

Sustaining Remote Work: Insights from a Qualitative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing debate surrounding remote work highlights its transformative potential and associated challenges in contemporary workplaces. Advocates emphasize its ability to enhance employee well-being, productivity, and work-life balance. These benefits, coupled with advancements in technology and cost-saving opportunities, have made remote work a viable mainstream employment model. However, critics raise valid concerns about its impact on employee engagement, team cohesion, and organizational culture, this study examines AAPNA, an IT services organization in India that has transitioned entirely to a remote work model post-COVID-19. Recognized as a "Great Place to Work," AAPNA provides a unique case for understanding how to facilitate perpetual remote work. Data was gathered through qualitative semi-structured interviews (conducted both in person and virtually), attending several team events and analysis of company documents, reports, and yearbooks. Findings reveal that pre-pandemic, AAPNA focused on fostering human connection, accountability, and approachability. The pandemic acted as a temporary disruption and a catalyst for reflection, enabling the company to make its implicit organizational practices explicit. This involved structuring flexibility, contextual communication, concretizing values and reinforcing connections. In doing so, the company also reaffirmed its core foci, ensuring it remained central to its remote work model. The study provides actionable insights for academia and industry to navigate the evolving landscape of remote work.

Keywords: remote work, telework, future of work

INTRODUCTION

"You can't spend time hiring grown-ups and then treat them like children," remarks Katarina Berg, Chief HR Officer of Spotify while affirming the company's work from anywhere policy. This sentiment resonates profoundly in the post-pandemic era, where flexible work arrangements (FWAs) have emerged as a cornerstone of employee expectations. The global workforce has witnessed a dramatic shift, with employees increasingly prioritizing autonomy, work-life balance, and flexibility. Research identifies this preference as a driving factor behind the Great Resignation of 2021 (Tessema et al., 2022). Supporting this trend, Forbes

(2023) report that 98% of American employees express a preference for remote work. The rapid advancement of technology, unprecedented events like the global pandemic and changing employee preferences have driven organizations worldwide to embrace remote working practices. In addition to enhancing employee well-being and job satisfaction, remote work has been associated with increased productivity and efficiency, encouraging organizations to adopt family-friendly policies (Ajzen and Taskin, 2021; Tønnessen et al., 2021). A Mercer study of 800 HR leaders revealed that 94% believed employees were equally or more productive working remotely compared to in-office. Moreover, remote work has enabled cost savings by reducing expenditures on office space and travel.

Yet, the remote work paradigm is not without its detractors. Towards the end of 2021, many companies began advocating for a return to office-based work. Notably, Tesla CEO Elon Musk condemned remote work as “*unacceptable*” and a “*threat*” to productivity, with Tesla enforcing a strict return-to-office policy in 2022. Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), India’s largest IT company with more than 6 lac employees, cited reduced employee engagement and acculturation as key factors in their decision to phase out hybrid work models and reintegrate employees into office environments. TCS is reported to have lost more than twenty percent of its workforce in the financial year 2023 with more women deciding not to return to the office than their male peers. Organizations seem concerned with the feasibility and sustainability of remote work as a mainstream and a more permanent employment model. However, given employee preferences, remote work is expected to remain a key feature of the evolving workplace. However, even from the perspective of the employees, remote work is not without its challenges. While remote work offers flexibility and enhances work-life balance (Ferriss, 2011; Pink, 2001), it also introduces difficulties such as increased monitoring, performance tracking, and presenteeism pressures (Cooper & Lu, 2019; Donnelly, 2015). These practices often undermine the benefits of remote work, leading to extended hours and diminished work-life balance (Delanoeije et al., 2019).

Instead of working on the old assumption of physical proximity to get work done or unrealistic assumption that remote will automatically solve work-life conflict, there is a need to understand complexities underlying a remote work model. The Internet’s role in the “spatial unfixing of work” has shifted work relations from localized, proximate interactions to fragmented, and distanced connections between workers and employers (Jones, 2010). These challenges can be overcome to the extent that geographical distance can be replaced with relational proximity (Donnelly & Johns 2020). But how this can be achieved remains underexplored in literature. This gap is critical to understanding how remote work reshapes employees’ experiences and how the HR functions can be recontextualized to suit a more permanent remote work model for better organizational and individual outcomes.

To understand how the disadvantages of geographical distance be overcome in remote work, we did an in-depth case study of AAPNA, a certified “Great Place to Work” in India, an organization that fully transitioned to a perpetual remote work model post the Covid-19 pandemic. In this research, our central line of inquiry was: *How can organizations facilitate perpetual remote work model?* By analyzing AAPNA’s people management practices and their impact on employees, we aimed to uncover actionable insights for sustaining remote work as a viable and effective workplace model. Our findings reveal that AAPNA was able to make its pre-existing organizational foci more concrete and transparent to its employees as they shifted to a perpetual remote work model, a process that we refer to as ‘explicitizing.’ This helped them transform geographical distance into virtual proximity while realizing the benefits of remote work and nullifying the inadvertent negative consequences. Our research seeks to contribute to academic discourse and offer practical strategies for organizations navigating the evolving dynamics of remote work.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Benefits Related to Remote Work

Remote work has become increasingly popular in recent years due to its various benefits. Research indicates that despite the potential challenges of working from home, productivity levels have not declined (Powell, 2020). On the contrary, multiple studies have demonstrated that remote work can boost productivity (De-la Calle-Durán & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2021; Tønnessen et al., 2021). One of the key advantages of remote work is the flexibility it offers employees in managing their work schedules, allowing them to decide when to start, take breaks, and end their workday (Messenger, 2019). This autonomy serves as a vital job resource, enhancing job satisfaction and promoting a sense of control over one's work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). In addition to autonomy, telework has been shown to increase job satisfaction and morale, as employees enjoy the freedom to structure their work according to their own productivity cycles (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Golden, 2009; Morgan, 2004). Working remotely also shown to reduce the frequency of interruptions typically experienced in a traditional office environment, leading to a more focused and efficient work process (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Baruch, 2000; Fønner & Roloff, 2010). Remote work also contributes to organizational agility by allowing workers to access work-related information efficiently, irrespective of time and location (Morgan, 2004; Campbell & McDonald, 2009; Overmyer, 2011). Moreover, it also enhances a company's image as a flexible and employee-centric workplace, further improving overall morale and work culture (Baruch, 2000; Campbell & McDonald, 2009).

The positive effects of telework extend to economic, social, and environmental levels (Hook et al. 2020; Pyoria, 2011). Economically, telework improves the competitive advantage of businesses, increasing profitability as remote work generates cost savings for both employees and organizations. Employees save on commuting expenses, while businesses can reduce overhead costs by maintaining smaller or no physical office spaces. Furthermore, the removal of geographic limitations allows companies to access a more diverse talent pool, thereby enhancing creativity, innovation, and problem-solving capabilities within the organization and their standing in the global market (Aguilera et al., 2016; Karia & Asaari, 2016; Kanellopoulos, 2011). Socially, it enhances the quality of life for employees by promoting a healthier work-life balance, enabling them to manage their responsibilities more effectively and with less pressure to adhere to strict office schedules (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Aguilera et al., 2016). Environmentally, telework plays a significant role in reducing CO₂ emissions by cutting down on the need for daily commuting, which in turn leads to decreased air pollution (Zhu & Mason, 2014).

