantitative studies (Rozman et al, 2021), which utilize statistical analysis to measure and analyse data; and mixed methods studies, which combine both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Table 1 describes the Characteristics of included studies.

Table 1. Characteristics of included studies

AUTHOR	COUNTRY	STUDY DESIGN	OBJECTIVE	SAMPLE	KEY FINDING
Dimian, G. C., et al.(2023)	Romania	Quantitative	This study aims to examine Romanian employees' perceptions regarding the multifaceted aspects of telework, including the ease or difficulty of adopting new ICT tools and technologies, its impact on work efficiency, work-life balance, and the effects on employees' physical and mental health.	212 Employees	The study revealed that the impact of working from home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic on employee work efficiency was mixed. On the positive side, WFH offered flexibility, enabling employees to better manage both work and family duties, which helped enhance their work efficiency. However, the study also identified several challenges that negatively impacted efficiency. These included increased workloads, higher stress levels, longer working hours, and greater management oversight, with women being particularly affected. These issues made it difficult for employees to balance their work and personal responsibilities, resulting in fatigue and mental stress.
Boutros, P., et al. (2023)	Morocco	Quantitative	This study aims to assess the causal impact of RW policy on firms' productivity measured by the change in their sales.	1105	The results indicate a positive and significant influence of remote work (RW) on firm performance within the service sector. This suggests that RW can substantially enhance the efficiency and productivity of service-oriented firms, including those in consulting, finance, and IT services.
Jayanandana, N., et al. (2023)	Sri Lanka	Quantitative	This study examined how the physical work environment, work-life balance, work flexibility, and effective communication impact the job performance of IT professionals in Sri Lanka's IT industry who are working from home (WFH).	293	Work flexibility had a negative effect on job performance,
Rožman, M., et al. (2021)	Slovenia	Quantitative	The paper aims to explore gender differences in work satisfaction, engagement, and efficiency among employees working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also seeks to identify the key aspects of these factors from a gender perspective.	785 employees	The results revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, female employees working from home exhibited lower work engagement compared to their male counterparts.

Zürcher, A., et al. (2021)	Switzerl and	Quantitative	The aim of this study was to assess how WFH corresponds with indicators of job performance and occupational wellbeing.	266 vocational counsellors	The findings of this study indicate that vocational counselling psychologists who worked remotely experienced reduced levels of distraction, along with enhanced productivity and job satisfaction, in comparison to their on-site counterparts.
Mohammed, Z., et al. (2022)	India	Quantitative	This study examines the impact of the lockdown and the abrupt transition in work practices on employee job satisfaction in India.	211	The results demonstrate a positive relationship between job satisfaction and perceived work autonomy among the work-from-home respondents.
Donati, S., et al. (2021)	Italy	Quantitative	This study investigates whether various employee groups, distinguished by their work, organizational, and personal characteristics, hold differing views on remote work, the acceptance of the technology required for working from home, and their overall well-being.	163 workers	Remote workers from large companies who had prior experience working remotely several days a week, particularly before the national lockdowns, and who worked in teams, exhibited more positive attitudes toward remote work, greater acceptance of technology, and more effective coping strategies compared to other worker groups.
Patanjali, S., et al. (2022)	India	Quantitative	The article analyses the impact of working from home during the lockdown on the productivity of IT employees, with a specific focus on organizational factors.	526 IT professionals	The findings suggest that organizational factors like autonomy, empowerment, employee independence, and a supportive environment were crucial for maintaining employee productivity during remote work. However, it was also observed that prolonged remote work over several months led to a sense of fatigue.
Haque, A., et al. (2024)		Qualitative & Quantitative	The growing popularity of web-based social media platforms enhances the potential for utilizing sentiment analysis and opinion-mining techniques to track and monitor employees' preferences for working from home through platforms like Twitter.	755,882,104 tweets	It suggests that remote work has the potential to be a positive and supportive HRM strategy, enhancing workplace effectiveness, increasing staff engagement, and promoting organizational sustainability.
Ipsen, C., et al. (2021)	Europ	Quantitative	The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the experiences of WFH among knowledge workers during the early weeks of the lockdowns and to determine the advantages and disadvantages of these experiences.	5748 knowledge workers	The results showed that the majority of respondents experienced working from home predominantly in a positive light, while fewer respondents viewed it primarily as a negative experience.
Brault, M. E., et al. (2022)	USA	Quantitative	Understand the impact of WFH on job satisfaction and stress among female healthcare employees.	220	More than 60% of our participants strongly agreed that working from home during COVID-19 enhanced their work satisfaction, increased their sense of safety, and reduced overall stress levels. Additionally, female respondents reported greater improvements in feeling safe and reduced stress compared to male respondents, and noted that remote work did not negatively impact their work efficiency.

