Attitudes to remote working in China, Ireland, and Germany. Exploring the opportunities and challenges facing organisations from a wellbeing perspective.

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Abstract

Purpose:

The Covid-19 pandemic led to an ongoing shift in how and where people work. To help organisations identify future directions, this requires an exploration of the experiences of remote workers.

Design/methodology/approach:

Our study examines the experiences of remote workers in three different countries, China, Ireland, and Germany, from a wellbeing perspective. To answer our two research questions, we adopted a qualitative research method utilising semi-structured interviews. We interviewed 30 participants, 10 in each country. We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach to analyse data.

Findings:

We constructed four themes: 1) The Commencement of Remote Working, 2) Perceived Benefits and Drawbacks of Remote Working, 3) Individual differences, 4) Country Differences. Through these themes, we unpacked the employee experience of remote working and how it impacted their wellbeing. We also found a clear difference between Eastern and Western employees in terms of working pattern preference in the post pandemic era.

Research limitations:

The main limitations of this study relate to the inability to generalise across the population of each country or within a specific industry.

Implications and originality/value:

This paper highlights how remote working can improve wellbeing in the post Covid world. It offers some directions for organisations to improve their remote and hybrid working practices. It also contributes to a sustainable human life by providing arguments for economic, environmental, social, physical, and psychological wellbeing.

Key Words: Remote Working, Hybrid Working, Wellbeing, Cultural differences.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic catapulted organisations and employees into a world of remote work. Research from Deloitte shows that 81 percent of employees were affected by the pandemic over the world (Owusu, Teye and Ocran, 2020), and man became remote workers overnight (Phillips, 2020). Data on the extent of this shift varies across countries. For instance, in the United Kingdom, it is estimated that only five percent of employees worked remotely on a regular basis prior to the pandemic (CIPD, 2020). And in Germany, 88 percent of small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) had in person office requirements. In contrast, 81 percent now believe that more flexible models will become a long-term change (Nachmias and Hubschmid-Vierheilig, 2021).

As a result of remote working brought on by the pandemic, 94 percent of respondents in Ireland said they would be willing to continue remote working (McCarthy et al. 2020). Furthermore, in 2020 remote working in China grew by 73.6 percent, reaching 346 million (China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), 2021). As technology develops, the working environment and working modes of enterprises are changing (Buchanan, Kelley, and Hatch, 2016). Digital technology continues to drive workplace changes (Ahmed, Hizam and Sentosa, 2020). In short, a shift is taking place in how and where people work, and this brings the need to explore the experience of remote workers to help organisations identify future directions.

Literature Review

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) strives to see human beings enjoying prosperous and fulfilling lives in harmony with nature. As a result of Covid-19, working lives have changed and some of these changes may be more permanent than others. For instance, hybrid working is becoming more popular (Lund et al., 2020) and many organisations have already stated an intention to allow permanent remote working (Friedman and Browning, 2021). In the spirit of the SDG, our paper, focuses on how remote working can improve wellbeing. More precisely, this is not another paper on Covid-19. Instead, it is a paper focusing on where we need to go in the post Covid world to ensure that we reap the rewards from lessons learnt whilst underpinning organisational decisions with economic, psychosocial, and environmental wellbeing in mind.

The impact of remote and hybrid working

Previous research has demonstrated potential advantages and disadvantages to remote working related to social, physical, psychological, and economic outcomes. Remote working can alleviate some of the social problems we see today. For instance, remote working reduces commuting and can help employees balance work and home life (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020; Hartig, Kylin and Johansson, 2007; Jalagat and Jalagat, 2019; Government of Ireland, 2021; Li and Herd, 2017). In the capital cities of the three countries studied, rent prices and house prices have been climbing. For example, Dublin was the second most expensive place for renters in the EU apart from Monaco

in a 2021 Global Price of Personal Space survey (CIA Landlord Insurance, 2021). In Berlin, in the past five years, rents have risen by 36 per cent (Hall, 2021). And in China, in a bid to control rent prices, the Chinese government has introduced a rent cap controlling rent price increases at five percent per year (Reuters, 2021). Remote working, from an economic standpoint, takes pressure off both the demand and supply side of housing. Remote workers can work in other cities, towns, and villages, once they have the technology required to complete their jobs. Additionally, due to cheaper costs of living, they have greater disposable income, which is associated with wellbeing. Importantly this highlights the need for technological focus and investment as noted by Barker (2022). Thus, the success of remote working is reliant on government and organisational investment in regions.

Our climate is in crisis and remote working has the capacity to reduce its deterioration. Due to pandemic associated shutdowns, a positive impact on air pollution was found in several studies (Dasgupta and Srikanth, 2020; Streiff, 2020; Venter et al., 2020). Air pollution is associated with vehicles, distances travelled, factories, population, fuel consumption and technological development (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018). Since 1990, human produced greenhouse gasses have risen 47 percent above a baseline set in 1990 (Lindsey, 2021). By burning fossil fuels, humans add approximately 9.5 billion metric tonnes of carbon each year to the atmosphere (Herring, 2021).

This demand is a double edge sword. On one hand it reflects GDP growth, and with that the economic wellbeing of nations, but on the other hand it relates to climate deterioration. And this destruction could wipe all living life from the planet (Jones, 2017). As Schumacher (2007) highlights, the human concept of a battle with nature is one which humans will lose. Critically, the cost of such a battle includes air pollution, greenhouse gasses, reduced individual well-being and

increased global warming (Stiglitz, 2008). In short, human behaviour has disturbed the natural carbon cycle (National Centre for Environmental Information (NCEI), 2020).

Crucially, remote or hybrid working has the capacity to reduce the burning of fossil fuels and the production of greenhouse gasses due to reduced commuting (Jalagat and Jalagat, 2019; Lund et al., 2020). Through a sustainability and wellbeing lens, organisations can improve the lives of today and tomorrow's employees since air pollution has been linked to illness and premature death (Chauhan and Johnston, 2003; European Environment Agency, 2021; Nel, 2005)

Remote working, when supported by government and company policies can also support families. More and more women have entered the labour market in recent years (Messing and Östlin, 2006). Thus, family structures often include dual earner families (Chou and Cheung, 2013). Families need to find ways to manage child rearing responsibilities, care of elderly parents and work. This is exacerbated in countries where social provisions for childcare and elderly care are not provided. For example, unlike German employees, Irish employees do not have equivalent access to state funded childcare provision. UNICEF ranked Ireland amongst the most expensive countries in the world for childcare, whilst Germany ranked in one of the highest for childcare provisions. More precisely, they found that a couple in Ireland, on an average income with two children, would spend approximately 33 to 50 per cent of their salary on childcare (UNICEF, 2021). Theoretically, remote or hybrid working could bolster the economic wellbeing of families. This will enable employees to manage work and household tasks simultaneously which is not achievable in a traditional office (Gager, Sanchez, and Demaris, 2009).

