# A STUDY OF THE IMPACT THAT ENFORCED REMOTE WORKING HAS ON THE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL WELL-BEING OF EMPLOYEES AS A RESULT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN:

## A case study of sales employees within the IT sector in Ireland

Research dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
**MBA**

Griffith College Dublin

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**28<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

**Candidate Declaration**

Candidate Name:        James Bates

I certify that the dissertation entitled:

**'A STUDY OF THE IMPACT THAT ENFORCED REMOTE WORKING HAS ON THE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL WELL-BEING OF EMPLOYEES AS A RESULT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: A case study of sales employees within the IT sector in Ireland'**

submitted for the degree of: **MBA** is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given.

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Date:            August 28th 2020

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Date:

**Dedication**

To Paula, Poppy and George

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of my wife Paula who has worked incredibly hard to take care of our children to allow me time to complete this dissertation.

Similarly, to our children Poppy and George with whom I've been an absence presence on many occasions during the last two and half years, I'm looking forward to making up for lost time.

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**Abstract**

In this dissertation I studied the impact which enforced remote working as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown had on the physical and mental well-being of employees, specifically focusing on individuals employed as IT sales executives in the Republic of Ireland. It was shown that after a few initial adjustments, physical well-being mostly improved and positive mental well-being was displayed towards remote working. The research strategy and methodology for this study followed a qualitative mono-method approach which gathered empirical data through the use of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The qualitative data gathered via the interview process was then analysed and coded using a form of template analysis to identify key themes pertinent to the study. The participants felt that their physical well-being had improved as a result of devising new ways to manage physical health and using time typically spent commuting for physical activities. Increased flexibility and reduced commute times resulted in a positive mental outlook and reduced stress in many cases. Adverse impacts were found on well-being due to lack of human interaction and on hand support. Differentiating factors between participants included age, living status and dependents. This paper does not attempt to draw theory from the data, but provide insights into the diverse factors affecting enforced remote workers well-being.

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# 1    Introduction

## 1.1   Overview

The research topic for this study is to do with employees who are engaged in a remote working arrangement and the assessment of the impact that this type of arrangement has on the well-being of these individuals.

More specifically, this study aims to explore how enforced remote working, such as the type which is seen as a result of the global COVID-19 lockdown, impacts the remote worker in terms of both physical and mental well-being.

The specific focus is on sales employees who are employed in the information technology (IT) sector in Ireland. We discuss how the traditional view of a Sales Rep, who was often characterized by a suit, tie, briefcase, and life on the road has slowly transitioned into someone that now tends to be slightly younger, comfortable with technology, and comfortable operating as part of a larger team in what is often a lively and upbeat office environment, surrounded by lots of interaction.

For the purposes of this study we are broadly referring to remote working as an arrangement in which the employee isn't tied to a fixed office location, typically working from home. When referring to the IT sector we broadly refer to companies who are engaged in the sales of software, hardware, cloud computing, internet platform and IT services.

Research gathered via literature review, combined with empirical evidence has been critically examined in order to better understand what factors impact employee well-being when they have been forced into this type of working arrangement unwillingly through mechanisms such as the government enforced lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic 2020.

## 1.1   Research Purpose

Employee well-being (EW) is a complex issue which is multi-dimensional (Juniper, 2011). Studies refer to positive well-being as higher morale, lower stress and lower absenteeism, whereas negative well-being aspects have included mental health issues, loneliness, isolation and anxiety, with one study finding that 12.1% of remote working employee responds cited mental health issues as one of the biggest challenges when working remotely (Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, 2019).

The purpose of this research is to gain further understanding into what factors contribute towards employee well-being when they are engaged in a remote working scenario.

Whilst much research has been conducted in relation to remote working and employee well-being individually, there is little literature surrounding the impact caused to individuals as a result of being forced into a remote working scenario through such events as the CVOID-19 lockdown.