Concerns Related to Remote Work

Despite its potential advantages, the adoption of telework in many organizations faces several obstacles. Both employees and managers often express reluctance toward virtual work, citing concerns such as social isolation, limited career advancement, and reduced learning opportunities (Griffith et al., 2003; Staples et al., 1999; Venkatesh & Johnson, 2002). Although a substantial number of jobs in the United States are suitable for telework, data from the American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, 2015) and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) show that only a small percentage of workers utilized these options. Moreover, a study by Gallup (2017) indicates that many employees who are eligible for telework either choose not to engage in it or do so infrequently, largely due to managerial resistance and a lack of adequate organizational support. Telework is shown to lead to professional and social isolation, particularly among frequent teleworkers, which negatively affects job performance by limiting opportunities for promotion and personal development (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Golden, 2009). The use of technology in telework settings has been identified as a factor in employee dehumanization, as it can diminish emotional connections and interpersonal warmth (Haslam, 2006; Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018).

Mediated communication through technology often fails to replicate the psychological closeness of face-to-face interactions, leading to perceptions of detachment among remote workers (Collins et al., 2016).

Moreover, the demands of telework can blur the boundaries between professional and personal life, leading to overwork and decreased autonomy (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Nordbäck et al., 2017). Teleworkers may experience increased interruptions and a higher incidence of work-life conflict due to the constant connectivity and lack of clear separation between work and home life (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Managers also struggle with the challenges of monitoring productivity and ensuring team cohesion in a remote setup, which can obstruct collaboration, trust-building, and knowledge-sharing among team members (Fonner & Roloff, 2010; Pyöriä, 2011). As a result, remote work often leads to reduced job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, and a heightened risk of workaholism, where employees feel pressured to be constantly available (Allen et al., 2003; Golden, 2009).

Although the aforementioned studies have begun the conversation about facilitating remote work. Asatiani and Nortrom(2023) note that we are yet to fully appreciate and understand the complexity of sustaining remote work. They argue that a sustainable remote workplace is not a one-size-fits-all solution but rather a blend of diverse—and sometimes paradoxical—characteristics that workers, managers, and organizations must carefully navigate. In response to this call for further research on sustaining remote work, we examine how a "Great Place to Work" organization leveraged the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to transition from a physical workspace to a fully remote model and scale its operations.

METHODOLOGY

Our research draws from an extensive exploratory qualitative case study. The purpose of a case study is to "gather comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information" about a specific phenomenon (Patton, 2002, p. 447). Case studies are particularly useful to effectively address “how” and “why” questions and to explore the contextual conditions that shape participants' actions. Through the case study of AAPNA Infotech, we aimed to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the factors facilitating perpetual remote work.

Research Context

We selected AAPNA, an IT service organization in India for our study. It was a revelatory case in which the phenomenon of interest i.e., perpetual remote work model was ‘transparently observable’ (Eisenhardt, 1989; Siggelkow, 2007). AAPNA is a prominent provider of software development solutions. It started its operations in 2007. Since its inception, the organization has operated with a strong focus on employee engagement, striving to ensure that all team members are recognized for their work.

In 2018, the company achieved ISO 9001 and ISMS certification, marking a significant milestone in its pursuit of quality and information security standards. Covid-19 compelled the organization to adopt remote work. By the end of 2020, AAPNA expanded to a workforce of over 150 employees and initiated several strategic projects aimed at business growth. These initiatives included attaining CMMI Level 3 accreditation, developing a comprehensive learning and development framework, extending its operations to Australia, forming the New Technology Group, implementing workflow tools, and launching its first product.

In 2021, AAPNA transitioned to a fully virtual work model and received recognition as a Great Place to Work® Certified company in India, underscoring its dedication to fostering a positive and engaging workplace environment. The Great Place to Work certification is awarded to organizations that demonstrate excellence in employee engagement and people practices. This recognition is based on a rigorous assessment process that includes the Trust Index© survey, requiring a minimum of 70% positive responses, along with adherence to

established audit standards. AAPNA demonstrated excellence in areas such as fair promotion practices, equal opportunities for recognition, and transparent communication, among other key criteria.

Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered using a range of methods which comprised virtual interviews; physical interviews; visiting their old office; attending virtual events such as the townhall meetings, Diwali celebration, coffee sessions; attending physical events such as AAPNA annual day; and reading company reports, website articles, media publications, and their social media posts. Formal consent was obtained from the company's CEO to use the interview recordings and related information for the research. For the virtual and physical interviews, a semi-structured interview format, featuring open-ended questions, was employed to facilitate in-depth responses from the employees. An interview protocol outlining the interview duration and broad guidelines was prepared and shared with participants beforehand.

The study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, from July to October 2023, 14 online interviews were held with the CEO, CHRO, line managers, and employees of AAPNA (see Table 1). During this phase, the authors also attended several virtual team events organized by AAPNA (see Table 2). AAPNA facilitated the coordination of these interviews by notifying us of the participants' preferred times. After having engaged with literature for quite some time and gaining more familiarity with the context we conducted the second phase in July 2024. This involved 16 in-person physical interviews with managers and employees, held at AAPNA's head office or locations convenient for the participants, such as coffee shops. Meeting people in the head office face to face allowed us to witness gestures, emotions, and body language which provided grounding to our study. In addition, we played indoor games with participants, had informal discussions over lunch with them, and observed specific cultural elements within the office. We also got the opportunity to attend AAPNA's Annual Day celebration which was a two-day event that allowed us to witness distinct cultural events. This combination of virtual and in-person interactions allowed for a comprehensive data collection approach. The interviews were intentionally designed to be flexible, encouraging participants to openly share their experiences with remote work. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. During these interviews, we took detailed notes and discussed emerging insights at the end of each day to refine the data collection process for the next day.

Insert Table 1 about here

Insert Table 2 about here

Data Analysis

We began with open coding, following the approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998). This involved carefully analyzing the interview transcripts and assigning codes to segments that captured the key content of the interviews. During this process, we also wrote several memos to assist in the development and refinement of our theoretical insights. These memos were discussed continuously among authors to arrive at the main findings.

We refined our coding procedures as our understanding evolved (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We utilized a factual timeline of events, theoretical reasoning, and the informants' accounts, which included various events occurring at different times and the relationships between them, to identify the temporal dynamics in our process model. This allowed us to examine how certain factors influence subsequent factors over time. For example, understanding the

pre-COVID depiction of culture from those who experienced it first-hand in physical setup and identifying the similarities and differences in a virtual context. We also developed several causal-loop diagrams to map the connections between themes derived from the data. While both authors coded data independently, we discussed coding and emergent findings throughout and resolved any issues or disagreements. The emergent data structure (Gioia et al., 2013) is shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

FINDINGS

Organizational Foci

Our respondents informed us that even before COVID-19, the organization focused on certain key elements that drove the way they functioned. We refer to them as their Organizational Foci. Our analysis showed that there are three distinct focus areas that AAPNA had which we label as: focus on human connect, focus on accountability, and focus on approachability.

Focus on human connect. Our respondents noted that AAPNA focused on creating a happy and engaging work environment. This they believed fuelled passion and effectiveness at work. As the CHRO explained:

“We always focus on creating a happy environment. Everybody should be passionate about working, because we realized that if you are passionate about working, you would be giving your 200 percent. If you are putting in 200 percent, the client will always be happy, and you are always happy working. And that starts a positive cycle, if the client is happy, we will get repeated business.”

We observed that at AAPNA, leaders consciously avoided using the term "employees" and instead referred to everyone as part of the "AAPNA family." As we probed further, one senior manager commented:

“We don't use the word employee anywhere. We try not to. We even educate leaders to avoid this because we work as a family. And the moment you will use the word employee, it is an employer-employee relationship. But if it is a family and you are saying it's team engagement.”