Remote working can also improve psychological wellbeing by time saving which can be allocated to better nutrition, general health, hobbies, and skill building (Felstead and Henseke, 2017; Prasad, 2020). However, boundaries to work and home life can become blurred when working from home

(Clark, 2000; Kelliher and Anderson, 2009). And these blurred work-life boundaries pose a threat to one's ability to sustain healthy sleep, nutrition, and physical activity (Pluut and Wonders, 2020). In addition, blurred boundaries may cause an inability to detach, which Taris et al. (2008) found to be far more damaging than working long hours regarding physical complaints and exhaustion. This means that remote working employees may be at risk of non-compartmentalising behaviour when they perceive the job as open ended (Hynes and Cullinane, 2021). Remote working may also damage wellbeing through information overload, stress, lack of motivation, feelings of isolation and invisibility, and barriers to communication (Delany, 2021; European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union et al., 2021; Flores, 2019; Li and Herd, 2017; Routley, 2020).

Taken together, the benefits of remote and hybrid working are plentiful. And whilst there are challenges, we propose that they are not unsolvable. To investigate the extent of the benefits and challenges of remote working, this paper explores attitudes to remote working of employees in three different nations, namely, China, Ireland, and Germany. As Prasad (2020) suggested, during the pandemic, employees will experience different emotional remote working journeys. In order to reap the benefits of the unusual experience the pandemic created; we first must identify what remote working experiences are. For example, how did employees find remote working? Were they satisfied? Did their opinion change? Was the workload comparable to life in a traditional office? What challenges did they face? How did they manage difficulties? Did they feel supported? How could their experience be improved? And what are their thoughts on how they would like to work going forward? Underpinned by the SDG, this is examined through the wellbeing lens. Thus, the research question underpinning this work is:

RQ 1: How do employees perceive remote working in terms of wellbeing?

The factors influencing remote and hybrid working experiences

Several factors such as location, industry and organisational culture may influence the extent of remote working and how it is evaluated. At the organisation level, rules, norms, regulations, shared concepts, surveillance, and sanctions can influence behaviour (Staelens and Louche, 2017; Scott, 2004; Scott, 2003). However, to do this, acceptance is needed (Scott, 2004). And one method open to organisations is through their incentive structures (Schmidt, 2014; Skinner, 1963). As noted by Markey-Towler (2019) motivation and emotions are important factors guiding behaviour. Thus, any organisational attempt to influence behaviour must have a connection to the individual.

To develop a stake, behaviour must involve the social self and desires (Voronov and Weber, 2020). Attachment, performance, and fantasy metaphors are a method of attaching individuals to an organisation and thus influencing their behaviour and cognition through proscribed and prescribed emotions which are subsequently punished and rewarded respectively (Boxenbaum, 2019). For instance, within the social unit, surveillance mechanisms can guide behaviour through feelings of shame derived from negative self-evaluations when one fails to meet the behavioural standards (Creed et al., 2014). Over time, standards and values infuse the organisation which influence expected attitudes, patterns of decision making and even forms of organising such that it evolves from a block of bricks to a social organism (Selznik, 1997). Therefore, institutions can be determinants of behaviour (Boxenbaum, 2019). However, behaviour can only be determined if a psychological connection between the individual and organisation exists (Markey-Towler, 2019; Voronov and Weber, 2020). It is therefore critical to explore the role of desired behaviours within an organisation, how they are rewarded, and how undesired behaviours are sanctioned when analysing what would influence employee perceptions of remote working.

Beyond the organisation, the national culture will shape expected social behaviours and these too can infiltrate the organisation via the recruitment and induction process. Once hired by the organisation, employees will begin to assimilate behaviourally through social learning and a desire to protect their self-esteem (Bandura, 1971; Hogg, Terry and McKimmie, 2000; Stets and Burke, 2000; Turner, 1999; Reicher, Spears, and Postmes, 1995; Abrams and Hogg, 1988). Hence the expectations of the society being studied is a useful source of information to examine differences. Hofstede's dimensions of culture can be utilised to explain how socio-cultural differences can influence hierarchy, relationships, expectations, and behaviours (Barnum, 2011; Chandra, 2012; Choi, 2008; Gao, 2019; Hofstede, 2013; Hofstede Insights, 2021; Meyer, 2017; Stanier, 2019; Yip, 2019).

At a country culture level, Hofstede's six dimensions of culture categorise countries based on power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation and indulgence (Hofstede, 2013). For this paper, all three countries are examined based on three of the dimensions. Namely, 1) power distance, 2) individualism, and 3) indulgence. The application of the tool to compare China, Ireland and Germany is shown in Figure 1.

