

## How Remote Work Changes Communication in Organizations

**Sandra Aguillon**

Bellevue University

**Julia Cronin-Gilmore**

Bellevue University

This inquiry explores the impact of remote work on communication in the professional sphere. Thirteen participants from various sectors were interviewed regarding their experiences with remote work communication. The data showed communication is substantially difficult for remote workers. Remote work introduces complexities to communication by expanding dependency on technology, increasing wait time, testing trust, and reducing visual and auditory cues. The implications for management hinge on the notion that poor remote work communication may diminish personal relationships and make the organization less resilient during challenging times. Participants noted that remote work fostered predominantly professional interpersonal relationships, devoid of personal connection. Trust issues emerged when struggling employees faced heightened oversight and micromanagement. Even though benefits to remote work were noted, these were dependent on the perspectives of individuals working from home. More research is needed on remote work and interpersonal relationships, as well as the effects of remote work communication on productivity to assess the comprehensive impact of communicating while working from home.

In the era of expanding remote work, communication is impacted by new conditions as previous challenges persist. Solomon (2016) when discussing the importance of feedback in organizations, cites findings on how uncomfortable managers are when communicating. According to Solomon (2016), 69% of managers reported they were uncomfortable communicating with employees, and 37% of leaders in organizations were uneasy about giving feedback to subordinates. There is a large body of similar literature and theories on the topic of communication (Afifi et al., 2016; Littlejohn, 2020; Robinson, 2017). Despite the knowledge available, and with the strategies developed to improve workplace connections (Doran, 1981; Mutyala, 2019), communication remains a top concern in organizations (Button & Rossera, 1990). Communication is foundational to human achievement and a key ingredient to organizational success, yet managers are still largely uncomfortable engaging in meaningful interactions with employees (Lis & Lis, 2021; Solomon, 2016; Van Zoonen et al., 2021).

The prevalence of communication barriers, even before the digital and remote work era (Button & Rossera, 1990), calls for a reexamination with consideration given to the increased remote work implementation. This study reevaluates communication barriers within remote work, considering technology's role and the nuances of general and remote-specific communication, as well as the impact of diversity and culture (Button & Rossera, 1990; Tovey, 1997). Communication barriers have been ascribed to diversity in the form of age, gender, educational level, and other characteristics distinguishing populations within the organization (Button & Rossera, 1990). Inter- and intra-

cultural differences determine how an individual approaches communication (Button & Rossera, 1990; Tovey, 1997). Managers must navigate these challenges, ensuring clear connectivity and addressing the impact of remote work on interpersonal dynamics and organizational culture (Anzari & Pratiwi, 2021; Weil, 2021).

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the impact remote work has had on communication for employees in organizations. At this stage in the research, impact will be generally defined as changes or shifts in the way employees interact through the various media available.

This study was conducted using the phenomenological approach to research. Phenomenological studies focus on experiences and explore aspects of those events, such as the feelings and behavioral responses of individuals to the phenomena in question (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, E. 1983). The patterns and shared experiences deciphered provide insights into the phenomena. Answering the central question in this case involved exploring the experience individuals had with remote work. The phenomenological approach was the most appropriate given the nature of the study and the best method for data collection, interviewing the participants about their personal experience with remote work.

### Central Research Question

What issues emerged with the implementation of remote work that impacted communication in organizations?

## Literature Review

The literature review is categorized into: (1) general communication and (2) impacts on communication due to remote work. Resilience and relational load theory serves as an overarching theme. In general communication, topics include barriers, inter and intra cultural communication, and improvement strategies. For remote work, topics cover technology dependence, personal challenges, trust issues, and employee perspectives.

### Resilience and Relational Load Theory

The resilience and relational load theory of communication explains factors determining a relationship's ability to endure challenging times (Afifi et al., 2016; Littlejohn, 2020). This theory proposes that deliberately managed and maintained relationships are more resilient. One aspect of the theory is the stipulation that members of a group have either a communal or an individual orientation (Awonuga, 2020; Littlejohn, 2020). The resilient relationship is built with the conscious effort of members embracing communal orientation and engaging in management behavior, which builds reserves (Afifi et al., 2016; Awonuga, 2020; Littlejohn, 2020). The building of reserves in turn leads to less stressed interactions and healthier conflict (Afifi et al., 2016; Awonuga, 2020).

Relational load involves accumulation of strain from conflict, miscommunication, and stress-related events, affecting the relationship's resilience (Afifi et al., 2016; Littlejohn, 2016). The diminished resilience can lead to separation in friendships and romantic relationships, as well as divorce in married couples (Afifi et al., 2016). In the workplace strong relationships increase the likelihood of enduring difficulties while weaker relationships might lead to losing employees or going out of business.

In terms of remote work communication, the resilience and relational load of a relationship can be linked to trust. A heavier relational load would equal a lower amount of trust while increased resiliency of the relationship would increase trust. Remote work aspects such as misunderstandings, and distance can add to the relational load and diminish resilience. This aligns with the findings of this study where participants expressed that the time spent apart from their coworkers weakened the relationship. In contrast the exchanges that took place while sharing a workspace were uncomplicated and free-flowing. These frequent and effective exchanges acted as maintenance and management behaviors and improved the relationships by increasing resilience.