The organization fostered closer relationships among employees through festival celebrations. This practice enabled people to form connections and develop strong ties with the company. To our surprise, the organization also provided employees with an extra day off on their birthdays. Many of our respondents highlighted the beneficial effects that participating in these shared festival celebrations had on them.

One of the strongest drivers of human connect was the CEO of the organization. Almost all the employees we interviewed appreciated his informal and personal engagement with them. They mentioned, “*he [the CEO] knows everybody by name, and that means a lot to us.*”

Focus on accountability. Our respondents noted that there was a great emphasis on accountability in the organization. To reinforce this idea, leaders at AAPNA used the term ‘Commando’ to describe their employees. As a relatively small organization, in the IT services sector, AAPNA sought competitive advantage through fewer structural and procedural barriers. This differentiated them from the other large organizations in the same space. As the Chief Strategy Officer explained:

“We feel that rather than getting a big army, which is typically the approach of other large organizations, we can do the same stuff with fewer people, but more accountable people, who can do it like a commando unit, in a shorter time and in a more efficient way, probably by doing it more rapidly or by thinking out of the box. That is why we use the Commando keyword as a kind of reference point.”

One of our respondents acknowledged that efficiency at AAPNA was achieved through “empowerment and the ability to work independently rather than through micromanagement.” Also, the intent was not to make people work extra hard but to drive a mindset of ownership. Additionally, the focus on accountability was coupled with the focus on human connect to produce results. We observed a strong connection between the happiness quotient of employees at AAPNA and a commitment to discipline, both of which contribute to their overall efficiency. As the HR manager noted, *“We believe if you keep the happiness quotient high, the people will be productive.”*

Focus on Approachability. One of the most prominent cultural elements we observed in the organization was the open-door policy. As one of the leaders explained:

“It’s not something we’re consciously building, but as these practices take shape, everyone starts to internalize them naturally. For example, our open-door policy means that all leaders keep their doors open, allowing anyone on the floor to stop by, say hello, or discuss anything on their minds. Whether it’s feedback, concerns, or simply something to share, you can do so freely and without hesitation.”

This sentiment was shared by nearly all the participants we interviewed. One employee expressed:

“Working with [the organizational leaders] is amazing. They are incredibly approachable, and being around [them] feels like a second home. It is open and welcoming. If I ever have a problem, I know I could approach [the CEO] without hesitation. The best part is that [the leaders] will always listen, without judgment, and genuinely hear me out.”

Several employees interviewed reported that AAPNA's organizational culture contrasts with other organizations, where hierarchical structures often inhibit direct communication with senior management or the expression of concerns. At AAPNA, however, as leaders reported, hierarchy is de-emphasized, fostering a transparent and accessible environment. Employees did not require special permissions to accomplish their tasks, even when directly dealing with senior leaders. As one employee stated:

“In other organizations, one hesitates before approaching someone in a senior position. However, at AAPNA, if I need to communicate with the CEO, I can do so freely and without reservation.”

Interviewees highlighted that at AAPNA, every voice was heard, regardless of position. If someone had an issue they felt uncomfortable discussing with their immediate manager, they were encouraged to share it with someone more equipped to assist. As the VP noted:

“We make sure every individual’s voice is heard. For instance, if team members couldn’t express a concern openly, the CEO would personally reach out to check if anything was bothering them. This approach makes people feel comfortable sharing issues, whether it was about a manager not providing enough support or areas for improvement.”

Temporary Breakdown propelling the Shift to Remote

Exogenous shock and initial response. The COVID-19 pandemic struck unexpectedly, leaving organizations grappling with uncertainty. On March 24, 2020, the government of India announced a nationwide lockdown. Many business organizations feared closures and worried about survival. However, at Aapna, employees appreciated the company’s proactive approach to prioritizing their safety by initiating work-from-home arrangements two days before the official announcement of the lockdown. This marked the start of a forced shift to remote operations, bringing significant challenges for the people in the organization. As a

matter of fact, remote work was not encouraged at Aapna before COVID-19 struck.

Reflecting on the shift, one participant shared:

“Transitioning is always a difficult decision. It’s never easy. Right now, our entire company is virtual, but there was a time when even granting two days of work-from-home felt challenging. We rarely encouraged remote work.”

The organization faced several hurdles, including ensuring productivity in a remote setup, maintaining effective communication, and fostering employee engagement in a virtual environment. As a manager explained:

“The foremost concern was how to maintain productivity. In the office, we relied on physical interactions to track progress and collaborate. In online mode, even with video calls, it’s never quite the same. A significant part of my role became ensuring my team stayed involved, which required me to be highly engaged with them throughout.”

However, the crisis created an opportunity for reflection and adaptation. Aapna provided the necessary equipment to facilitate remote work from home for employees. This was coupled with an understanding that Indian homes with joint families may not typically be suited for office purposes. Portable work desks were delivered to employees’ homes. People were quick to realize that some of the initial fears were largely “mental barriers.” They were from the IT services industry, and they had a rich experience of working with clients virtually. This gave them a crucial advantage. As one senior manager explained:

“If we could manage the client-facing side virtually, we could certainly handle internal operations the same way. It turned out to be just a mental block. Before COVID, there was a perception that remote work would lead to productivity loss. But the pandemic forced us to adapt, and people realized that by doing things a bit differently, productivity could be maintained.”

Remote as an opportunity. The flexibility offered by remote work proved to be a major advantage, especially during the pandemic. This shift not only gave people the choice to work from anywhere but also helped the organization save on rental costs. These savings were utilized to provide employees with stylish work pods, enabling them to create an office-like setup at home and facilitating remote work. Despite the change, the organization also successfully maintained productivity. As one participant shared:

“People have realized that remote work doesn’t compromise productivity. In fact, it allows them to better manage their personal and professional lives. For us at Aapna, this virtual setup has worked exceptionally well, and it’s a positive direction for the future.”

As our respondents mentioned, the most significant advantage was the time saved on commuting, which could be spent with family and personal development. Several employees pointed out that the pandemic acted as a “wake-up call,” prompting them to reflect on their “fast-paced lives and the sacrifices made in pursuit of professional success.” Many participants noted how office routines often consumed family time and extended beyond official working hours. One employee shared:

“It used to take me two hours daily to commute to the office. Now, I can spend that time with my kids. My aging parents no longer worry about me coming home late at night. Earlier, my day started at 8 AM and ended at 9 PM, often followed by late-night client calls. It was exhausting, but now I can balance my work and personal life better.”

Remote work brought several indirect benefits. For example, individuals from smaller towns who had previously relocated for work could now return home and continue their jobs remotely. As one participant observed:

"Remote work has brought several indirect benefits. People aren't traveling as much, which lowers pollution and carbon footprints. It's also aligned with our family-oriented culture, people could go back to their hometowns. They are happier taking care of their loved ones. Additionally, saving travel time allows employees to focus on learning, take online courses, and grow professionally."

These shifts highlighted how AAPNA's transition to remote operations transformed not only its work processes but also the lives of its employees, enabling greater flexibility and aligning work practices with individual priorities.

In a short span of time, AAPNA started realizing other benefits of remote operations. Remote work enabled the organization to expand its talent pool beyond a certain geography to attract employees from different locations, fostering a diverse workforce. In late 2021, as the pandemic subsided and other organizations began calling employees back to the office or adopting hybrid models, AAPNA chose a different path. The company decided to scale up its remote operations and fully embrace a completely remote work model. As mentioned by a few respondents who joined Aapna after the pandemic in a fully remote mode, "Aapna became an employer of choice for individuals who wanted to do good work with more flexibility and had to take care of responsibilities at home."