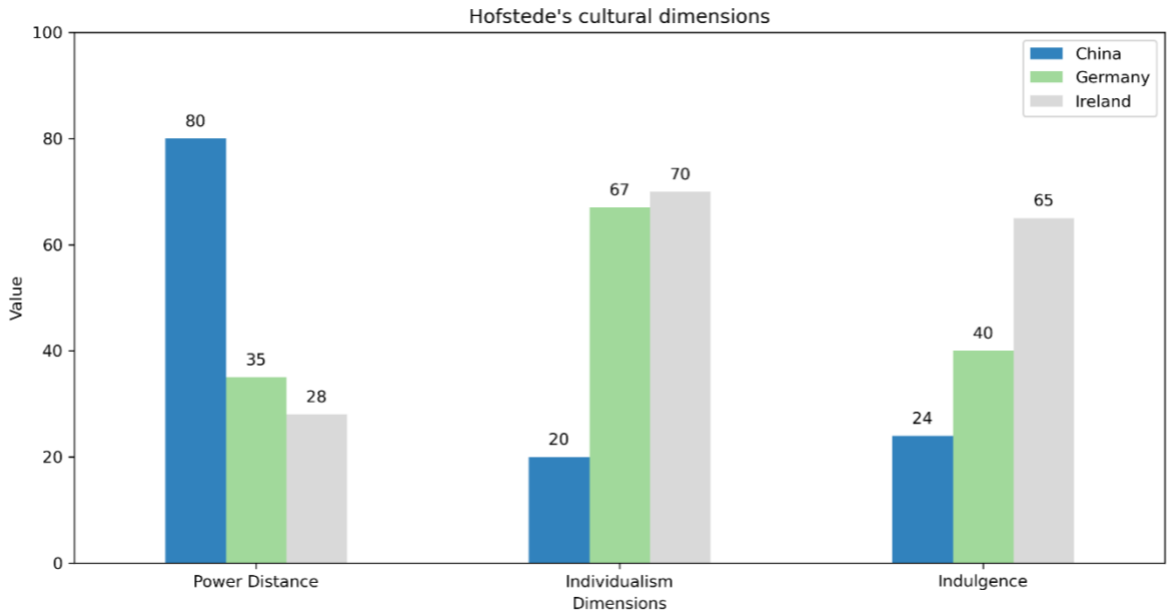

Figure 1. Country comparison (Hofstede Insights, 2021)

Power distance

When a country scores low in power distance, such as Ireland, it reflects society's unacceptance of inequalities amongst people. This spills over to the workplace in the form of flat hierarchies, accessible managers, open consultation, and informal communication. In contrast, high power distance, in countries such as China, underpins the society's hierarchical nature and influence of authority on the subordinate-superior relationship (Hofstede Insights, 2021). For example, Chinese workers are perceived as successful when they do what is asked of them. Furthermore, they are not expected to offer ideas or opinions (Meyer, 2017). Therefore, remote workers in a high-power distance country may have reduced ability to demonstrate the proposed skills needed for successful remote working. For instance, Nachmias and Hubschmid-Vierheilig (2021) discuss the 'home-office-skill' of self-management, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurialism. They will also need to be

able to solve problems and troubleshoot (Ahmed, Hizam and Sentosa, 2020). Thus, hierarchy may hinder the ability to be an effective remote worker.

Individualism

Ireland and Germany are both classified as individualist countries. Meanwhile, China is considered collectivist. In individualist countries self-reliance and initiative are expected (Hofstede Insights, 2021). Hence, the ability to show innovativeness and think beyond the traditional, the key remote working skills highlighted by Ahmed, Hizam and Sentosa (2020) may be more prominent in German and Irish remote workers than their Chinese counterparts. Indeed, Chinese employees may seek guidance from their managers in line with the expectations in the hierarchy and collective. This highlights the importance of management skills needed in remote working. Thite (2020) proposes that management will need to shift their mindset to ensure that remote employees are encouraged to experiment. Experimentation requires feelings of safety. Managers will therefore need to create trust, which creates a willingness to put faith in others (Edmondson, 2004). As Delany (2021) notes, trust in managers can be built through fairness and consistency regarding treatment and support. The hierarchical nature of a high-power distance country coupled with collectivist punishment of out groups could be a barrier to remote working in China compared to Ireland and Germany.

Indulgence

At 65 Ireland scores the highest in indulgence compared to China at 24. In countries scoring high on indulgence, leisure time is important, and inhabitants tend to be optimistic. In contrast, in low scoring countries such as China, not much emphasis is placed on leisure time (Hofstede Insights, 2021). In fact, in Asian countries, working longer is viewed as a commitment to the employer (Chandra, 2012). For example, in China family and social life is often sacrificed for work (Choi,

2008) and the '996' working model, which requires employees to work from 9 am to 9 pm six days a week has been increasing (Gao, 2019). Acceptance of this form of working could also be explained by China's collectivist structure which praises and celebrates diligence and self-sacrifice in the pursuit of common interest (Choi, 2008). And within the office, an unwillingness to leave before the manager is associated with maintaining a good image (Stanier, 2019). In short, Chinese workers stay for longer in work to protect their career but this is at the expense of their physical, social, and psychological wellbeing. For instance, anxiety, heart disease, encephalopathy, and sudden death have all been rising, which Yip (2019) proposes are due to long and intensive work hours. All of the above-mentioned norms guide behaviour within an organisation. Hence, employees working in environments with strong social pressures to work long hours may face problems with work-life balance due to a perceived inability to say no or create boundaries.

Combining socio-cultural and institutional factors, we propose that differences will pose different threats and opportunities for remote worker wellbeing. We explore this through an institutional and sociocultural lens which accounts for how structural and cultural differences will influence norms and expected behaviours in a company. In doing so we answer:

RQ2: What differences exist between perceptions of remote working regarding wellbeing across China, Ireland, and Germany?

Methods

To explore employee attitudes towards remote working, we adopted a qualitative research method utilising semi-structured interviews. We employed this method as it facilitates two-way communication and the retrieval in-depth information (Adams, 2015). Furthermore, it enables researchers to probe further so that interviewees can discuss sensitive issues openly (Dejonckheere

and Vaughn, 2019). The interview agenda comprised of four quadrants examining time, perception, insights, and company practices. The schedule was deductively constructed from the literature review.

Two criteria for inclusion in the study were used. Firstly, interviewees must have experience in remote working. And secondly, they must have a job which can be completed outside the office. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, 10 in each country. The demographic information of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Transcriptions were uploaded to NVivo and utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) approach, the data was analysed, and themes were constructed. Two researchers coded the interviews separately, resulting in an intercoder reliability rate of 77%. After comparing the results, 100% agreement was reached on the themes. TA enables researchers to identify and analyse patterns within data through a six-phase process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This incorporates noting patterns, producing initial codes, shifting to broader themes, reviewing and refinement, capturing essence and final write up.

Findings

From the data analysis, we constructed four themes: 1) The Commencement of Remote Working, 2) Perceived Benefits and Drawbacks of Remote Working, 3) Individual differences, 4) Country Differences. Themes, subthemes, and illustrative quotes are displayed in Table 2 (appendix).

Theme 1: The Commencement of Remote Working

Our data revealed that COVID-19 was the key driver of remote working. 70 percent (N=21) of employees were experiencing remote working for the first time due to the pandemic. However, this was not equally represented across the three countries. For instance, 60 percent of German interviewees (N=6) had remote working experience prior to the pandemic compared to 30 percent of Chinese interviewees (N=3) and none of the Irish interviewees (N=0).