### General Communication

#### Communication Barriers

General communication barriers stem from fundamental individual differences such as social class, educational level, culture, language, and the knowledge one is given access to in college. Two individuals from different cultures may not use similar words or mannerisms to express themselves when communicating. The intricacies of communication make interpersonal exchanges complex and

are intensified in remote work conditions.

Obstacles to communication can be context specific or general barriers (Button & Rossera, 1990; Littlejohn, 2020). A review by Fischer et al. (2016) pointed to technological, organizational, and social barriers hindering communication in crisis situations. The researchers found the two types of barriers; technological and organizational, each composed of specific behaviors and obstacles. Infrastructure failures, technology nonacceptance, use of different technology, and the use of social media to disseminate information were specific technological barriers. Organizational barriers included intracultural differences, underdeveloped organizational networks (specifically a lack of trust between organizations), and limited resources and training.

Workplace communication problems unlike those in the crisis situations begin with education. In a study of a group that included government and private companies seeking to attract new graduates Al-Musalli (2019) found school programs prepare students for written communication, where listening and speaking skills are most prevalent. The author referred to the structure of the education system, the skills developed, and instructors' level of competency as contributing factors. Al-Musalli's survey also showed that only 22% of workplace communication was written (37.5% of the participants stated the type of interactions most used varied by the employee's position) and 43% of work time was spent reading and writing as opposed to 57% spent listening and speaking. Button & Rossera (1990) support what Fischer et al. (2016) and Al-Musalli (2019) found in their research identifying technology, education, and social barriers as common obstacles to overcome when communicating.

The literature highlighted other contributing factors to challenges in interacting including language, culture, personal relationships, distance, and work barriers (Button & Rossera, 2019; Moniz, 2010; Tovey, 1997). Social class and educational levels also play a role in how well individuals and groups communicate (Al-Musalli, 2019; Button & Rossera, 1990; Fischer et al., 2016). The list of barriers to communication included various factors and some are multi-faceted; technology challenges, for instance, include accessibility to multimedia and the lack of experience using computers, cameras, or even video conferencing sites as tools. (Anzari & Pratiwi, 2021; Button & Rossera, 1990).

### Inter- and Intracultural Differences

Culture is another multi-faceted obstacle to communication because of the range of contexts it encompasses (Popescu et al., 2020). Effective communication is the essence of close relationships, which help individuals manage stress in other areas of their lives (Afifi et al., 2016; Awonuga, 2020; Littlejohn, 2020). Afifi et al. (2016) state effective communication can make for resiliency in challenging times. However, effective communication depends on the culture of the individuals (Mendenhall, 2018). One may attempt to communicate

well, if the standards of the other's culture are different, despite intentions, miscommunications could surface as a result (Afifi et al., 2016; Tovey, 1997).

To add to the complexities, an organization may be composed of different ethnicities, and the challenges presented can instead come from the workplace culture rather than race, such as various levels of knowledge of technology (Strawser, 2021). In a study on diversity designed to explore the notion that cultural variations can be both inter- and intracultural. Tovey (1997) assigned a group of business graduate students the task of researching both intercultural and intracultural variations. The data gathered showed communication in organizations is further affected by intracultural differences, including geography, age, class, and gender (Strawser, 2021; Tovey, 1997).

Culture is inherent in multiple groupings and encompasses more than ethnicities. (Strawser, 2021; Tovey, 1997). Strawser (2021) explains how generational differences also affect communication in the workplace and identifies five generations currently in the workforce: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and GenZ/iGen. The author explains differences in these groups include age range and specific characteristics of members of each group. Traits were determined by conditions around the time of their birth, and Strawser recommends ten best practices to address generational issues. These include being familiar with the different generations and the characteristics typically shared by members of those groups, as well as basing actions and strategies on theory regarding difficulties created by generational differences (Strawser, 2021; Tovey, 1997; Zehrer & Leib, 2020).

To overcome differences, politeness is often used to avoid miscommunications in the workplace. However, politeness does not necessarily yield excellent communication (DeAngelis, 2015). In a literature review of politeness theory, Locher and Watts (2005) discuss the notion of politeness not being inherent in words but in what is considered appropriate in some environments. Thus, to exhibit polite behavior when immersed in an unfamiliar culture, one would have to understand what is considered correct for the group, whether it be with respect to a specific gender, ethnicity, or educational background (Locher & Watts, 2005; Strawser, 2021). The context also determines whether specific gestures or terms used in the exchange would be considered polite (Anzari & Pratiwi, 2021; Locher & Watts, 2005).

### Strategies for Improving Communication

The literature indicates communication is foundational to organization success (Lis & Lis, 2021; Van Zoonen et al., 2021; Winton et al., 2021). Scholars have explored the different obstacles and barriers that impede the type of communication conducive to improved performance (Button & Rossera, 1990; Littlejohn, 2020; Moniz, 2010). When exploring the obstacles, cultural performance and emotional concerns beyond language are taken into consideration. Knowledge of communication from this explo-

ration has yielded strategies for improving communication (Mutyalu 2019; Stewart, 1983). Equal treatment of employees and reward systems, for example, are commonly used to prevent communication issues (Popescu et al., 2020; Winton et al., 2021)

Emotions are often at the center of conflicts and must be addressed to ensure miscommunications do not escalate (Deangelis, 2015; Stewart, 1983). Deangelis (2015) provides suggestions for effective team communication. Deangelis highlights the importance of good communication stating that processes and tools are becoming more advanced, yet failure rates of group projects are increasing due to poor communication. The author suggests addressing core conflicts impartially and addressing one's biases to be free to communicate honestly and receptively.