## 1.2    Significance of the Study

The significance of the study stems from two fundamental reasons; firstly, there has been an increase in the percentage of workers engaged in remote working arrangements (Felstead and Henseke, 2017), which is anticipated to continue into the future; and secondly, the enforced lockdown measures of the global pandemic of COVID-19 has forced a huge portion of the working population into a situation of remote working unexpectedly, which may have a significant impact on employee well-being.

The Government of Ireland produced a research paper in 2019 through its Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, 2019) and set-up the Future Jobs Ireland initiative which assessed the current situation regarding remote working, ongoing issues, international policies and influencing factors for remote working. A survey carried out within this report highlighted the IT sector as the second largest sector in Ireland utilising remote working practises, demonstrating the significance of the remote working in this sector.

Additionally, as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown measures and the enforced remote working introduced to employees, there is now much speculation and discussion in the media regarding what future working arrangements may entail (Kimberl, 2020). Regular media headlines such as 'Is Working From Home The Future Of Work?' (Eisenberg, 2020), 'Bright future for remote working' (Friday *et al.*, 2020) and 'Preparing For The Future Of Remote Working' (McSorley, 2020) are adding to the speculation that remote working may become the future of work.

The significance of EW cannot be overstated with research demonstrating links to such concerns as illness and health care costs (Grawitch *et al.*, 2006), job performance (Wright, 2010) and job satisfaction (Pradhan *et al.*, 2019). Research on this topic to date has been focused on employees who have voluntarily chosen to engage in this manner of work, as opposed to the COVID-19 situation in which remote working was enforced. Therefore this is a

topic that requires further research and development to allow organisations to best plan and prepare for such future situations, whilst maintain the well-being of the employee.

## 1.3 Research Objective

To support the purpose of this research a number of objectives were identified which will form the basis upon which the empirical evidence will be gathered through the interview process which will assist in answer the research question: -

*"How does remote working as a result of COVID-19 impact the physical and mental well-being of young to middle-aged individuals employed as sales executives in the IT sector in Ireland"*

The key research objectives are set out below: -

First objective:

*To explore how enforced remote working affects the mental well-being of the employee.*

The first objective seeks to explore what impact, either positively or negatively, remote working has on the mental or psychological well-being of the employee as a result of being forced into a remote working arrangement due to COVID-19.

Second objective:

*To explore how enforced remote working affects the physical well-being of the employee.*

The second objective seeks to explore what impact, either positively or negatively, remote working has on the physical well-being of the employee as a result of being forced into a remote working arrangement due to COVID-19.

Third objective:

*To evaluate what work or workplace interventions remote working employees feel their employer could make to improve their physical and/or psychological well-being.*

The third objective aims to not only explore the factors affecting well-being but to evaluate what measures remote working employees feel their employer could make in order to improve their well-being.

## 1.4     Structure of the Study

The study will be conducted using qualitative analysis derived from interviews with individuals employed in the sector to form an in depth view of their experiences and how they felt their job satisfaction and well-being levels were affected.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Overview

This chapter reviews the current literature on the concepts and types of remote working and the factors relating to the growth of this type of working arrangement. The analysis also discusses the benefits and challenges identified in the literature in relation to remote working and then discusses aspects relating to employee well-being. Finally factors relating specifically to the Irish market are addressed.

The entire chapter aims to offer a critical analysis of the literature relating to remote working and employee well-being, citing relevant academic and peer reviewed literature, reports and articles.

### 2.2 Remote working, virtual teams and flexible working

The literature on remote working has many synonyms, often referred to as teleworking, virtual working, flexible working, work-at-home or telecommuting amongst others. The 2002 European Framework Agreement (European Social Partner, 2002) defines remote working, otherwise known as telework as 'a form of organising and/or performing work, using IT, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, meaning they can effectively be based at any location, such as their home, co-working facility, or even a coffee shop.

This arrangement can take several forms; one form is that of a typical arrangement in which this type of working practise is permanent, the type of which has seen significant growth in recent years (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Whereas, another form can be a temporary, or forced arrangement, such as the one many employees found themselves in during the COVID-19 global pandemic of 2020.