Explicitizing Organizational Practices to Facilitate Remote Work

Proximity facilitates the immediate clarification of ideas or intentions, allowing for real-time questions and feedback. In contrast, in remote settings where geographic separation restricts the ability to interpret non-verbal cues and respond promptly, organizations often face challenges in effective communication (Stone & Posey, 2008). Our findings indicate that AAPNA actively worked towards enhancing the clarity and transparency of its practices to minimize confusion and misunderstanding. Geographical separation can often lead to confusion and uncertainty within organizations, making it crucial to address these challenges. To mitigate such issues, AAPNA has made a concerted effort to communicate and "explicitize" certain organizational practices, ensuring that employees have a clear understanding of expectations. This effort to explicitly define key practices not only reinforced the company's organizational culture but also facilitated the transition to a fully remote work model.

As a result of these efforts to clarify and formalize practices, AAPNA received external validation through the achievement of CMMI Level 3 certification, a widely recognized benchmark that demonstrates the organization's commitment to quality and adherence to industry best practices. Additionally, the company received the "Great Place to Work" certification. This global recognition, based on employee experience and cultural analysis, highlighted AAPNA's exceptional workplace culture and its dedication to creating an environment that fostered employee satisfaction and engagement.

Structuring Flexibility. Remote work offers several unintended benefits, such as meeting family needs (Olson & Olson 2009). It provides employees with significant flexibility in their schedules and lifestyles, allowing them to work at their convenience in a more casual environment. This setup enables effective management of childcare responsibilities, making remote work a viable option for many primary caregivers (Olson, 1983; Olson et al., 1989). However, extreme flexibility without structure could be detrimental to organizations as it may become difficult to establish individual accountability and comply with industry norms. As AAPNA was an IT services organization, its revenue model was based on the number of hours employees had dedicated to their work. Consequently, it became essential to track and account for the billable hours spent on specific tasks to transparently present this information to clients and uphold ethical business practices even during the remote setup. To address this, a system by the name, *Mera Monitor* (translated as: My Monitor) was implemented. This system tracked employees' work hours by noting their log-in and log-off times and also

capturing screenshots of their laptops at regular intervals. As one of the participants explained how the system worked:

“In simple terms, it’s similar to when you used to go to the office and had to punch in and punch out by showing your ID card. It just records our in and out times. Moreover, if I log in at 11 and log out at 8, it will help my manager know what I did during those hours?”

Mera Monitor had several other features like a *daily scheduler* which gave the employees flexibility to schedule their work hours. This gave employees the flexibility to choose their working hours. They could start work at 10 am or 11 am or even later, as long as they could log in for eight hours a day. Another feature of the application was *away time*. Employees could take a break for lunch, or for picking up their children from school, or attend any other activity at home. Several employees noted that the tools helped them take accountability for their time, better planning of the day, and monitor their productive hours, as one participant shared from their experience:

“The time scheduling flexibility of the system allowed me to finally spend more time on myself. When I used to commute to the office, I was always running late and could never make time for activities like going to the gym, exercising, or watching TV. Now, balancing work with responsibilities like dropping my child off at school has become much easier.”

Research shows that at times there is a less formal atmosphere and more interruptions in remote setup, it is easier for remote workers to get disengaged from work (Ferreira, 2021; Vartiainen, 2021). AAPNA recognized the challenge of ensuring accountability for work in a home environment where distractions are unavoidable. They tried to maintain an environment where proper accountability could be assigned, and work could go on without interruptions. The CHRO reflected on this issue:

“There were cases where we noticed certain issues. While we don’t actively monitor employees, certain patterns—like delayed responses to messages and calls—require intervention. If this happens once or twice, it’s excused. However, repeated occurrences or similar concerns raised by others necessitate further investigation to ensure accountability.”

The information captured by Mera Monitor provided HR with valuable insights to enforce accountability and notify employees when they were falling short of meeting the deliverables. Some respondents also reported difficulties maintaining focus and staying on track and appreciated the prompt from HR. One of the employees openly shared his experience:

“There was a couple of months when I became a bit laid back. I received an email from HR regarding my dropping work hours. Initially, I felt concerned about this, but it motivated me to take corrective action.”

One of the intended outcomes of the structure was to correct slack, which in a way was achieved at AAPNA. However, on the other side, there were also people who spent too much time working. The system also played a key role in controlling workaholism, which can be amplified when work spills over into family life and leisure time, disrupting the balance—a significant challenge in remote work (Vartiainen, 2008). One of the participants mentioned that the systems helped her recognize when to log off from work, as she shared:

“We are monitoring ourselves. So, what will happen is you know where your time is going: food, taking care of kids, and that you are not overworking. Instead of working 11 to 7, you know that you are not working 11 to 11. You know when to switch off.”

Contextualizing communication. Physical separation and geographic distance place significant demands on an organization's communication systems (Citera, 1998). For distributed teams, a primary concern is maintaining the effectiveness of remote communication. Team coordination and interactions are generally considered more effective in face-to-face settings compared to distributed environments (Lai & Burchell, 2008). The advantages of working remotely can be undermined by the perpetual connectivity enabled by information and communication technologies (ICTs). Leonardi et al. (2010) discussed how the advantages of working remotely can be undermined by the perpetual connectivity enabled by information and communication technologies (ICTs). They observed that while ICTs connect individuals, they also increase communication demands, leading to feelings of being micromanaged and burned out.

In remote work, effective communication isn't about constant interaction but about engaging with the right timing and approach, ensuring relevance over frequency. Too much communication causes fatigue, while too little leads to disconnect (Wang et al., 2020). The key is contextual communication: selecting the appropriate channel, timing, and level of detail.

However, to overcome communication barriers and improve accessibility, AAPNA implemented various mechanisms to improve clarity in the way work was communicated, delegated, and completed.

One such mechanism was the use of daily scrum calls. These virtual meetings were conducted twice a day between team members and their reporting managers to ensure task clarity. The morning session focused on task allocation, estimated completion times, division of responsibilities, and addressing challenges encountered with previously assigned tasks. In the evening call, team members reported their progress, enabling continuous monitoring and coordination. The organization is continuously experimenting with how to make these calls more effective one manager noted:

"For a 10-member team, I initially spent time speaking to each member individually every day. However, I realized this approach was inefficient. To save time, I started to bring everyone together in a single meeting, where each team member was given two minutes to provide their updates. This streamlined process ensures effective communication without wasting time."

Another mechanism was the practice of daily client calls. These meetings facilitated discussions on feedback, updates on progress, and any changes in project requirements, ensuring alignment between the team and the client's expectations.

Additionally, respondents highlighted the use of an online platform such as Microsoft Teams where all the team members were virtually present when the work was being done. This platform enabled them to take care of interdependencies in their work, ask clarificatory questions, and also seek guidance. One of the important uses of the platform emerged during interruptions or emergencies. Team members informed their colleagues about their temporary unavailability through this platform, and upon their return, they updated the team about their status. This practice became a routine part of the AAPNA's workflow and created what we refer to as a *mutual accountability space*. It allowed all team members to remain informed about who was virtually present or not present at any given time, thereby addressing interdependencies in tasks. As an employee shared:

"We often receive updates about emergencies, power outages, or internet issues caused by rain, informing us when someone is unavailable. This transparency is valuable because it keeps everyone aware of team members' situations and availability. In a remote setup, such visibility about where the team members are or what they are doing is rarely possible."