Theme 2: Perceived Benefits and Drawbacks of Remote Working

Remote working had several benefits. For several interviewees remote working meant that work life balance improved. Individuals had more time to spend with family and no longer was everything *"based around the workplace"* (IRL 8). Flexibility regarding routine or working to one's own rhythm was described by several interviewees. Due to remote working, office-based schedules and set times of the day for specific tasks were relaxed. Freedoms bestowed upon interviewees included flexibility regarding dress code, greater comfort, ability to listen to music when working and flexible scheduling of daily tasks. Moreover, reduced commuting time led to time gains in other areas of their lives. As a result of remote working efficiencies, interviewees had more to more time to invest in themselves. For example, using gained time to learn new skills, do sports, and tend to their health. In essence, remote work enabled interviewees to arrange the day to suit their body clock and mood. Moreover, several spoke about enhanced ability to concentrate and increased productivity. This was due to a lack of interruptions when working from home compared to in an office setting.

Whilst remote working was viewed quite positively in many aspects some drawbacks were described. Remote working was viewed as a hindrance to social aspects of the workplace. For example, G1 describes a change in the team culture and a fear on how to keep something which

was *"very special before"*. For others, maintenance of social relationships, collaboration and spontaneity were more cumbersome online. Some also spoke about feeling lonely and longing for a connection. The lack of body language and inability to read non-verbal cues was also a concern for several interviewees. For instance, the appropriateness of online training was questioned by G5. He worries that you cannot see if somebody is *"lost"*, *"what they are doing"* or ascertain if they fully understand. Hence, training and development strategies will need to ensure that learning objectives are achievable through the delivery method.

Giving and receiving timely feedback was also more problematic. G8 provides a potential explanation for this. In her organisation, she describes the ease of booking slots in diaries but how calendars can be fully booked for two months. Essentially, the technical advantage which eases the process also removes the flexibility and spontaneity needed in some circumstances. Simply put, the casual conversations one might have in the office are less likely in remote working.

Interestingly, whilst remote working was described as a positive way to concentrate on work, G5 had experienced people popping in and out of meetings and therefore lacking full engagement in the topic. He is annoyed when they come back *"because you have to repeat everything and bring them back on track"*. This highlights the importance of sustainable work and meeting planning for remote workers and how its absence could lead to inefficiencies and irritation amongst employees. Indeed, he describes *"running from meeting to meeting, to meeting"* which can be back-to-back with different clients with *"no time in between the meetings"* and a need to *"switch topics"*. Hence, the scheduling creates a stressful situation for him. G8 shares the same experience. Not only is she working more hours and waking up earlier, she also highlights the lack of breaks and the *"back-to-back meetings all day"* which she believes are a result of excessive invitations not tailored to a specific audience. This is easily done as barriers such as room size are no longer an issue.

Importantly, as a result, interviewees such as G5 find themselves lacking time to *"get stuck into something or to get into any amount of detail"*. IRL 10 similarly described *"back-to-back Zoom"*. This critically underscores how organisations will need to carefully consider how they manage online meetings and when to conduct them so that meetings are perceived as valuable and do not damage wellbeing.

Perceived benefits and drawbacks were not always instantly realised. In fact, attitudes shifted over time as employees became familiar with remote working. For instance, gaining access to training, learning the importance of setting personal boundaries and ensuring the availability of resources required took time.

Theme 3: Individual differences

As described in theme 2, several positive and negative elements coexist within remote working. However, the impact on an individual depends on individual characteristics, preferences, and behaviours. For instance, it became apparent in the data analysis that self-discipline and good time-management skills are key components of successful remote working. With these abilities, employees were less distracted and were able to multitask whilst efficiently meeting their job requirements. Moreover, they were able to successfully create personal time and erect boundaries between work and personal life. To illustrate, G5 used commuting time to listen to podcasts and read. Since he no longer commuted, he stopped this activity and is regretful about this. However, as highlighted by G3, when discussing the temptation to not leave the house, willpower is needed to push oneself outside. Or as G6 states *"I learnt to create some rules like how to work at home, how to also divide the work time and the private time".* Hence, G5 could create personal time barriers to ensure desired activities are completed or manage time better. This is echoed by C2, G8, G9, G4. Excessive connection to technical tools and devices can cause work life balance

problems. As G3 describes it, *"a big black mirror is looking at me"* which *"comes to my brain unconsciously much more"*. G4 explains that their availability has increased, and this is simplified via access to work phones, smartphones, and emails. Thus, when working from home, employees need to take personal responsibility for their wellbeing and how they manage their time. Simultaneously, organisations must also pay attention to problems with over scheduling and isolation also highlighted in theme 2.

The condition of one's living arrangements also influenced the remote work experience as did parenthood. More precisely, appropriate space and working conditions at home are needed to ensure a positive remote working experience. Specifically, office space and not dining table space, and suitable internet connection are critical requirements for sustainable remote working. And as emphasised by G2, a manager of several people, the living environment of two of his employees was not as welcoming as the office and thus he learnt a valuable lesson about welcoming spaces. Simultaneously, he struggled with how to help employees working remotely due to his inability to create a space like the office. This highlights two critical issues for organisations and managers going forward. Firstly, how can organisations ensure that home office space is a work friendly space and second, how can organisations help managers to help their employees. Furthermore, regarding diversity and inclusion, G8, a non-native German speaker, described how online meetings discourage her from speaking due to confidence issues and how that impacts her motivation. This poses a challenge for organisations aiming to ensure that all employees feel they have a voice.

Several employees spoke about psychological and motivational problems they faced whilst remote working. They included finding it *"hard to be alone the whole day"* and then finding it *"hard to go out"* (G6), *"missing the human interaction"* (C4), feeling *"lonely"* and *"disconnected from*

society" (C5). G2 felt guilt about lacking insight into employees lives and says, *"I hate myself in the first place that I did not care about their living environments"*. He describes himself at the time as *"a bit depressed"* and how the experience had been *"really hard on me".* IRL 8 describes states of *"panic"* and stress. In fact, she explains *"I don't think I've ever felt so much stress in my life"* during a period of intense pressure from management to return to the office in the middle of the pandemic prior to vaccination. This highlights the interaction between individual perceptions on what the right thing to do is and the behaviour of organisations and how this can cause stress. Indeed, G1 was in full support of her organisation implementing remote working as *"it was a responsible way of dealing with the situation".* Whilst some others felt bored and demotivated such as C3, IRL 10 and IRL 9. As C3 highlights *"I feel less of a sense of urgency working from home than I do in the office, so I'm not as motivated as I am when I was in the office. There are a lot of household chores to distract me, which makes me not as quick to want to get work done right away, even though I know it's almost there."* Again, this underpins the role of time management and self-management but also motivation to complete tasks. Remote workers will need to be motivated by the work, the organisation and themselves. They and organisations will need to find ways to focus their attention to the task at hand.