Another strategy used in organizations to enhance performance is setting of specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART) goals (MacLeod, 2012). This approach addresses one way communication is imperative to a company's performance, specifying what one wants to accomplish (Doran, 1981). Organizations can operate in cohesive ways and mitigate crises by clearly communicating objectives (Popescu et al., 2020; Winton et al., 2021).

In a quantitative study Popescu et al. (2020) identified communication as the core issue behind problems in a Romanian business development program. They also explored ways management can be more successful by improving the quality of communication (Popescu et al., 2020). The data showed effective communication is conducive to improved performance (Popescu et al., 2020). The study suggests that in an indirect way, managers can improve performance by enhancing communication. The authors' recommendations were fair equitable treatment, respect, and honesty to build better relationships and serve as the foundation for improved communication.

Consistent feedback was highlighted by Winton et al. (2021) in a study exploring corporate culture's effects on communication and reward systems. Data was compiled using a mixed-methods approach consisting of surveys sent to one department of a US production company and follow-up interviews with a fraction of the surveyed employees (Winton et al., 2021). The data indicated a rewards system was of high concern to employees, and the authors make two main recommendations for improving communication in organizations: a reward system and consistent feedback to employees (Winton et al., 2021).

Participatory communication is explored by Mutyalu (2019) where knowledge workers become active participants in work environments and contribute knowledge, observations, practice, and ideas. The author's proposed approach is to make human resources departments more active in work operations stating that participatory communication would aid the sharing of information and the goal of dispersing knowledge throughout the organization.

Interpretive listening is a strategy for enhanced communication, which Stewart (1983) suggests improves upon empathic listening as a communication tool. The author also proposes engaging in meaningful communication with another individual is not a matter of being present and listening attentively with the intent of understanding. Being present, Stewart (1983) writes, is a matter of being oneself during the conversation. What empathetic listening requires one to do is nearly impossible: communicators cannot suspend their knowledge and experience and stop being who they are to be someone else (Stewart, 1983). The alternative, interpretive listening, he states, involves co-communication, and works in a manner that includes both communicators.

Improving communication provides a better foundation for companies to build and expand. When something as universal as politeness can be put into question by virtue of how it is perceived, not addressing this could lead to interpersonal concerns. Implementing strategies to improve communication is an excellent way companies can address the communication barrier problem as well as the concerns that have surfaced with remote work implementation.

## **The Shift to Remote Work**

### **Remote Work Communication**

Communication is essential in organizations and is shaped by the system (Mohe & Seidl, 2011). Remote work disrupted communication. Disruption, which can impact even the strongest of structures and change the norm, (Van Zoonen et al., 2021) fosters competition (Christensen et al., 2003) by keeping companies' performance high and promoting innovation to the benefit of consumers, communities, and society in general (Christensen, et al., 2003). The disruption that occurred with stay-at-home orders created an urgent need for remote work and remote communications (Van Zoonen et al., 2021). The shift created an awareness to the question of what work from home entails, with work from home being the new reality in many companies (Wang et al., 2021). Examining communication as it was, observing the changes that have taken place in the recent past, and analyzing the impacts of remote work are efforts that can promote good connections (Button & Rossera, 1990).

While both Popescu et al. (2020) and Winton et al. (2021) underscore the importance of effective communication, they do not explore how the implementation of remote work has impacted exchanges. These impacts are necessary in a study on communication and the effects of changes in the work environment. Organizations implementing changes should minimize the negative impact of these shifts. (Moniz, 2010). Communication requires attention as it is a core concern that is not always affected directly by changes but is instead indirectly altered by the new conditions (Popescu, 2020). Dependency on technology, interpersonal challenges, trust issues, and employee perspectives on remote work are all concerns raised by the shift to remote work that, either directly or indirectly, alter communication.

### **Dependency on Technology**

In an article on the increased use of laptops for remote work, Weil (2021) provides a discussion of top technology issues that have emerged. He writes that an important aspect of technology and remote work is the privacy concerns of individuals and organizations. The topic of privacy is of specific importance given the sensitivity of some business processes and proprietary information, Weil (2020) writes. As multimedia has become more widely used, companies will have to upgrade their systems to meet the demands of the new conditions.

Technology has long been used for distance learning, which has yielded insights about telecommunicating, such as the importance of the quality of network systems and the flexibility of interfaces (Wang et al., 2010). In a recent study, Rathore et al. (2021) explore the potential of energy-harvesting wireless sensor networks (EH-WSN) to prolong the time networks remain operational, making for a more seamless technological experience. The objective is to increase network performance to maintain operations (Rathore et al. 2021; Weil 2020). The prolonged energy life provided by the EH-WSN would improve performance (Rathore et al., 2021).