Mihalca, L., et al. (2021)	Romani a	Quantitative	The purpose of this study was to investigate effects of work from home on important employee outcomes such as work productivity, job performance, and satisfaction	482 employees	The findings highlight that both home/family factors and individual self-management strategies are essential for adapting to telework during COVID-19, with home/family factors accounting for the greatest amount of variance. A well-equipped home workspace and access to necessary tools were critical for perceived productivity, job performance, and overall satisfaction with telework. In contrast, work-family conflict did not influence these outcomes. Workload emerged as a significant factor affecting productivity and satisfaction with telework, but did not impact job performance.
Bergefurt, L., et al. (2024)	Netherlands	Quantitative & Qualitative	This study aims to gain insights into relationships between satisfaction with physical workplace features, perceived activity support, and productivity support in a hybrid working context.	N = 57,286)	The findings suggest that employees' location decisions are influenced by their experience and the support provided by their work environment (whether at home or in the office) for performing specific tasks. Perceived support for both focused and collaborative activities, whether at home or in the office, is associated with higher perceived productivity.
Singh, S., & Sant, S. (2023)	India	Quantitative & Qualitative	The Purpose of study is to explore the link between employee engagement and turnover intention in hybrid and remote workplaces	371 IT professionals	The findings show that Employee Turnover Intention is negatively correlated with Employee Engagement.
Awada, M., et al. (2021)	USA	Quantitative	This study aims to investigate how factors related to the worker, workspace, and work itself influenced productivity and the amount of time spent at a workstation on a typical work-from-home day during the pandemic.	988 Employee	The overall perception of productivity among workers remained consistent with their in-office productivity levels before the pandemic. However, increased productivity was more likely to be reported by female, older, and high-income workers. Productivity was positively associated with better mental and physical health, having a teenager at home, enhanced communication with coworkers, and having a dedicated workspace.
Kowalski, K. B., et al. (2022)	India	Quantitative & Qualitative	The current study examined the relationship between work-from-home productivity (WFHP) and job satisfaction.	1158 respondents	The results showed a positive association between work-from-home productivity (WFHP) and job satisfaction. When employees maintain high productivity while working from home, they experience less pressure from employers, allowing them more time to engage in family activities. Conversely, when productivity is low, increased pressure from employers can prevent employees from dedicating time and energy to non-work activities.

Galanti, T., et al. (2021)	Italy	Quantitative	This study examines the impact of family-work conflict, social isolation, a distracting environment, job autonomy, and self-leadership on employees' productivity, work engagement, and the stress experienced while working from home during the pandemic	209 employees	Employees' family-work conflict and social isolation were negatively associated with work-from-home (WFH) productivity and engagement, while self-leadership and autonomy were positively associated with these outcomes. Additionally, family-work conflict and social isolation were linked to increased WFH stress, whereas autonomy and self-leadership did not have an impact on stress levels.
Abdulrahman, H., & Yousif, G. (2023)	Saudi	Quantitative & Qualitative	The aim of this study is to evaluate how remote work effect workers' productivity in the Saudi financial sector.	1270 Employee	Result show that a positive association between workers' productivity and remote work.
Farooq, R., & Sultana, A. (2022)	India	Quantitative	This study aimed to explore the relationship between employee productivity and work-from-home (WFH) practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, it investigated the moderating role of gender in the connection between WFH and worker productivity.	250 respondents	The results suggest that there is a negative relationship between working from home (WFH) and employee productivity. Additionally, the study found that gender plays a significant moderating role in this association.
Hafshah, R. N., et al. (2022)	Indonesia	Quantitative	This research examined the impact of remote working on the performance of millennial employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.	367 respondents from the banking sector	The study's results indicated that remote working led to improvements in productivity, employee engagement, and motivation.
Ravhudzuloa, H. R., & Eresia-Eke, C. (2024)	South Africa	Quantitative	To examine how telecommuting moderates the relationship between employee engagement—encompassing its physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions—and employee performance within the South African Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector.	478 employees	The results show that telecommuting moderates the relationship between cognitive engagement and employee performance, as well as the relationship between emotional engagement and employee performance. However, telecommuting does not moderate the relationship between physical engagement and performance, nor the overall relationship between employee engagement and performance.

Discussion

The impact of working from home (WFH) on employee engagement and productivity has been widely studied across various countries and industries, revealing both positive and negative outcomes. This discussion synthesizes findings from the reviewed studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of how WFH affects these critical aspects of workforce management.

Positive Impact on Productivity and Engagement

Several studies highlight the positive effects of WFH on employee productivity. For instance, Boutros et al. (2023) found a significant positive influence of remote work on firm performance in Morocco's service sector, indicating that WFH can enhance efficiency and productivity, especially in consulting, finance, and IT services. Similarly, Patanjali and Bhatta (2022) reported that organizational factors such as autonomy, empowerment, and a supportive environment were crucial in maintaining productivity among IT professionals in India during the pandemic.