Theme 4: Country Differences

Future perspectives, a sub theme of country differences, captures interviewee perceptions on the future of remote working and their preferences for how they would like to work. Of the total sample, 63 percent would like to continue working in a hybrid manner (N=19), 17 percent would prefer fully remote (N=5) and 20 percent would prefer to work in an office only (N=6). By analysing each country, the preference slightly changes. In the Irish sample, 80 percent would prefer hybrid working and the other two would prefer fully remote. That is, no Irish interviewees

would like to work in a traditional office environment. For the Germans, the situation is similar. All Germans voted in favour of hybrid working. In contrast, 60 percent of Chinese interviewees wanted to work in an office. Two patterns emerged which influenced their decision: 1) feeling disconnected and lonely (C2, C4, C5, C8) and 2) increased effort and time required to communicate remotely (C3 and C10).

Potential reasons for the difference in the impact of communication problems relates to resource provision differences across borders as captured in the subtheme c*ompany practices.* For efficiency gains to occur, employees spoke about a need for access to resources such as equipment, training, and support. This emphasises the hard and soft element of remote working. Naturally, equipment facilitated the completion of tasks. For the Chinese cohort, online office software such as WeChat and DingTalk is prevalent, but this is not viable for cross border business and communication, nor is it utilised outside China. Due to structural factors of a political nature, well know tools such as Zoom, Slack and Google, cannot be accessed without a VPN (Virtual Private Network). This makes international business difficult for remote workers and companies offering remote working. Indeed, executives in multinational corporations, have spoken about barriers to communication due to channel inconsistency (Narayandas Rangan and Zaltman, 2020). This sentiment was reported by many Chinese participants. They struggled to gain access to company information, they lacked technical support, and more time was spent on trying to communicate, which was perceived as time wasting. This highlights the implications that government restrictions and potential hierarchies have on local and international business regarding efficiency and productivity.

Employees also had complex social needs and wanted to feel connected to the organisation and their colleagues. Zoom was a frequently mentioned tool and some companies provided premium accounts to employees to ensure conversations could last longer than the forty-minute time limit.

Some organisations had regular team meetings which enabled feedback and communication to occur. When this was organised in a safe manner, employees could share positive and negative experiences, and receive feedback from management which was a good learning experience for all involved. Moreover, other companies ran social events such as food sharing sessions, respect for women events, questionnaires, and staff birthday parties. Events, beyond the topic of work tasks, built morale, fostered belongingness, and created a harmonious working atmosphere. However, it must be noted that online events were not suitable for all and cannot replace spontaneous *"discussions on [sic] the coffee machine"* (G5). Hence, both German and Irish employees preferred hybrid working which reflects a desire to capitalise on both remote benefits and in office social benefits. In contrast, the Chinese preference for office working at 60 percent underlines the importance of the online communication element (soft resources) in remote working supported by access to hard resources (tools) which increase communication efficiency.

Most employees, regardless of country, spoke about difficulties disconnecting after work. 70 percent (N=7) of the Chinese participants experienced extended working hours and overtime work. In some instances, this related to a lack of autonomy and ability to plan one's work. For example, C3 and C9 regularly received extra work suddenly which resulted in unplanned required overtime. This was not mentioned by any interviewees in the Irish or German sample. C3 and C7 also shed light on how monitoring from supervisors eroded motivation to work due their tendency to focus solely on results. Interestingly, they believed it impacted the ability of the supervisor to truly evaluate and observe their skills which then impacted their access to promotions. Moreover, due to difficulties accessing tools for international communication, Chinese employees may not be able to work efficiently and therefore waste time waste trying to overcome resource barriers, which then spills over into personal time. In fact, 70 percent of Chinese interviewees mentioned that a

lack of communication had led to lower productivity. For instance, sometimes they found it difficult to contact a person which leads to increased communication time and the need to work longer hours. Again, this underlines the critical importance of hard and soft resources in managing work efficiently.

As presented in theme 2, several German and Irish participants spoke about an excessive volume of e-meetings. However, both the Irish and Germans recognised the importance of personal responsibility. For instance, several Germans spoke about recognising the need to spend time outside and do sport. And Irish interviewees spoke specifically about how they invested more time in their wellbeing when working remotely. They created boundaries for themselves, and their companies provided flexibility to do this. In contrast, C3 explained that she works long hours to avoid negative judgements about her work ethic. This sheds light on a working culture which rewards long hours with promotions. As C10 states *"it's easier to see the work dynamics and performance in the office"*.

The preference of managers, company culture and company size, captured in the subtheme company practices, may also play a role in an organisation's appetite for remote and hybrid work. For instance, G10 believes that some managers will want their teams close by and that activities such as going for lunch in the canteen are company rituals which symbolise the togetherness of family. G7 also believes a scepticism trickles from the top down and this relates to fear of change and perceived loss of control. Indeed, this is echoed by G2's fears to help his remote employees. Whilst G8 believes smaller organisations may be stricter in their thinking and lack trust. In combination, trust is a common thread throughout interviewees and the levels of trust varied from highly trusting to showing no evidence of trust. For example, IRL8 and IRL10 felt that the

experience of remote working had highlighted a lack of trust and unwillingness to engage in dialogue from management. This then had an impact on their wellbeing.

Discussion and recommendations

This study highlights the positive and negative aspects of remote working for a sample of employees in three different countries. As evident in the subtheme *future perspectives*, almost all Irish and German employees wish to continue hybrid working. This is supported in the literature (Friedman and Browning, 2021; Lund et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2020).

Hybrid working addresses the problems with remote working described in the theme *perceived benefits and drawbacks of remote working* such as blurred work life issues (Pluut and Wonders, 2020). It may also reduce the likelihood of excessive working as it creates greater opportunities for compartmentalising. When employees switch from remote to hybrid working, the negative aspects of remote work such as barriers to communication, feeling isolated, and information overload can also be reduced (Delany, 2021; European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union et al., 2021; Flores, 2019; Li and Herd, 2017; Routley, 2020). However, the successful application of remote and hybrid working requires several actions by organisations.