Reliability of technology and privacy rank high in importance when it comes to remote work. They are essential to performing day to day functions and to free the employee from having privacy concerns and instead focusing on the task at hand. As remote work increases in popularity the quality and availability of services designed to meet the needs of remote communication has expanded. Zoom is a popular video conferencing platform which provides the option to communicate by phone when there are connectivity concerns. Slack which offers end to end encryption provides the privacy sought by companies when collaborating and corresponding electronically. With similar services becoming more effective in addressing the fundamental technological concerns associated with working remotely, companies can shift their focus to interpersonal communication concerns.

### **Personal Challenges Associated with Remote Work**

Technological aspects of remote work might be easier to overcome than interpersonal ones. Work-life balance and concerns about interpersonal relationships often top the list of difficulties with remote work (Flores, 2019). The educational sector was also impacted by the implementation of remote operations. While the technological aspects put into practice with distance learning have provided data about what functions can be used effectively in remote operations (Wang et al., 2010), the socio-emotional aspects of remote operations in education have also been more challenging to address (Anzari & Pratiwi, 2021).

The aspects of interpersonal communication that have been impacted by using technology for interactions between students and professors were explored by Anzari & Pratiwi (2021). The researchers found interpersonal relationships are diminished by a lack of visual cues and personal connections. People cannot always see the body

language of the other person when working from home. Robinson (2017) research added that people decipher, and attribute others' behavior based in part on the context of the exchange and the actions they exhibit. Both play a role in making deductions about the situation and are significantly reduced with remote operation conditions. Robinson (2017) found students interacting physically in an activity displayed high levels of compassion. On the contrary, Anzari and Pratiwi (2021) studied students in a remote learning environment and found that empathy was diminished. Students' ability to get a sense of the lecturer's mood was also notably reduced. Also, keeping students academically motivated depended on the lecturer's skills in operating the technology. Interaction is limited when communicating remotely due to the absence of visual cues and the varying degrees of access to technology by the individuals engaged (Anzari & Pratiwi, 2021; Robinson, 2017).

There are other remote work concerns that more indirectly affect communication. Wang et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study of remote workers to explore communication barriers and challenges with remote work. The remote work challenges found were interference from home concerns, communication barriers, procrastination, and loneliness. While these are not all direct communication concerns, they may impact an individual's effectiveness in interactions. The virtual work characteristics identified by the authors that could aid in overcoming the challenges posed were social support, autonomy, monitoring, and the workload.

Among the most prevalent personal challenges faced by employees working from home is separating home life and work concerns. In a study by Wepfer et al. (2018) of 1,916 individuals recruited online using structural equation modeling, Boundary management was found to be vital to remote work because well-being may be impacted by the ability to balance work and life. Employees manage boundaries with varying degrees of division: while some employees can blend the two to such a degree that the boundaries are imperceptible, others prefer to keep home and work separate. Wepfer et al.'s (2018) study also showed less engagement in recovery activities that could impact employees' overall well-being.

### **Trust and Remote Work**

Researchers hold different views of trust and remote work, with some reporting that trust is negatively affected by remote work and others arguing it is irrelevant (Lis & Lis, 2021; Van Zoonen et al., 2021). There is more consensus among scholars when examining trust as a foundational element of a good relationship (Afifi et al., 2016; DeAndrea, 2014). A good relationship, in turn, has been shown to be related to effective communication (Afifi et al., 2016; Awonuga, 2020). The correlations between trust, relationships, communication, and performance may not be direct, but scholars agree if one builds good relationships, effective communication will be more accessible (DeAndrea, 2014; Lis & Lis, 2021; Popescu et al., 2020).

Moniz (2010) asserts not having face-to-face interactions can negatively affect work relationships by testing trust. A study by Flores (2019), found 75% of managers claimed to trust their employers but insisted on monitoring them. In a qualitative study on the abrupt switch to remote work, Lis & Lis (2021) found trust and good relationships were crucial to efficiency. The authors also found effective communication was an integral part of effective functioning, and physical proximity aided in problem-solving, which was reduced by remote work implementation. Trust may not be dependent on effective communication, but the literature demonstrates on-site interaction yields desirable benefits to the working relationship (Anzari & Pratiwi, 2021; Lis & Lis, 2021). Effective communication is a building block of a relationship that has the capacity for trust and indirectly affects confidence in another individual (Lis & Lis, 2021; Moniz, 2010).

### **Employee Perspectives About Remote Work**

Research has shown employees felt uneasy because organizations did not have adequate time to implement the transition to remote work smoothly. Employees had difficulties with being forced into remote work abruptly with the onset of the pandemic. (Lis and Lis 2021; Van Zoonen et al., 2021). Perspectives had shifted by 2021 when a few employees were embracing remote work (Donati et al., 2021), and communication quality played a role in employees' adjustment to working from home (Van Zoonen et al. (2021).

Employee perspectives toward remote work were analyzed by Donati et al (2021) using an online questionnaire distributed to 163 workers in Italy. The results revealed five clusters of workers: those who did not experience remote work, workers who were at home half-time or three-quarters of the time in small or medium companies, employees who worked remotely half or three-quarters of the time and were employed by larger companies, those who worked for small, medium, and large companies from home but were a part of a team, and employees in big companies who were part of a team (Donati et al., 2021). Employees who had experienced remote work previously or worked in large organizations in the past showed better attitudes toward working at home (Donati et al., 2021). The data also revealed preparation to work from home, whether from previous experience of working from home or working with a company that provided training and invested in the practice, yielded perspectives more conducive to success with remote work. Female workers with families demonstrated more positive attitudes toward work-from-home initiatives than males, and employees with high school education or less were more averse to remote work than those with a higher education (Donati et al., 2021). Table 1 points out key and critical areas in general and remote work communication found in this literature review.