The variation in terminology and operational definitions of what constitutes remote working is a topic that has been debated for several years and still no agreement has been reached on a specific definition (Madsen, 2003; Sullivan, 2003). One of the challenges posed as a result of having no clear consensus on what defines remote work, is that literature to date has been built on data which could provide a different outcome depending on how population was defined, as Allen, Golden & Shockley (Allen *et al.*, 2015) argue. They go on to suggest that when they were reviewing the literature for their study they encountered varying definitions

and conceptualizations of remote working which hindered their understanding as results across studies were often not comparable.

Felstead and Henseke (Felstead and Henseke, 2017) discuss similar criticisms in the conclusion to the their 2017 study, highlighting trend data as descriptive and not accounting for compositional changes such as the movement towards the knowledge economy. They further critique previous analyses, discussing issues such as sample size, limited data range regarding indicators for job outcomes, as well as lack of testing of theories, particularly in comparison of remote workers to the traditional office-based counterparts.

Whilst there are variations in terminology as well as operational definitions of what defines remote working, for the purposes of this study we are broadly referring to an arrangement in which the employee isn't tied to a fixed office location, typically working from home.

Whilst there is existing research in the area of remote working, the sector is changing rapidly due to technological advancements (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016) and compositional factors such as movement to the knowledge economy (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). The latter point being further substantiated by several theorists who claim that remote working is only feasible when the employees are working within the 'knowledge economy', in which they add value to their organisations with their heads rather than their hands using theoretical, specialised and abstract knowledge (Drucker, 1966; for critique, Thompson *et al.*, 2001).

Remote workers can work independently, or as part of a wider group or team, towards an individual or collective goal, commonly referred to as a virtual team (VT). Similarly to the term, remote worker, literature around the definition of a VT can vary between studies. Historically the terms "group" or "team" have been used interchangeably with regards to VT research (Sundstrom *et al.*, 1990; Cohen and Bailey, 1997; Langfred, 1998), however this interchangeable nature of the terminology has been brought into question (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993; Fisher *et al.*, 1997). Observational analysis would indicate the latter term, "team" better describing a collection of remote working individuals who are interdependent and integrated. This study is focusing specifically on individuals employed as sales people within IT companies, who typically would be measured by individual sales targets, but would form part of a sales team, all of whom would interact closely on a regular basis, to share knowledge and follow similar patterns of work, therefore considered a VT.

It is fair to suggest that not all virtual teams work remotely. It is possible that teams who are classed as VT's are done so because they are geographically dispersed, however, that's not to

say that the individuals of those teams don't work from a centralised office location as many of them may do. Therefore they are not technically classified as remote workers and not relevant to the purposes of this study.

The other factor which results in difficulties accurately reviewing literature is that much of the literature relates to flexible working, for which remote working could be classed as a subsection of. As with the terms remote working and VT's, flexible working is another term which is not easily defined. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), flexible working can encompass many working patterns or ways of working such as part-time, flexi-time, working from home or job sharing (Beatson, 2019).

There is much literature surrounding the aspects of flexible working and well-being, however the challenge still remains in that it is impossible to distinguish which aspects of the study relate to remote working specifically.

For the purpose of this literature review I limited the focus of the research specifically to those studies which look at remote working, or whichever synonym of remote working that author decided to use.

## 2.3    Growth in remote working

The main focus of this study is regarding employees who have been forced into a remote working scenario as a result of COVID-19. As the events surrounding COVID-19 are so recent, and still in motion at time of writing, there is a significant number of unknown variables still in play for which the outcome remains unknown. Additionally, there is scarce hard data available to analyse the current situation. We will review the literature which is available further into this section.

There *is* much literature however surrounding the growth of remote working in pre-COVID conditions with this literature suggesting that there are a number of different influencing factors responsible with some of the key emerging themes discussed in more detail in this section.