Several workers across countries had problems disconnecting due the absence of an official end of day marker and easy and open-ended access to digital devices, e-mails, calendars, and communication tools, such as MS Teams, or Zoom. For some, this resulted in back-to-back working and a sedentary lifestyle. Considering the low levels of indulgence in China (Figure 1), the problem of disconnection might be a serious factor that policymakers and managers need to consider. This is supported by the literature in relation to working long hours, damage to health and sacrifice of family for work (Chandra, 2012; Choi, 2008; Gao, 2019; Stanier, 2019; Yip, 2019).

Organisations with a wellbeing interest, will need to consider both the hard and soft resources required for remote working whilst factoring in the need to balance remote and hybrid offerings.

On the hard side, this can include clear work allocation, instructions, and technology support (Wheatley, 2017). More specifically, organisations operating in China will need to identify methods to ensure that remote workers have access to information, can communicate in real-time or within a reasonable period to ensure that productivity and work life balance are maintained. If organisations choose to follow a purely or majority remote format, regardless of country, they will need to 1) establish policies and 2) offer training on how to work from home to ensure that work-life balance is embraced and workaholism is disincentivised due to their negative outcomes (Johnson and Lipscomb, 2006; Moyer, Aziz and Wuensch, 2017; Robinson, 2000; Shimazu et al., 2015; Song and Lee, 2021). For instance, working long hours is associated with well-being problems and poor outcomes for family life and marriage (Johnson and Lipscomb, 2006; Song and Lee, 2021). And workaholism is also associated with anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, reduced personal accomplishment and decreased life satisfaction (Moyer, Aziz and Wuensch, 2017; Robinson, 2000; Shimazu et al., 2015).

Organisations wishing to capitalise on human talent in a sustainable fashion will need to recognise the limitations of working excessively and compulsively and address the role they play in promoting this behaviour. As demonstrated through the institutional theory lens, the organisation can guide behaviour, and this can be more salient when an individual feels motivationally or emotionally attached. Organisations will need to find ways to communicate the importance of breaks, sports and free time and they will need to model the behaviour they desire. This could include policies on when and how to communicate after work hours, rewarding those demonstrating work life balance and not rewarding excessive working, assigning sustainable

workload which affords employees autonomy on when and how they complete it, being mindful about invitations to meetings, emphasising the importance of breaks between meetings and promoting the company employee assistance programme (EAPs).

Furthermore, employees, regardless of what soft resources are provided, should find time to prioritise their wellbeing. This requires personal policies to balance their work lives and personal lives. Skills needed will be self-management to ensure that personal wellbeing plans are followed but also time management skills and focus to ensure that work is efficient and productive. Organisations will need to find ways to develop employees and managers to become successful remote workers and leaders respectively (Delany, 2021). For example, building self-discipline and good time management skills appear to increase the benefits one can gain from remote working. Moreover, individual training can be designed to help employees become more skilled at compartmentalising, the act of carving time for oneself in an open-ended job (Hynes and Cullinane, 2021).

Importantly, developing skills may be more complicated in different countries and hierarchical companies. For example, Chinese employees, accustomed to responding to managers due to sociocultural norms, will need a behavioural and cognitive shift to facilitate troubleshooting and open dialogue. And managers will need to adjust their mindset and expectations to create a safe environment open to dialogue. Hence training needs analyses (TNA's) will need to be adapted to remote working and learning plans will need to consider the individual in the design phase. More precisely, pre-existing knowledge ought to be considered and any team learning should encompass skill-based groups (Ahmed, Hizam and Sentosa, 2020). Simply put, remote working skills and autonomy to build those skills varies across cultures and organisations. Hence, the individual should be central to any learning. As noted by Li and Herd (2017), when an employee can design

their learning space in line with their preferences, it is expected that they will be more motived to participate in the learning process.

Organisations operating in a remote format, need to be mindful that they cannot replicate the casual social aspect of communicating at work for some and thence will need to consider regular social activities to maintain connection between colleagues and the organisation since the loss of connection, belongingness and damage to the culture was mentioned in all three countries. Activities of this nature reflect the softer side of resource provision, a critical element of building the culture and dynamics according to the interviewees.

As noted by numerous interviewees such as C1, C3, C9, IRL1, IRL5, IRL6, IRL7, IRL 10 and G6, organisations will use remote working to save money. However, to ensure this effectively works, organisations will need to invest money in resources as highlighted by interviewees. Firstly, organisations will need to ensure that office space is available for hybrid workers to come to the office (G2). Secondly, many hybrid workers will still have online meetings and conferences, and this will require private quiet spaces so as not to disturb colleagues (G1). Thirdly, organisations may need to consider allowances for home office working (G8). Fourthly, the specific job and the duties within that job will need to be examined to identify what aspects of the job can be performed remotely and what cannot (IRL 8). And finally, organisations will need to formalise tax arrangements as mentioned by G10 and specify locations where employees can work. For instance, G3 is permitted to work anywhere within Europe and G4 emphasises that it is *"mobile working"* and not dependent on being in one's home. This may be supported by government policies such as the Irish government's promotion of remote working and the right to disconnect and wellbeing (Government of Ireland, 2021, 2020; Eurofound, 2019).

Research limitations/implications

One of the limitations of this study is the utilisation of TA which can lack rigour (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). However, the use of the six-step process outlined in the methods section demonstrates that TA can be systemic. Furthermore, the authors interrater procedures sought to remove bias from the coding process. Notwithstanding, we invite scholars to consider quantitative studies, especially longitudinal studies which examine changes over time. For example, diary studies collating data on perception over an extended period could shed light on when positive and negative experiences occur. Moreover, a larger sample size would allow for generalisations, especially regarding country differences. Case studies would also be useful to examine the experience within companies and industries. Furthermore, opportunities to explore the perception of management, leaders and other decision makers would be useful to gain a broader perspective on the benefits and challenges beyond the employee level.