What's remarkable is that these updates are shared voluntarily, as a natural expression of responsibility. This behavior reflects the strong culture of accountability that we've built."

AAPNA utilized two distinct social media channels: an official WhatsApp group and an informal group. Employees not only submitted their leave requests through formal channels but also communicated their leave status on the platform to ensure colleagues were informed and avoid non-urgent interruptions. The informal group, known as the *Bindas Bandas* (translated as *Cool People*) group, served as a space for employees to share birthday wishes, festival wishes and other light-hearted content.

AAPNA has consistently upheld an open-door policy, enabling employees at all levels to directly approach organizational leaders to address concerns or share ideas. This approach aimed to minimize hierarchical barriers and ensure timely problem resolution. In the remote work environment, an open-door policy was much emphasized, allowing employees to connect with the most appropriate person to address their concerns or share their ideas. One employee explained that if someone had a concern, an idea, or has conducted research that could benefit the organization, they could directly approach the CEO or the most relevant person in the hierarchy. She emphasized that all leaders are receptive to such contributions, stating:

"If you have any concern or an idea or research on something, you can directly approach the CEO or anybody. So, they are someone who is very much open to, such practices you come up with a result this is the price why this is important, what are the benefits and definitely they would you know, look at your emails and they would definitely answer them."

Reinforcing Connections. Studies have shown informal communication plays a critical role in fostering and maintaining relationships among co-workers, facilitating the integration of employees into teams, and the organization (Koch & Denner, 2022). It enables employees to find common ground, enhance mutual liking, create a positive atmosphere, and promote team building (Burke & Wise, 2003; Chen & Krauskopf, 2013; Fay & Kline, 2011). Casual interactions among co-workers are difficult to replicate in virtual setups (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). In virtual work environments, opportunities for employees to bond and engage in informal "water cooler" conversations—naturally occurring in physical office settings—are significantly reduced (Griffith & Neale, 2001; Olson & Olson, 2000). Several employees at AAPNA expressed that they missed physical meetings, lunch breaks, and casual conversations. As one employee shared:

"What I miss most about working in the office is the casual interactions—people would come in, say hi, and there was this fun, lively atmosphere. I miss those moments a lot. Sharing meals, having different conversations, and building a unique rapport with colleagues over lunch—it was something really special. I miss that connection a lot."

Recognizing the importance of maintaining human connection in a remote work environment, AAPNA made several efforts to foster such interactions. One such effort was hiring an employee engagement officer exclusively for this purpose. She shared that at the time of hiring the CEO emphasized his priority clearly: "I want the happiness quotient of AAPNA's people to be high."

To replace physical breaks *virtual coffee sessions* were held thrice a day, where employees had the opportunity to engage in informal conversations. Attendance was voluntary, and people discussed only non-work matters. We also attended a couple of virtual coffee sessions and noted how people bonded over them. One of the employees stated:

"Sometimes, when working from home, you might get distracted or start thinking about negative things. The purpose of these interactions is to bring you back, boost positivity,

and strengthen team spirit. These virtual coffee sessions are really helpful in achieving that.”

Additionally, AAPNA developed an application called *Fundoo Friday*, which allowed employees to play Bollywood-themed games and quizzes for entertainment on weekends. This application worked so well for the organization, that they decided to turn it into a full-fledged product to be marketed outside of their organization. Furthermore, the organization celebrated various festivals virtually using creative engagement strategies. For Diwali, there was a virtual Rangoli competition where employees had to create traditional art form using colored powder to decorate their floors and send pictures on the WhatsApp group, and for Christmas, employees participated in a “Secret Santa” event, where they received gifts from the organization.

Intensive ICT-based work has long been linked to physical discomfort and developing musculoskeletal disorders (Wechsler et. al; 2024). In a traditional office setting, employees typically engage in activities such as waking up on time, exercising, preparing for work, and commuting. However, remote work often leads to prolonged sitting and a lack of movement, which can have negative effects on physical health. To address these challenges, the organization introduced several health initiatives, such as *Health Matters*. This initiative involved employees committing to taking care of their health. Employees were asked to fill out a form articulating their fitness goals for the year. Some employees wanted to lose weight, whereas some wanted more agility and strength. People were provided access to a nutritionist, with whom they could discuss their goals.

AAPNA hired a Yoga trainer who took sessions each morning for a couple of months, explaining the benefits of asanas and how they could help with specific health issues, such as back pain or cervical problems. Employees were encouraged to go for a company sponsored full body check-up at an empanelled hospital. Employees received their test results directly to their personal IDs, ensuring that the reports were confidential and could not be accessed by anyone else. Employees were also able to make requests for the check-up for their family members.

A wellness calendar was designed for the year, featuring unique themes each month. For example, one month focused on nutrition, with a competition encouraging participants to share their healthiest home-prepared meals and juices. These recipes were then compiled into a nutrition book, which was distributed to all employees, with contributions coming directly from the participants. In an interview, one employee shared that during an interaction with HR, he appeared exhausted, and upon being asked, he revealed that he had been struggling with sleep issues. Recognizing that many employees might be facing similar challenges, the organization introduced a new monthly theme focused on proper sleep, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that employees are getting adequate sleep.

Another initiative, called "Digital Detox," was implemented, where they discussed the pervasive role of digital devices in our daily lives, noting that even during sleep, many individuals remain engaged with their phones which has serious health concerns. As part of this initiative, one day was designated for participants to completely disconnect from all digital devices—no phones, laptops, or media—encouraging a full digital break.

Recognizing the importance of physical meetings alongside virtual interactions, the organization introduced various initiatives to promote in-person connections. These initiatives include weekend gatherings where employees in the same location could meet over meals and coffee, and the organization pays for the expenses. Another initiative, *Cinebond*, allowed employees from the same location to bond over a movie, with expenses funded by the organization. Furthermore, the *Coworking @ AAPNA* program involved partnerships with co-working spaces in multiple cities. Employees were encouraged to work from a co-working space at least once a month to break the monotony of remote work. For locations that did not

have a formal co-working space, employees were encouraged to visit a coffee shop and work from there. AAPNA had also bought a property in Goa, a popular tourist destination in India, offering employees the opportunity to come together. Teams along with their leaders visited this place for a week, where they worked, stayed, and enjoyed together.

AAPNA organized the *Leaders Retreat*, which involved each leader, taking their team on a 6-day retreat to a selected location within a set budget. The retreat focused on brainstorming sessions and team-building activities. Additionally, the organization hosted the *AAPNA Champions League (ACL)*, an annual cricket tournament that brought employees together at the head office for friendly matches to foster camaraderie. The organization also celebrated its *annual day* which was a two-day physical event that comprised highlighting past years' achievements, recognizing employees for their efforts, planning for the upcoming year, and cultural activities to engage and unite employees.

Concretizing Values. The lack of a shared physical workspace can hinder the development of a cohesive organizational identity and shared values (Akpa et al., 2021). Similarly, AAPNA recognized that one of the major challenges in a remote setup is effectively introducing employees to the organization's core values. The company also acknowledged the importance of ensuring that employees not only understand but also align with these values. To address this, AAPNA developed the slogan "AAPNA Values Impact" to raise awareness of its core values: I-Integrity, M-Mastery, P-Passion, A-Act Now, C-Courage, and T-Think Forward. Pre-covid, the company followed a "commando" approach, but as the organization transitioned to a fully virtual environment, it became clear that not everyone understood what this term meant. To ensure alignment, AAPNA engaged in multiple discussions with employees to clarify the meaning of "commando" and ensure that everyone shared a common understanding.