Furthermore, Hafshah et al. (2022) demonstrated that remote working led to improvements in productivity, employee engagement, and motivation among millennial employees in Indonesia's banking sector.

WFH also positively influenced job satisfaction and engagement in certain contexts. Ipsen et al. (2021) reported that knowledge workers across Europe generally experienced WFH in a positive light during the early weeks of lockdowns, with many respondents indicating enhanced job satisfaction. In the United States, MeganE.Brault et al. (2021) found that over 60% of female healthcare employees agreed that WFH during COVID-19 increased their job satisfaction, safety, and reduced stress levels.

Negative Impact and Challenges

Despite these positive outcomes, several studies identified challenges associated with WFH that negatively impacted productivity and engagement. For example, Farooq and Sultana (2022) found a negative relationship between WFH and employee productivity in India, with gender significantly moderating this association. Dimian et al. (2023) revealed mixed impacts of WFH on work efficiency among Romanian employees, noting that while flexibility improved work-life balance, increased workloads, stress, and longer working hours posed significant challenges, particularly for women.

Furthermore, Rožman et al. (2021) observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, female employees in Slovenia working from home exhibited lower work engagement compared to their male counterparts, highlighting the gender disparities in remote work experiences. Galanti et al. (2021) also found that family-work conflict and social isolation were negatively associated with WFH productivity and engagement, stressing the importance of managing these factors to prevent declines in work performance.

The work environment and support systems play a critical role in determining the success of WFH arrangements. Mihalca et al. (2021) emphasized that a well-equipped home workspace and access to necessary tools were essential for perceived productivity and job performance among Romanian employees during the pandemic. Similarly, Bergefurt et al. (2024) highlighted that employees' satisfaction with physical workplace features and the support provided by their work environment, whether at home or in the office, was strongly associated with perceived productivity in hybrid working contexts.

Factors Affecting Engagement and Productivity

Several factors have been identified as critical in influencing the effectiveness of WFH on employee engagement and productivity. These include work flexibility, communication, organizational support, and the physical work environment.

Flexibility in work arrangements has been shown to have both positive and negative effects. While flexibility can enhance work-life balance and autonomy, as noted by Dimian et al. (2023), it can also negatively impact job performance, as seen in the study by Jayanandana and Jayathilaka (2023), which found that work flexibility in Sri Lanka's IT industry had an adverse effect on job performance.

Effective communication has emerged as a crucial factor in maintaining engagement and productivity during remote work. Jayanandana and Jayathilaka (2023) also emphasized the importance of effective communication in supporting job performance in a remote work setting. The absence of face-to-face interactions can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection, which in turn can affect engagement levels.

The role of organizational support in facilitating successful remote work has been highlighted by several studies. Patanjali and Bhatta (2022) underscored the importance of a supportive work environment in maintaining productivity, while Galanti et al. (2021) identified job autonomy and self-leadership as positive contributors to WFH productivity and engagement. These findings suggest that organizations must actively provide the necessary resources, including technology, communication channels, and managerial support, to sustain high levels of engagement and productivity among remote workers.

The physical work environment, including the availability of a dedicated workspace and necessary tools, plays a significant role in influencing productivity and satisfaction with remote work. Mihalca et al. (2021) found that a well-equipped home workspace was critical for perceived productivity and job performance, while factors such as workload and home/family conflicts also significantly affected these outcomes.

Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive systematic review of the impact of working from home (WFH) on employee engagement and productivity, conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines.

The impact of WFH on employee engagement and productivity is multifaceted, with both positive and negative outcomes depending on various factors such as organizational support, gender, work environment, and individual characteristics. While WFH offers flexibility and can enhance productivity in certain contexts, challenges such as increased stress, work-life imbalance, and gender disparities need to be addressed to optimize remote work practices. To maximize the benefits of WFH, organizations need to adopt a holistic approach that addresses these challenges, provides adequate support, and tailors engagement strategies to the diverse needs of their workforce.

Limitations and Future Research

This study faces several limitations. Firstly, the reliance on specific databases and English-language studies might exclude relevant research, potentially narrowing the scope. The study's focus on productivity and engagement without considering other factors like job satisfaction and mental health may provide an incomplete picture. The examination of data predominantly from the COVID-19 pandemic period may also not reflect long-term effects as remote work practices evolve. Furthermore, the methodological variability among the reviewed studies introduces challenges in drawing consistent conclusions.

Future research should aim to include a broader geographical range to enhance generalizability and address underrepresented regions. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess long-term impacts of remote work. A more comprehensive approach should explore factors beyond productivity and engagement, such as job satisfaction and mental health. Comparative studies across different industries and job roles can reveal specific challenges and best practices. Investigating the impact of emerging technologies on remote work and evaluating the effectiveness of organizational support mechanisms can provide valuable insights for optimizing remote work environments.

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