Technology, which is central to remote work, yields challenges and benefits. Dependency on technology develops with remote work, but it also provides the benefit

**Table 1***Literature Review Findings*

General Communication		Remote Work Communication	
Communication Barriers	Obstacles to communication in the workplace stem from a broad range of factors within the organization and individuals' makeup. These factors, including technological, organizational, cultural, and educational, play a role in creating communication barriers.	Dependency on Technology	Remote work's dependency on technology calls for privacy, reliable systems, and user-friendly interfaces
Inter and Intra Cultural Communication	Organizations are composed of individuals with diverse perspectives. These individual differences introduce language and cultural variations that may impede the flow of interactions. What is perceived positively by one can be received negatively by another. Within an organization, intra-cultural variations such as age, social status, gender, and geographical factors also impact communication.	Personal Challenges	Interpersonal concerns brought on by remote work conditions present personal challenges such as diminished relationships by way of reduced empathy and visual cues.  Work life balance presents personal challenges that hinder the individual's effectiveness in interactions. Work and life boundary management promotes well-being and is vital in remote work conditions.
Strategies for improving Communication	Implementing equitable treatment and reward systems address emotional concerns.  Knowledge workers being more active in work operations promotes sharing of information  Interpretive listening and clarifying objectives can lead to more meaningful interactions	Trust Concerns   Importance of Employee perspectives	Trust is negatively affected by remote work  On-site interaction traditionally supports trust and relationship resiliency  Employee perspectives towards remote work vary and can be influenced by the amount of training the workforce receives for the shift. Preparation for remote work yielded more positive perspectives toward the practice.

of having the convenience of connecting to the office from home. Much information is available on the topic of communication in general, and multiple theories have been developed to expand understanding of this essential function (Littlejohn, 2020). General communication barriers have been identified and explored, resulting in strategies aimed at improving communication. Remote work communication obstacles have not been researched as extensively. This study was designed to bridge the knowledge disparity between general interaction challenges and obstacles that impact remote work communication.

## Methods

### Participants

The snowball sampling technique was used to gather potential candidates (Etikan, 2016). Recruitment was done by reaching out through social media, and by asking for recommendations from coworkers and friends in various fields for maximum variation. A flyer was then sent to interested parties by email with an invitation to complete an initial survey that determined if they met the selection criteria of working remotely full time. The initial survey asked demographic questions about participants. Specifically, the interested parties were asked the following: Did your remote work assignment begin after the

Covid-19 pandemic? Are you still working remotely a hundred percent of the time? What is your age? What is your occupation? In what part of the country do you reside? Eight participants started working remotely during the pandemic and five were working remotely since before the pandemic. The participants resided in the western part of the country, with nine in the West, three in the Southwest and one in the Midwest. The age ranges included two participants between the ages of 20 and 29, two were between the ages of 30 and 39, five were between the ages 40 and 49, and four were between the ages 50 and 59. The occupations of participants were two in business, two in government, two in finance, four in education, and three in healthcare. Genders were represented by three male and ten female individuals. All participants worked remotely full time in 2022, and eight are currently still working remotely full time. Five participants have returned to work and are either working remotely full time or in a hybrid situation. In total 13 individuals took part in the study.

### Apparatus and Materials

Interviews were conducted remotely and required multiple tools for communication and connection, as well as documenting the data. Materials also included agreements, confidentiality information, and the initial survey. Qualtrics, an online survey platform and software, was used to conduct the initial selection criteria survey. Cell phones were used for initial interactions such as scheduling interviews. The following communications were done through email to obtain consent and confirm appointments. Microsoft Word was used to create agreements, consent forms, and instructions given to participants noting that interview could withdraw at any time, and an interview script, which was used throughout the study. A hand-written journal was kept notating exchanges and insights to explore during analysis. A password-protected laptop computer equipped with a camera and a microphone was used to conduct interviews. Software and membership for Zoom, a video, audio, phone, and chat communication platform, were obtained to record and save interviews. The Otter app, which automatically transcribes meetings or other conversations, was used for recording and transcribing the interviews. MAXQDA Software is a multipurpose platform used for transcribing, coding and analyzing data. Multiple tools are available with MAXQDA for making notes, and graphically organizing data from media and document files. MAXQDA was procured for this study to analyze and code interviews. Accounts were password protected and accessible only to the researcher.

### Procedure

Prior to the beginning of the research, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interview outline was created and the agreement with consent to participate was written, including the right to withdraw at any time before, during, or after the interview. The necessary materials for connecting with partici-

pants, and for conducting data analysis were also gathered before commencing. Interviews were scheduled on Zoom for an agreed duration, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes. During the interview participants were welcomed and encouraged to feel at ease before starting the recording. The confidential nature of the interview was reiterated, and participants were encouraged to only respond with what they felt comfortable discussing. During the interview, the researcher asked a question, waited for a response, and moved on to the next question. The interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed using Otter. Next, the data was uploaded and analyzed using MAXQDA as well as coding and data analysis strategies.