AAPNA believed that its workforce was three times as effective as that of any other organization, emphasizing the exceptional value of each employee. In line with this belief, the company introduced mascots in 2021 after fully adopting remote work: "Ekam" and "Shunya," the binary duo. Ekam represents dynamism, while Shunya symbolizes resilience—two key values that symbolizes AAPNA's core principles and approach to work.

Additionally, the company strengthened its HR processes by giving them structure such as the recruitment process was formalized which included digitization of candidates' documents. All the stages in the recruitment process were aligned to their core ideas. In fact, they introduced a CHRO round in the process to discuss the organizational culture. The CHRO mentioned:

"During the hiring process, if a candidate told me they had another offer and asked if we could match the salary, I would always encourage them to take the other offer if money was their main consideration. I would emphasize that joining AAPNA should be a choice driven by a passion for the work, not financial incentives."

Remote Work Outcomes

Our findings reveal that there are important outcomes of explicitizing organizational practices both for the individuals and the overall organization. We highlight both the individual level and organizational outcomes below.

Organizational outcomes. One of the significant features of switching to a fully virtual model was that the company's productivity remained intact. This enabled the company to scale quickly, growing from 70-80 employees before COVID-19 to over 150 after transitioning to remote work. Besides, applications such as Mera Monitor and Fundoo Friday, which the organization had developed to overcome the disadvantages of remote work, were being evolved into products that could be sold to customers outside of the organization.

Now, employees can flexibly schedule their working hours, which benefited both the organization and the employees. When employees needed time for their families, they could

easily accommodate for it. Similarly, when the organization requires time from employees due to clients being in different time zones, employees are more willing to make adjustments for it. Several employees mentioned that as the organization allowed them to fit their personal requirements into their work schedules, they also became more willing to incorporate organizational needs. Both the organization and its employees are able to create a better balance, which we term as ‘reciprocal flexibility’. As several employees noted that they accommodate meetings at odd hours willingly in this flexible environment, and not out of compulsion. This creates mutual flexibility for both the organization and employees. Some of our respondents also shared with us that remote work made them better managers, as they had become more mindful of their team member’s time and personal space. Since AAPNA had decided to work in a remote mode perpetually, managers realized that they had to become more mindful of work-life boundaries, which they may have overlooked earlier. As one of the managers shared:

“As a manager, I’ve become very conscious of respecting boundaries and ensuring my team isn’t overworked. For example, if something comes up at 10 p.m., I’m careful not to reach out to the team just because I can. I encourage them to do the same—to maintain boundaries and avoid unnecessary late-night communication.”

One of the disadvantages of remote setup is that employees could become distracted or lose focus. Several of our respondents admitted that they occasionally got off track while working for a long time in a remote environment. In such cases, the employees appreciated tools like Mera Monitor that helped them track productive hours, identify instances of slacking, and make corrections.

Individual Outcomes. Remote work has supported employees in fulfilling their family commitments without compromising their professional responsibilities. By eliminating the time spent in commuting and offering flexible schedules, remote work allowed individuals to actively participate in their family’s daily lives. For instance, one employee shared that he can now pick up and drop their children off at school, something that was previously not possible. Another participant highlighted how they were able to spend more time with their family, and not miss out on important moments:

“For me, family is the most important thing. The virtual setup lets me spend more time with my son, watch him grow, and be part of his learning. Earlier, I felt I was missing out on these precious moments. Work and earnings are important, but so is being there for your family.”

Remote work has significantly contributed to creating dual-career opportunities, particularly for working couples. As mentioned by an employee, the balance of flexibility and structure provided by AAPNA has allowed him to work from home, so that his wife could explore career options that were previously restricted by childcare responsibilities. He said:

“My wife wasn’t working earlier because she had to stay at home and take care of our son. But after COVID, because I was at home, she could start working again.”

Similarly, remote work has been especially advantageous for working mothers, offering the flexibility to manage dual roles as professionals and caregivers. A female employee returning from maternity leave noted “Remote work eased my transition back into my career.” Another working mother appreciated the opportunity to stay connected with her child throughout the day, improving her ability to manage both work and family life, as she shared:

“When you’re in a physical office setup, you don’t know what your kid is doing. How much can you understand over the phone? But being at home lets me be present. The balance is beautiful, and it’s working wonderfully for me.”

Remote work has also opened up opportunities for individuals to prioritize personal well-being and invest in self-improvement. By eliminating long commutes and offering greater flexibility, it has created space for employees to focus on themselves alongside their professional and family responsibilities. Additionally, many employees have leveraged the extra time gained from working remotely to invest in self-learning. Many employees noted that they have enrolled in online courses to upgrade their skills supporting both their personal and career growth.

Similarly, remote work has allowed employees to be present at home during critical moments where their physical presence acts as a reassurance and support to their families. This allowed employees to be there for their loved ones without compromising their work commitments. One employee shared his experience when his daughter was sick:

"I was working remotely when my daughter was sick, which required me to stay home with her constantly. It was comforting to simply be present without needing to stop my work."

DISCUSSION

Our findings reveal that the organization strongly focused on three critical elements: human connect, accountability and approachability even before transitioning to a fully remote work model. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, it acted as a temporary disruption, compelling the organization to shift to a remote work model. This period of adaptation provided an opportunity for reflection and strategic adjustments. While the remote model introduced challenges such as managing tasks that were previously intuitive and tacit in a physical setup, it also offered unique opportunities. For example, the organization was no longer geographically constrained, enabling it to scale operations and attract a more diverse talent pool.

The pandemic, in fact, acted as a temporary breakdown for the organization that helped it adopt a more reflective approach. Interruptions in routine activities may foster theoretical reflection, which prove instrumental in identifying the underlying causal properties of organizational practices (Dreyfus, 1995). When ongoing work is interrupted, one is faced with two choices: either remain passive and fixated on the unresolved situation or adopt a detached, analytical perspective to uncover the causal properties underlying the issue. Such interruptions in routine activity create spaces for meaningful thematic deliberation (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). These involve paying focused attention to actions, examining thought processes, communication methods, and underlying logic of practice, and ultimately solving problems more effectively (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). The compulsive remote work transition acted as a temporary breakdown for AAPNA. It used the disruption to deliberate and reflect on its culture and its way of working to identify elements that made them effective. Generally, these tacit factors are more like subjective insights and intuitions that are difficult to capture and share, as they reside in people's minds (Nonaka, 1991). However, they are central to organization's values and culture. These were similar to Organizational Foci that we identified in our research. From these intuitions, AAPNA institutionalized processes to ensure that actions were routinized. Tasks were defined, actions specified, and mechanisms were put in place to ensure the consistency of these actions (Crossan, Lane, White 1999). This is what we refer to as 'explicitizing,' i.e., the organizational practices that were more tacit before were made more concrete and transparent to suit the remote set up. The extent to which an organization is able to explicitize its organization foci to lend clarity to its employees in a remote set up determines how well it can convert geographical distance into virtual proximity.