This study highlighted the influence of individual differences regarding how remote working improves or disrupts the work-life balance. Some participants experienced greater abilities to balance professional and personal obligations. The literature has presented similar results. For example, Felstead and Henseke (2017) claim that improved job arrangements aid employees to gain work-life balance which makes them more productive. Conversely, in this study, there were employees who faced difficulties separating work from home life. In the absence of a traditional office routine, employees lacked a concept of time which led to working through breaks and into the evening. This was also found in Routley's (2020) study where employees had difficulties distinguishing between starting and finishing work. Indeed, it could be argued that remote working exposed traditional nine to five workers to the peril of open-ended work, within which workaholism tends to be more prevalent (Schaufeli, Taris and Bakker, 2008). It would therefore

be interesting for future research to examine the extent of workaholism in remote workers and explore what individual and institutional factors influence that.

This study offers some directions for organisations to improve their remote and hybrid working practices based on the benefits and drawbacks of remote working. Moving forward, organisations will need to reflect on how performance will be managed if remote working continues into the long term (Delany, 2021). This will pose a challenge for organisations in relation to training, recruitment, and development. For instance, what are the skills required for remote working? How can organisations develop them? And how can organisations attract and retain staff with remote working skills? Hence, there is an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to examine how we can build on this learning experience and develop innovative approaches to skills training (Ahmed, Hizam and Sentosa, 2020).

Evidence so far demonstrates how many employees have quickly adapted to this working mode (Ganado et al., 2020). Overall employees adjusted to remote working in this study. However, as noted by Wang et al. (2021), remote work is not suitable for everyone. This study also found that transitions to remote working are not a universal journey and that companies must realise that flexible working arrangements do not benefit everyone. Therefore, organisations will need to develop methods to identify which employees are better suited for remote working and which are not. One avenue for exploration is the relationship between personality and remote working ability. As Perry, Rubino and Hunter (2018) state, practitioners should examine the compatibility of certain personalities and flexible working arrangements. For instance, in our study, several employees spoke about the importance of social connections. However, we did not test for personality differences or needs preferences and thus it remains outstanding if these aspects can influence perceptions of remote working. This information could inform resource allocation within

organisations to ensure the optimal balance of social resources needed to maintain work engagement. Indeed, our study also showed that despite organisational efforts to run online social events, for some this sorely lacked the in-person collegiality they hoped for. Hence, organisations will need to strike a balance between fully online and hybrid offerings to cater for preferences.

The role of individual differences could be further extended to include self-efficacy, as confidence and beliefs in skills can enhance performance of an employee, bolster their willingness to embrace technology and spillover to colleagues through their enthusiasm (Ahmed, Hizam and Sentosa, 2020). Through a focus on self-efficacy, opportunities for Human Resource Development (HRD) emerge. For instance, HRD practitioners can explore known antecedents of self-efficacy and build evidence-based training programmes to increase employee and manager self-efficacy. This will require leadership and management commitment as they set the tone regarding organisational culture and hold the decision-making keys (Ahmed, Hizam and Sentosa,2020).

Conclusion

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity strives to see human beings enjoying prosperous and fulfilling lives in harmony with nature. In particular, SDG 8 aims to *"promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all".* This paper unpacks the experience of remote workers and examines how this experience can form the basis of future working policy with a wellbeing focus. Hence, this paper offers 1) an economic wellbeing 2) an environmental wellbeing and 3) a social, physical, and psychological wellbeing argument for remote and hybrid working.

Our study demonstrates the extent of hybrid work popularity and why employees find it attractive. Hybrid and remote working can 1) reduce demand for housing in high pressure zones, 2) reduce the extent of daily travel and improve emissions and 3) free up time for family, health, and other personal activities. Hybrid working offers potential solutions to isolation, excessive online time and lack of coordination reported in remote working. It can facilitate casual conversations and eradicates the need to block book diaries. Importantly, its foundation is based on balance and based on the data collected is a popular choice amongst employees.

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Appendices

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

Particpant code	Country	Gender	Age	Role	Industry	Tenure	hybrid (H), Remote (R), Office (O)	REMOTE DUE TO COVID
C1	China	Male	30's	Customer Support Specialist	Pharmaceutical	3 years	R	Y
C2	China	Female	20's	Marketing Assistant	Manufacturing	1 year	O	N
C3	China	Female	30's	Management Consultant	Consulting	5 years	O	Y
C4	China	Male	20's	Sales Support Manager	Technology	2 years	O	Y
C5	China	Female	30's	Centurion Relationship Manager	Finance	4 years	O	Y
C6	China	Female	40's	HRVP	Electric	7 years	R	N
C7	China	Male	20's	Marketing Specialist	Consumer Goods	1 year	R	Y
C8	China	Female	20's	Marketing Manager	Consumer Goods	3 years	O	Y
C9	China	Male	20's	Fixed Income Research Associate	Finance	0.5 years	H	N
C10	China	Female	20's	Purchasing Specialist	Manufacturing	2 years	O	Y
I1	Ireland	Male	30's	Senior Marketing Executive	Technology	3 years	R	Y
I2	Ireland	Female	20's	Campus Recruiter	Technology	2 years	H	Y
I3	Ireland	Female	20's	Recruitment Consultant	Consulting	3 years	R	Y
I4	Ireland	Male	30's	Audit Associate	Finance	4 years	H	Y
I5	Ireland	Female	20's	Manager	Aviation	1 year	H	Y
I6	Ireland	Male	20's	Senior Manager	Education	2 years	H	Y
I7	Ireland	Female	20's	People & Culture Consultant	Consulting	0.5 years	H	Y
I8	Ireland	Female	40's	Lecturer	Education	8	H	Y
I9	Ireland	Male	30's	Senior Financial Analyst	Finance	4	H	Y
I10	Ireland	Female	30's	Lecturer	Education	7	H	Y
G1	Germany	Female	40's	Marketing Manager	Logistics	1 year	H	Y
G2	Germany	Male	30's	Marketing Manager	Finance	1 year	H	N
G3	Germany	Female	30's	Key Account Manager	Consulting	3 years	H	N
G4	Germany	Male	30's	Enterprise Architect	Logistics	2 years	H	Y
G5	Germany	Male	30's	Senior Management Consultant	Consulting	5 years	H	Y
G6	Germany	Male	40's	IT Administrator	Finance	2 years	H	N
G7	Germany	Male	30's	Business Analyst	Health	2 years	H	N
G8	Germany	Female	40's	Enterprise Architect	Finance	2 years	H	N
G9	Germany	Female	40's	UX Designer	Technology	2 years	H	N
G10	Germany	Female	40's	Project Manager	Consulting	2 years	H	Y