### Findings

The central question for this study is: What issues emerged with the implementation of remote work that impacted communication in organizations? Communication ranks among top concerns in organizations, and with remote work comes an added layer of difficulty. Study Subquestions addressed communication issues including impacts of remote work, trust concerns, and using technology for communicating instead of person-to-person interaction. Varied challenges were noted by participants, and several expressed the degree to which trials were experienced by individuals depending on whether they prefer remote or in-person communication. Five themes emerged from the data analysis; Communicating is particularly difficult for remote workers, remote work relationships tend to be strictly professional, trust concerns, most common benefits of communicating remotely, and challenges of using technology for communication.

#### Theme One: Communicating is Particularly Difficult for Remote Workers

According to the participants, remote work communication is almost exclusively done via email, phone calls, or video conferencing. Communicating through various media presents several challenges for remote workers because of wait times and misunderstandings. Email communication requires longer wait times when dealing with individuals who check their email less frequently. Phone calls have a more immediate response but only when the person on the other end is available. Video conferencing is not always a viable option because clients do not always have a camera on their computer.

Participants were asked how remote work had impacted communication. Responses included,

"when technology doesn't work properly, or if technology is used as a buffer for human communication, a lot of meaning gets lost there" (P3).

"I would say that communication is slower now" (P7).

"So that was another thing that we faced like someone becomes unresponsive. And it's like, well, what do we do from there?" (P9).

"A lot of miscommunications happened too with people just getting a little fired up, and feeling like someone was attacking them or calling them out when in reality, maybe

it was just how it was said over message or over email" (P9).

"I think in general, for me, it kind of makes things a little more burdensome" (P11).

"So, trying to interpret if a supervisor is upset and during email versus in person, I think that's, that's the challenge" (P13).

When asked about inter- and intra-cultural issues related to remote work communication, participants shared,

"I'm terrible at accents, and so sometimes I really have to focus especially like on Zoom calls, because you know, the quality of the calls just aren't that great" (P6).

"So, women thrive in this environment with where men seem to have greater struggles" (P8).

"I see that a lot of families that are in the Latino community, they're not used to this... they don't want it like culturally they want to be in person" (P12).

The findings support the literature which showed, among other barriers, distance and cultural differences, technology, and distance hinder communication (Al-Mussalli, 2019; Button & Rossera, 1990; Fischer et al., 2016). Participants' maintained communication was more efficient when working on-site. Challenges or miscommunications which used to surface on-site could be sorted in minimal time by walking into someone's office, however online communication requires a response from the other person who may or may not reply. Wait times could take minutes when communicating with someone who checked their email often, but when dealing with someone averse to technology it could take days to get a response. They also expressed that communication online was more likely to lead to misinterpretation. The quality of communication was impacted by an individual's use of technology and their approach to multimedia communication because some individuals are slower or averse to communicating through technology, or do not have access to all the necessary tools.

### **Theme Two: Remote Work Relationships Tend to be Strictly Professional**

Remote work has impacted work relationships due to the prolonged absence of face-to-face interaction between individuals. Participants expressed that onsite communication lends itself to frequent exchanges because being in the office next to a co-worker provides more opportunities to participate in exchanges that are not work related. Participants were not asked the time frame of their employment. However, most indicated that they had developed friendships with some of their co-workers prior to remote work implementation. Participants indicated that these friendships dwindled with remote work implementation at various rates depending on how strong they were to begin. Distance, according to the participants, diminished those personal relationships due to minimal contact, and most exchanges were strictly professional. The relationships that were not that strong to begin with, and the new ones

developed online, did not develop further than professional exchanges.

The literature shows that socio-emotional aspects of remote work communication are a prevalent concern that requires support (Anzari & Pratiwi, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). The results of this study validate those findings, with social-emotional concerns repeatedly being mentioned by participants.

"I would have always encouraged that we would have met by visual always want to meet people" (P1).

"It can sometimes lack emotion. You know, when you're face to face, you can show empathy or show emotion or excitement towards something, or when you're all electronic it can seem kind of monotone because you don't know what type of emotion is coming between it or behind whatever's coming across" (P2).

"I find, like, our relationship is somewhat strained" (P3).

"Colleagues that I wasn't as strong in terms of having a strong connection with became non-existent with remote work" (P4).

"When you are in person, you get to know more of a person because you are able to see the emotions" (P5). "

The people I know less it's broadened the gap" (P6).

"I feel like I don't really know them. You know, we've changed" (P7).

"I guess, just friendly interaction, as opposed to an email where it can be very, you know, robotic or very just straightforward responses" (P11).

Participants' responses reflected a perspective towards remote work communication as being strictly professional. While they did not express that communication was poor, responses indicated human connection was lacking. There was also an indication that communication was better when there was a face to the name and, at the very least, a video conference was held.

### **Theme Three: Trust Concerns**

Participant responses revealed varying degrees of trust between employers and employees depending on the quality of communication applied when remote work was implemented. Participants stated some employees were monitored on their devices one hundred percent of the time while working, while other employees were required to submit logs of their work. Some participants mentioned instances where certain employees are trusted to complete their tasks without monitoring, or work logs. Participants added that trust agreements were not in place initially but developed with the remote work practice. Individuals were initially informed they were expected to get their work done on their schedule. As remote work progressed, instead of communicating with remote workers struggling with the conditions employers tended to increase monitoring. Individuals not completing their assigned tasks were subject to increased monitoring and micromanagement.