Our findings reveal that explicitizing for making perpetual remote work effective may take place in four different dimensions. The first is the flexibility dimension. Flexibility offered by remote work may result in slack or even work pressures spilling over into personal life,

making it difficult to “switch off” from work (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). To address this, the organization implemented systems to provide structure to flexibility. The second is the communication dimension. Recognizing communication as a critical challenge in remote setups (Lai & Burchell, 2008), the organization implemented mechanisms such as scrum calls and mutual accountability spaces to ensure effective and seamless interaction across teams. The third is the reinforcing connections. The organization turned the perceived limitations of remote work into opportunities for engagement, such as virtual coffee sessions, health connects, and digital detox, fostering a sense of connection and collaboration despite physical distance. The fourth is concretising values. The organization formalized its HR practices to align with its core values, which were also explicitly conveyed through slogans and mascots to ensure alignment across the workforce.

By making these four dimensions explicit, the organization was able to strengthen its focus on key priorities while achieving both organizational and individual benefits. At the organizational level, these included reciprocal flexibility, boundary setting, and minimizing slack. At the individual level, employees reported improved ability to plan their days, dedicate time to personal well-being, and provide support to their families during emergencies.

Our findings, emphasizes that perpetual remote work is feasible only when an organization identifies and explicitly articulates its core foci. The extent to which organizational practices are made explicit directly impacts the ability to reap the benefits of remote work. Importantly, our contribution does not prescribe a specific organizational culture. Instead, we highlight that any organization, regardless of its culture, can achieve success in remote work by explicitly defining and reinforcing its core elements. This approach ensures that organizations can maintain their identity and achieve sustained outcomes while adapting to evolving work environments.

Insert Figure 2 about here

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

Remote work arrangements provide temporal and spatial flexibility, allowing employees to manage their schedules, reduce commuting stress, and improve work-life balance (Messenger, 2019). While this flexibility helps balance professional and personal responsibilities (Asatiani & Penttinen, 2019; Powell & Craig, 2015; Pyöriä, 2003), it can also lead to burnout and family disengagement as employees extend work hours or blur the boundaries between work and personal time (Eddleston & Mulki, 2017; Jaakson & Kallaste, 2010). Additionally, remote work presents challenges such as communication gaps, reduced collaboration, and professional isolation (Vartianen, 2021). Our research suggests how some of these issues can be addressed by exploring strategies to mitigate the downsides and enhance the effectiveness of remote work. By drawing upon insights from in-depth study of an organization that has decided to adopt a perpetual remote working model, our research contributes to the remote work literature by exploring strategies to overcome the drawbacks of remote working, while maintaining its advantages.

While much of the existing research focuses on hybrid work models as a solution to the challenges of remote work, there remains a lack of established practices and a deep understanding of how to create sustainable remote workplaces (Connor et al., 2022; Asatiani & Norström, 2023). Our study takes a novel approach by shifting the focus to *perpetual remote work effectiveness*, a new stream of literature that examines how organizations can sustain long-term productivity and engagement in fully remote settings. This theoretical advancement

provides valuable insights into building sustainable, high-performing remote work cultures, moving beyond the limitations of hybrid models and offering practical strategies for organizations to thrive in a fully digital environment.

Technologies often disrupt traditional workplace interactions by fragmenting and distancing employer-employee relationships. Geographic separation further exacerbates these challenges by limiting the interpretation of non-verbal cues and delaying responses, making effective communication within organizations more difficult (Stone & Posey, 2008). This study responds to the call for a deeper understanding of how geographical distance impacts remote work, emphasizing the importance of a relational perspective on emerging technologies (Bailey et al., 2022). Our research demonstrates that relational proximity can be recreated in virtual environments by ‘explicitizing’ key elements of physical workspaces, that were more implicit to begin with. The framework we propose addresses remote work challenges by offering strategies to manage asynchronous communication, maintain workflow continuity, and reduce isolation. Our findings highlight how organizations may actively enhance clarity in their organizational practices to minimize confusion and uncertainty. The case study shows the use of four key subprocesses: structuring flexibility, concretizing values, contextualizing communication, and reinforcing connections to ensure employees have a clear understanding of expectations from them. This deliberate approach not only reduced ambiguity and fostered workplace cohesion but also strengthened the company’s core values of human connection, accountability, and approachability, which were their organizational foci even before the shift to remote work. By foregrounding these essential elements, our study advances the discourse on digital geography and remote work, illustrating how organizations can strategically reconfigure spatial relationships to maintain a sense of proximity in virtual environments.

Our study emphasizes the importance of generalization of our model without advocating for a specific cultural model. Instead, we highlight the importance of organizations recognizing their unique *organizational foci*—the priorities, intentions, values, and operational drivers that shape their work environment. We argue that by identifying their unique cultural foci, organizations can better align with their purpose and values even in a remote work set up. For example, in the case study we observed how the organization was able to identify its foci of approachability, accountability and human connect during the disruption posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. They made substantial efforts to explicitize their organizational practices which in turn helped them overcome one of the crucial disadvantages of remote – people unable to pick up and understand the tacit cues which are otherwise abundant in the physical workplace. The study offers a framework that helps organizations navigate and clarify their foci, ensuring that their remote or digital work structures remain adaptable, coherent, and aligned with their foci in remote work settings. The COVID-19 pandemic, though a temporary disruption, accelerated the transition to remote work, creating an opportunity for reflection and strategic adaptation. We highlight that any organization, regardless of its culture, can achieve success in remote work by explicitly defining and reinforcing its core elements. We also argue that an organization’s ability to clearly explicitize its cultural foci in a remote setting is key to transforming geographical distance into virtual proximity.

Our research also contributes to the surveillance literature by highlighting how digital tracking in remote work can stem from distrust and the need for control, often driven by the increasing reliance on performance metrics and HR analytics (Abraham et al., 2019; Manuti & de Palma, 2017). However, we argue that by structuring flexibility, when designed to empower rather than control employees, can enhance autonomy and engagement (Chen et al., 2019). By shifting surveillance mechanisms from restrictive oversight to supportive tools, organizations can create a sustainable remote work model that balances productivity with trust. For instance, the

implementation of *Mera Monitor* in AAPNA provided HR with valuable insights for enforcing accountability and alerting employees when they were not meeting deliverables. Some employees also reported difficulties maintaining focus and appreciated the prompts from HR as helpful reminders. Our findings suggest that the way monitoring systems are designed and the narratives surrounding them plays a critical role in shaping their impact. Specifically, we observed that when performance-tracking tools were positioned as mechanisms for empowerment rather than surveillance, employees were more receptive to them. These systems helped employees monitor their productive time, particularly in managing the distractions inherent in remote work. By fostering self-awareness and supporting time management, such approaches can mitigate negative perceptions of monitoring and align performance tracking with employee well-being and productivity.

The flexibility paradigm (Bal & Izak, 2021) in remote work highlights both individual autonomy and an organization's ability to adapt to unforeseen changes. It emphasizes that flexibility allows employees to choose when and where they work while enabling organizations to remain responsive to business needs. However, unmanaged flexibility can blur the boundaries between work and personal life, leading to issues like work-life conflict, overwork, and unpredictability.

Our contribution addresses these challenges by redefining the flexibility paradigm to introduce greater structure and predictability. We achieve this by explicitly defining key elements such as contextual communication and structured flexibility. To implement this, virtual meetings were conducted twice a day between team members and their reporting managers. These meetings focused on task allocation, estimating completion times, dividing responsibilities, and monitoring tools were implemented to ensure effective planning and coordination. Employees noted this approach helped them take accountability for their time, plan their day more effectively, and work within a clear framework. At the organizational level, this approach fostered reciprocal flexibility, established clear boundaries, and minimized slack. At the individual level, employees reported improved ability to structure their workdays, allocate time for personal well-being, and provide support to their families during emergencies. By introducing certainty and predictability—two key challenges in remote work (Vartianen, 2021)—this approach allows individuals to maintain a healthy work-life balance while still benefiting from the inherent flexibility of remote work.