Firstly, technological advancements is the main theme which is suggested by many authors in a number of studies (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016). Any person of working age today will be old enough to have witnessed the rapid pace of technological change over the last two decades, even in mobile technology and IT alone and how our methods and ability to communicate remotely have evolved and allow individuals to be permanently connected

(Myerson *et al.*, 2010; Amit and Sarma, 2018). The same consequences can be applied within the work setting as this same use of IT has made it possible for employees to conduct their work away from the office in unconventional setting (Choi, 2018).

There is significant literature to further support this idea (Blok *et al.*, 2012; J. Cole *et al.*, 2014) of rapid changes in IT being a contributing factor to not only changes in forms of work but also times of work, and even changes to working venues.

The literature would also suggest that this is not the only factor and compositional factors such as movement to the knowledge economy (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). This point being further substantiated by several theorists who claim that remote working is only feasible when the employees are working within the 'knowledge economy', in which they add value to their organisations with their heads rather than their hands using theoretical, specialised and abstract knowledge (Drucker, 1966; for critique, Thompson *et al.*, 2001).

Several authors have also suggested that in addition to a movement towards the knowledge economy, a changing demographic of the workforce is another significant contributing factor (Idris, 2014; Rubery, 2015; Felstead and Henseke, 2017). In line with this concept of a changing demographic of the workforce, several authors (Idris, 2014; Rubery, 2015; Allen *et al.*, 2015) suggest that the increased participation of women within the workforce, also known as the feminisation of the workforce is a driver towards remote working, arguing that females are more likely to take up this form of working practise.

Other literature has focused more on business benefits and business value as drivers for change. For example, as a result of globalisation and increased competition between firms to recruit highly-skilled employees, businesses are offering remote working positions (Berkery *et al.*, 2017; Onken-Menke *et al.*, 2018), a point also argued by Choi (Choi, 2018) who goes on to further claim that this also help businesses with employee retention as well as enhancing organisational performance.

In summary the growth in voluntary remote working (ie. not enforced remote working such as the situation with COVID-19) is as a result of a combination of factors and not just one factor in isolation.

In relation to the literature surrounding remote working since the events of COVID-19, the statistics are quite staggering. The most recent data in Ireland comes from a report which was produced in May 2020 by the Whitaker Institute at National University of Ireland Galway and the Western Development Commission (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020) who collected data from 7,241

individuals over a one week period at the end of April 2020, which was roughly one month into the Irish economy lockdown.

We can see that from the chart below 86.6% of the respondents were working remotely as a result of COVID-19, with a further 11.2% working partly remotely. This leaves only 2% of the population who weren't able, or weren't forced to work remotely.
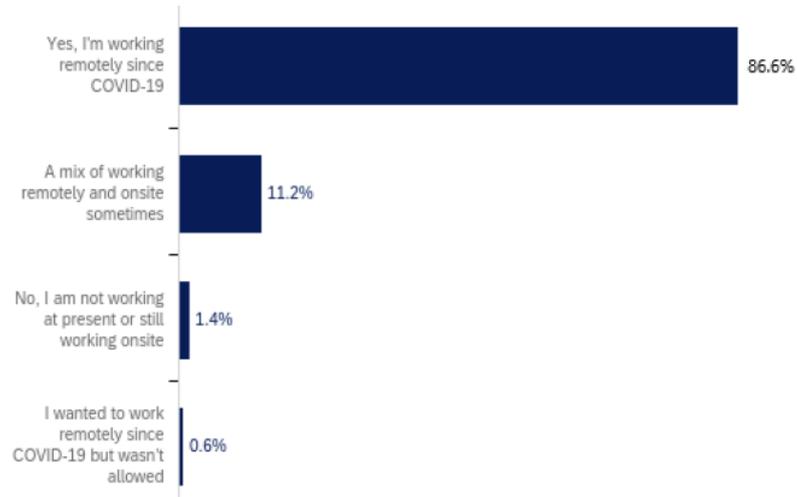