The literature pointed to trust concerns that may arise from the low quality of communication yielded from remote work circumstances. Mixed results present a particular problem due to the need for consensus when building trust. The literature showed better communication is more suited for building trust, and if the relationship is fundamentally good, then the communication is more likely to be effective (DeAndrea, 2014; Lis & Lis, 2021; Popescu et al., 2020). When asked about trust in their organization with remote workers responses included,

"Reciprocity and that trust and that accountability both ways make you want to perform because you know that they trust you and you trust them" (P1).

"Trust was established between my employer and me through open communication" (P2).

"Yeah, it was company property, and there was no trust because we knew that they could potentially look into what we were writing" (P4).

"I try to be an open book. I try to be very transparent. I try to be like I don't know the answer but talk to me and together I'll find it out for you. I'm here. Here's my phone number" (P10).

When employers implemented communication enhancing, and trust-building practices that employed open, purposeful, and effective communication employees felt more valued and motivated to deliver on that trust. Participants were experiencing varying degrees of trust in communication ranging from weekly check ins to constant monitoring without open exchanges, and varying degrees of micromanaging in between. The lower the quality of the communication the lower the level of trust employees experienced.

#### **Theme Four: Most Common Benefits of Communicating Remotely**

Participants noted that the benefits of remote work communication were impacted by whether they preferred in-person communication. There were multiple benefits to remote work communication noted. According to participants communication can take place from the convenience of an employee's home; thus, more communication aspects of their work can get accomplished because there is less time spent on commuting. Also, employees found they can improve communication efficiency when they work a flexible schedule that fits their needs and allows them to better balance work and life concerns.

"The online full-time faculty completely demonstrated that they were able to not only work from home very well and do their job well, but they actually performed better" (P1).

"It's a lot easier to provide a faster service and turn times when you can, you know, send 30 emails within a five-minute timeframe versus being face to face with someone that could be you know, it can be a 30-minute conversation where you could have done much more electronically" (P2).

"Recording all types of communication is huge" (P2).

"I can concentrate more" (P5).

I'm a people-person you know, I like to be around people" (P5).

"I'm a homebody I like being at home" (P6).

"Technology has helped a lot" (P9).

"It's like, we can think we're seeing that we can be more efficient in that sense, because we can see one client after another" (P12).

The benefits of communicating while working remotely work listed by participants supported what was in the literature reviewed for this study, which found the benefits of remote work depended on the perspectives of individuals and were reliant on gender, education, and social support (Donati et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Participants, when asked about the benefits of remote work noted that their preferences were a factor.

#### **Theme Five: Challenges with Technology and Communication**

The findings validated the literature asserting remote work communication challenges include the dependency on technology plus the need for seamless connectivity and reliable services (Wang et al., 2010). Interpersonal concerns brought on by technology were highlighted with participants expressing that it was more difficult to read people and build strong teams when the relationships are disconnected (Anzari & Pratiwi, 2021; Robinson, 2017).

"I think just to acknowledge that we're like human beings, not computers" (P5).

"That interview was conducted remote so then when I met him in person, and then two weeks later, he's quitting. It's like, oh, man, like we didn't get a good read of him. (P9).

"Yeah, I think it's that human connection. It's something about, you know, giving someone an actual hug and shaking their hand that physical touch, you know, just seeing that person smile like this. It's so difficult like to do that virtually. Again, after a while, we get used to humanizing the technological component of it, but it's very unnatural to humanize these meetings unless you purposely make them human. So that's, that's the challenge" (P10).

"Because we're so robotic" (P10).

"When the technology acts up, it causes a problem because then we aren't able to do our job and also, maybe in general, we're unable to communicate (P11).

"Yeah, it can create a situation where you're maybe a little overly reliant on the technology, and when it's not available when it's not functioning properly, you may not be able to actually do your job or communicate with people that you may need to" (P11).

Participants expressed that the drawbacks of technology were substantial and difficult to overcome. Some of the concerns are multifaceted and faced in various processes. The technological aspects, for instance, do not only slow

down communication but also present the potential of a complete interruption of tasks. Interpersonal concerns similarly include the potential for simple misunderstandings, as well as the possibility of relationships deteriorating throughout the organization. Table 2 identifies key issues faced by remote workers and potential organizational actions along with direction for future research.

### Discussion

In this study, the central question was: What issues emerged with implementing remote work that impacted organizational communication? Participants were interviewed regarding their communication experience with the shift to remote work. Themes emerged and pointed to remote work communication as being especially difficult for employees. The primary issues that emerged with the implementation of remote work were inefficient communication and interpersonal communication concerns.

#### Inefficient Communication

The findings show inefficient remote communication was brought on by technology, time delays, and trust issues. Dependency on technology limits communication with clients and other employees who may or may not have seamless connectivity or reliable systems. Time delays surfaced because various individuals regard remote work communication with a different level of importance, or urgency. Trust between employees and managers often results in monitoring employee devices. The monitoring may further contribute to inefficient communication when employees are concerned with being observed while interacting with clients and other employees.