Table 2. Themes, subthemes, and illustrative quotes

Theme 1: The Commencement of Remote Working		***Illustrative quotes***
Subthemes	Before Covid	*"Actually, I started remote working is not because of the pandemic, because I've been working for multinational companies and started this cross-regional collaboration mode more than a decade ago." (C6)*
		"before Corona, I used to work also in remote positions" (G2)
	Due to Covid	*"I started remote working after the outbreak of COVID-19 in China. Actually, this is the first time I work remotely, but only for two weeks." (C1)*
		"It started in 2020 with the Corona pandemic. We switched really fast from being on customer site, doing workshops together at the customer, in their offices. Then we have to switch completely to remote work" (G5).
		"I think we started working remotely on the 13th of March 2020. From the Friday. No, it would have been the weekend so 16th March I suppose" (IRL 8).
Theme 2: Perceived Benefits and Drawbacks of Remote Working		

Subthemes	Benefits	*“I think I can manage my time more flexibly and I don't have to work a fixed number of hours” (C2)*
		“The increased flexibility and control of my work-life balance. Since there is no commute in the mornings or afternoon, I have more time to myself and can see my family and friends more often. I have never worked in the office, but I do think I get a lot of work done from home as there is no distractions - my manager also said she thinks she is more efficient at home because in the office you stop for coffee breaks and chats with colleagues, whereas now you have to schedule in 30 mins for a virtual coffee break.” (IRL 7)
		"When I started working remotely, I realised everything is depending on me and the time frame that I wanted to work, it doesn't have to be in the morning session. It doesn't have to be in the afternoon. It doesn't have to be in the day, I was able to work also in the evening" (G2)
	Drawbacks	*“I did feel that the workload has increased and because I can’t communicate with my colleagues face-to-face and we had different ideas and opinions, which*

		actually increased the time cost. So sometimes I don't work that efficiently." (C7)
		"I don't like the fact that I don't have any social interaction with my colleagues anymore, because we had a very close knit team with loads of fun amongst ourselves, when we were in the office together. but, when we were working from home, you could just communicate via the chat function on the system. That wasn't like a real conversation and obviously typing everything was taking up time and so people weren't bothered as much" (IRL9).
		"sometimes it's hard to concentrate if things are happening around, especially with the kids. It works very good like now they have holidays, and they don't need me very much but when they had homeschooling, it was hard to deal with that" (G1).
Theme 3: Individual differences		
Subthemes	Motivation	*"I like having a conversation with my workmates. I like having a bit of fun in work, a bit of a laugh" (IRL 9).*

		“Working from home for long periods of time makes me feel anxious, and sometimes it is easy to be in a state of slackness, resulting in lower productivity. Plus, the relationship with colleagues is also not as close as before due to the reduced communication.” (IRL 6)
	Living arrangements	*"felt like you couldn't get away from work anymore, because the computer was always in the kitchen on the kitchen table, always looking at you so you felt you couldn't get away from work anymore. It felt like you were actually living in the office rather than at home" (IRL 9)*
		" I have to say I got [sic] no family at my flat, so I really can work on my own, so it's really straightforward at several points. I really enjoy it, so there's no staff surrounding or somebody is knocking on your door or something like that, if you are in conferences" (G7).
		" I don't have enough space to move around and for sports or something" (G3).
		" There was [sic] two colleagues of mine, for example, even during pandemic, they went to the office because there was no one in the office. I come to the realisation that their living environment was actually not quite perfect. After the

		pandemic, I realised that, and I hate myself in the first place that I did not care about their living environments, my employees. That gave me the insight about that office is important for some people because sometimes people need to also go in a place to feel welcome" (G2).
	Self-discipline	*"I'm a self-disciplined person and I can manage my time well, so I think remote working can be very efficient and I'm not easily distracted" (C2)*
		"I had to learn a lot of self-discipline" (G4).
		"it's very important to go out and to move and walk. Sometimes I really just skip that. It's necessary. I have to do it, but sometimes it's a bit hard to go out" (G3)
	Time-management skills	*"I don't get distracted because I am used to working alone on projects. There were also no other things to get distracted by because everything was closed at the start. I am probably glad in hindsight that I had something to focus on, I hate sitting around doing nothing. I was able to get stuck into things but as I said maybe a bit too much. I know I worked too much" (IRL 10).*
		"It's about how you manage your time. If you manage your time well, I guess, yes, concentration's definitely better at home" (G8).

Theme 4: Country Differences		
Subthemes	Future Perspectives	*“No, I think working remotely has made me slacker. In other words, it further exacerbates my procrastination and increases my workload instead. Moreover, if I work in the office I won’t get so much extra work after the office hour, and my supervisor can directly see my efforts.” (C3).*
		"I would like to keep two or three days (remote working), depending on the time of the year" (G10).
		"Oh, yes. No full-time, no, because of the social thing, but certainly hybrid. If you could and you know from your own workload that you could do everything and get everything ready. If you manage it well in a four-day week it's an even. Even if teaching was organised so that there were three days of teaching and then two days, you could be at home working on preparing, on making, let's say, pre-recorded classes, going forward, exams, and things like that. Organising your time so that if they organised it better then they could have a few teaching days and even for the students to do the same thing, maybe, but-- They had a

		couple of days to work on any assignments that they had to do. I think they would like that. I think they would go for a hybrid too" (IRL8).
	Company Practices	*"There is some company information that is not available when working from home. When I was working in the office, I could get all the information I need immediately, but now I have to call my colleague who is on duty to check it for me before I communicate with my clients. I think it's very time-consuming. As a financial service company, we pay high attention to protect data, but the facilities and network are not supported, which actually has a negative impact on customer satisfaction and is not conducive to maintaining engagement with customers in the long run."(C5).*
		"Our company provides each employee with a laptop, screen, and headphone. I think they need to pay more attention to employees' mental health, because

		employees will be anxious or lonely if they work from home for a long time, so it is important to care about employees' emotions." (IRL 5)
		"We have the stakeholders on top, I would say, like the CEO and something like that. They're quite sceptical about remote working because, yes, it's like a cultural thing. If you haven't had it and you haven't experienced the good parts of it, for you first, it's like in every situation in your life. There's a blockhead, a blockade or something like that. Yes, it's a change, so you're frightened of this change, and you don't have maybe the control on your employees or something like that. It's a cultural thing, which really is annoying" (G7).