Our findings are in line with scholars who argue that HRM may need to be recontextualized in the digital work environment (Donnelly & Johns, 2020) by demonstrating its evolving and critical role in shaping the remote work environment. Specifically, AAPNA's HR initiatives demonstrate this evolving role by actively shaping the remote work experience. For instance, the company hired an employee engagement officer dedicated to this purpose and introduced virtual coffee sessions held three times a day to replace physical breaks, encouraging informal conversations. Additionally, employee engagement activities such as *Fundoo Fridays*, *Leaders Retreat*, *Cinebond* and a strong focus on physical and mental well-being reinforced HR's role as a vital bridge between the organization and its employees. By fostering organizational cohesion and enhancing employee satisfaction, HR plays a crucial role in sustaining a digitally driven remote work landscape.

LIMITATIONS

This study is based on a single case study of an IT service organization. Future research could expand on our findings by examining different cultural contexts that are conducive to remote

work. Comparative studies across diverse organizational and national cultures could provide deeper insights into the generalizability of our results.

Additionally, while our study employed a qualitative approach, future empirical investigations could incorporate quantitative analyses to further explore the factors that facilitate remote work. Such an approach could provide statistical validation and broader applicability of the identified mechanisms. Another key area for further research is the conversion of geographical distance into perceived proximity (Wilson, 2008). Our study identifies “explicitization” as one mechanism contributing to this process (Nonaka, 2009). Future studies could explore alternative mechanisms that facilitate remote collaboration and address the challenges of physical separation. While our study highlights explicitization at the organizational level fostered reciprocal flexibility, established clear boundaries, and minimized slack and at the individual level, employees reported enhanced ability to structure their workdays, allocate time for personal well-being, and support their families during emergencies. Future research could further investigate different outcomes of explicitization, particularly its impact on performance and innovation in remote work settings.

Furthermore, in our study, COVID-19 served as a temporary exogenous shock that prompted organizational reflection and adaptation (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011). However, such crises are not always present. Future research could examine how reflective processes occur in the absence of external disruptions. Identifying other mechanisms that trigger organizational reflection and adaptation in the natural course of business operations would offer valuable insights for sustaining continuous learning and improvement in remote work environments. By addressing these limitations, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how organizations navigate and optimize remote work practices.

IMPLICATIONS

Understanding and articulating organizational values and culture is essential for making implicit values explicit, particularly in remote work settings. Organizations that deeply understand their culture and values are better equipped to navigate uncertainties. Reflection on cultural identity should not be limited to crisis situations, such as natural disasters, but should be an ongoing process that strengthens organizational resilience. Proactive cultural reflection enables organizations to absorb and adapt to challenges without losing their foundational principles. During crises, organizations often adopt a mindset of unlearning past practices to accommodate new realities. While this flexibility is necessary, there must be a balance between unlearning outdated methods and preserving the core values that define the organization. A strategic approach to change ensures that while processes evolve, the fundamental identity of the organization remains intact.

Managing the paradox of flexibility is another key factor in maintaining organizational cohesion. Providing employees with flexibility is essential for maintaining work-life balance. However, organizations must carefully determine the appropriate level of flexibility to ensure productivity does not decline. Structuring flexibility allows employees to plan their day effectively while still benefiting from the advantages of flexibility in remote work.

In remote work settings, the effectiveness of communication is driven by relevance rather than frequency. Organizations must prioritize contextualized communication that aligns with employees’ work environments and responsibilities, fostering meaningful interactions rather

than overwhelming employees with redundant information. Overloading employees with frequent meetings can lead to disengagement and confusion, whereas meaningful, well-timed communication fosters clarity and connection. Organizations should focus on creating communication strategies that reinforce shared values, ensuring employees understand expectations and can actively contribute to the cultural framework. Leadership plays a crucial role in this, as leaders must model communication practices that emphasize purpose, engagement, and inclusivity.

Additionally, fostering *mutual accountability spaces* is essential in remote work environments. Organizational cultures naturally develop mechanisms of shared responsibility, where employees collectively uphold values and expectations. However, in remote settings, these informal mechanisms can weaken, leading to reduced accountability and engagement. Organizations must actively create structures that reinforce a culture of accountability, ensuring that employees take ownership of their roles while remaining aligned with the company's values. By leveraging structured engagement mechanisms—such as collaborative goal setting and transparent performance tracking—organizations can strengthen mutual accountability and reinforce their core cultural principles.

Employee engagement presents a significant challenge in remote work environments. However, this study highlights how organizations have leveraged technology to make creative strategies to foster engagement while prioritizing employees' physical and mental well-being. Given the potential negative impacts of excessive technology use, organisations introduced structured initiatives to maintain a sense of connection and overall wellness of employees. These efforts include virtual team-building activities, wellness programs, and interactive engagement platforms tailored to remote work dynamics. By implementing such measures, organizations can cultivate a supportive remote work culture that enhances productivity, collaboration, and employee satisfaction despite the physical distance.

CONCLUSION

The rapid shift to remote work has transformed workplace dynamics, elevating flexibility and autonomy as key employee expectations. However, some organizations are still hesitant to fully embrace remote work. This reluctance is caused by a range of concerns such as employee accountability, isolation, lack of collaboration, fluid relationships and lack of organic learning that are better taken care of in physical office settings. Our study provides actionable strategies for organizations to address these challenges by transforming intuitive practices into explicitized frameworks. Our findings show that by explicitizing on four dimensions—structuring flexibility, contextualizing communication, reinforcing connections and concretizing values - organizations can overcome the inherent challenges of remote work. By

doing so, organizations can reap the benefits of remote work while retaining their core values, and thus ensuring remote work as a sustainable and effective model for future of work.

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Table 1: Respondents Profile

S. No.	Participants' Designation	Years of association with the company	1 st phase (virtual interviews)	2 nd phase (physical interviews)
P1	CEO and Founder	16	2	1
P2	Chief Human Resource Officer	16	1	2
P3	Vice President (Technology)	2	1	1
P4	Vice President (Strategy)	7	1	1
P5	Associate Vice President (Technology)	15	1	
P6	Associate Vice President (Project Development)	16	1	1
P7	Senior Human Resource Consultant	4	1	
P8	Recruitment Officer	4	1	
P9	Lead Talent acquisition	3	1	
P10	Lead consultant (HR)	2	1	1
P11	Senior Software Developer	16	1	
P12	Principle Software Developer	16	1	
P13	Associate Software engineer	2	1	
P14	Senior Software Engineer	3	1	
P15	Admin staff	16		1
P16	Associate Vice President	6		1
P17	Managing Consultant	17	1	1
P18	Senior Consultant	8		1
P19	Associate Vice President (Strategic Initiatives)	7		1
P20	Managing Consultant	6		1

P21	Quality Assurance Assistant	5		1
P22	Senior Consultant	4		1
P23	Senior Human Resource Generalist	6		1

Table 2: Attending Events

S. No.	Name of the Event	Mode	Time duration
1.	Townhall (2)	Online	1 hr + 1hr
2.	Virtual Coffee Sessions (2)	Online	30 mins + 30 mins
3.	Diwali Fiesta	Online	1 hr
4.	Fundoo Friday	Online	30 mins
5.	Annual Day	Offline	2 days

Figure 1: Data Structure