#### Interpersonal Communication Concerns

The data shows that interpersonal concerns are one significant issue that emerged with the implementation of remote work that impacted communication. Participants voiced concerns about relationships being diminished by

the remote work experience. Identified as a lack of human connection by some participants, a strictly professional approach to communication leaves individuals feeling like communication is detached and less human. While participants described some benefits to remote work communication, such as convenience and flexibility, they also indicated those benefits are outweighed by the limits it places. Not being able to interact in person lacks visual cues, human connection, and friendly interactions, which when present add a layer to communication, enhancing the exchange and making it more effective.

#### Implications

The resilience and relational load theory stipulates that the resilience of groups increases with the deliberate management and maintenance of relationships (Afifi et al., 2016; Littlejohn, 2020). Healthy relationships, thus, will help groups overcome difficult times together (Awonuga, 2020; Littlejohn, 2020). Communication is the foundation of good working relationships, and good working relationships are fundamental to organizational success (Deangelis, 2015). The study shows that remote work made communicating difficult, was lacking in human connection, and produced relationships that were strictly professional. On site communication does not contain the technological constraints which limit the flow of exchanges and contains expression and emotion which convey more to the other individual.

The remote work conditions and prolonged distance between coworkers caused the relationship to diminish. Participants expressed that relationships that were not strong while working on site dissolved under remote work circumstances. While it may not be evident during normal business functions, companies that promote those personal connections will be more likely to endure stressful times. Organizations would benefit from building relationships among their remote workers and with their on-

**Table 2**

*Challenges Faced by Remote Workers*

Key Issues	Proposed Organizational Actions	Future Research Direction
Longer Wait Times	Implement time limits for responses	Productivity related to remote work communication
Misunderstandings	Effective Communication Posters: "I hear you saying..." "This is what I understood..."	Remote work and relationships
Lacking in Emotion	Data collection, employee surveys, feedback.	Remote work's impact on interpersonal relationships
Trust Issues	Trust-building workshops	Trust and Remote Work
Dehumanizing	Data collection, employee surveys, feedback.	Relationships conducive to organizational success
Overly Dependent on Technology	List of alternate procedures. Up to date systems. Regular maintenance. Tech Support Staff.	Productivity related to remote work communication

site staff so that the staff is willing and able to communicate efficiently in tough times.

Organizations can address the challenges of remote work communication and promote good relationships even in remote work conditions. Each organization has unique inter and intra cultural elements to consider when attempting to enhance communication and build relationships. Data collection would be foundational to determine the fundamentals of a group's culture and concerns. Equipped with an understanding of the organization's culture and dynamics a strategic plan based on their specific needs can be developed and carried through.

### Limitations

The study is limited to specific intra-cultural elements because participants reside in the western part of the country. Cultural, social and economic factors influence communication preferences and may differ from region to region. This geographical disparity is further pronounced by a higher concentration of technology industries in the Western US which could contribute to a higher use of technology and increased concerns regarding remote work communication. Another limitation was the ratio of women to men participating in the study. The number of women interviewed exceeded the number of men by a ratio of three-and-one-third female to every male. The unequal number of participants from each gender could have influenced the patterns and concerns that surfaced. The small sample size was another limitation of the study. Thirteen participants provided a limited scope of the vast field containing remote work communication concerns. Given that qualitative research has built-in limitations including the challenges presented by analyzing data that is not systematically sorted, and the potential for researcher influence, a broader quantitative study which includes other regions and is designed to explore the themes discovered in this inquiry may add further insights to the central question.

### Conclusion

Relationships are fundamental building blocks of the organization, and much depends on them being strong enough to overcome challenges. Remote work challenges limit interpersonal communication and contribute to ineffective exchanges, which in turn diminishes relationships in the workplace. While other issues have emerged, such as dependency on technology and employee monitoring, these are less complex than relationship building and can be explored or improved within the organization. It is critical, however, to look further into the effects of remote work on communication and relationships.

### Recommendations

Inefficient communication and interpersonal interaction concerns must be addressed by employers. Concerns about technology connectivity require investing in a system's update and perhaps an onsite technology expert. Inexperience with technology ought to be addressed with training and making support personnel available to employees struggling with multimedia. Interpersonal com-

munication concerns would necessitate a more long-term investment of time and resources to bring employees together and nurture good working relationships. These recommendations can be done sequentially to build on strides attained with previous efforts.

The results of this study indicate two areas where further research can be beneficial to understanding the impact of remote work communication: (1) the impact of diminished interpersonal relationships due to working remotely, and (2) productivity related to remote work communication. Communication inefficiency when working remotely may impact productivity. The study showed that remote interpersonal relationships were lacking human emotion, which raises the question whether limited communication, and diminished interpersonal relationships have an impact on productivity.

Work relationships were a recurring theme during the interviews. Given the importance of good workplace relationships, further research is recommended to determine whether remote work communication hinders their development. It is also recommended to examine further the effects of the quality of workplace relationships on productivity. Relationships and how they are affected by remote work could provide insights into how remote work changes communication in organizations.

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**Sandra Aguilon** (saguillon@my365.bellevue.edu)

**Julia Cronin-Gilmore** (gilmore@bellevue.edu)

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