**Figure 1. Percentage of remote workers in Ireland as a result of COVID-19 (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020)**

Interesting to note though is that of those respondents, only 6.5% were working remotely on a daily basis before COVID-19 and 78.1% had never worked remotely or only occasionally worked remotely prior to this situation.
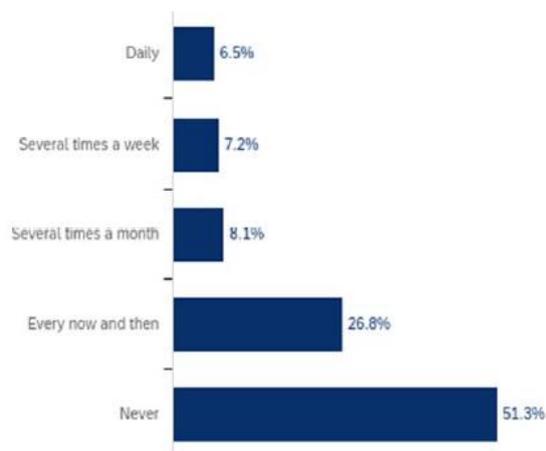


**Figure 2. Percentage of people in Ireland working remotely prior to COVID-19 (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020)**

One of the key findings of the report highlighted that of the 51% of respondents who had never worked remotely before, 78% of those stated that they would like to continue working remotely once the crisis is over, citing their top three benefits as; no commute, reduced costs of going to work and greater flexibility to manage their day. These figures potentially have the ability to fundamentally shift the expectations of remote working globally.

I will add a note of caution however to highlight that of the respondent population, 55% were employed by the public sector and 77.5% identified as female.

## 2.4 Remote working benefits

One of the key features surrounding the narrative of remote working is regarding the benefits to be gained. Much literature has been written on this theme within the context of remote working resulting in strong evidence to indicate generally positive benefits derived for both employer and employee.

In terms of benefits to the employer, Breaugh and Farabee (Breaugh and Farabee, 2012) found that organizations find this form of arrangement is appealing for several reasons; workers can be located closer to customer; costs are reduced compared with that of office workers; and they saw an increase in productivity from the remote working employee.

This concept of increased productivity is a benefit which has been concluded by many authors, Crawford (Crawford *et al.*, 2011) for example suggested this as one of the main benefits to an organisation, along with Torten (Torten *et al.*, 2016), both concluding comparable outcomes.

On the other hand, from the employees perspective, flexibility in terms of work schedule, improved family life, alongside the elimination of having to commute to the office, all resulted in an alleviation of work-family conflict and an attractiveness towards remote working (Lautsch *et al.*, 2009).

The benefit of flexibility is a theme which has been suggested by other authors, for example, Crawford (Crawford *et al.*, 2011) and Keeling (Keeling *et al.*, 2015) both cited this in their studies as one of the reasons for an employee's decision to work remotely. Adding further support to the claims of flexibility of work schedule as being a key benefit to remote workers is findings by Tremblay (Tremblay, 2002) who concluded in her study that the benefits derived from remote working were as a result of eliminated travel time and allowing employees the flexibility to be at home for important parts of the day such as school pick-up or drop-off.

Research by Baruch (Baruch, 2002) however suggested that an improved family life was the key benefit for remote workers, finding evidence that points towards a reduction of work-related stress alongside an improvement in family relationships as contributing factors.

Whilst those studies only represent a very small fraction of the available literature surrounding the topic, the general themes all appear consistent; employees engaged in a remote working arrangement display positive attitudes towards that style of working, with "greater spatial and temporal flexibility prompting increased levels of organizational commitment, enthusiasm and satisfaction" (Felstead and Henseke, 2017). Bloom et al (Bloom *et al.*, 2015) also reported similar positive attitudes towards remote working with participants in their study reporting substantially higher satisfaction and psychological attitude scores towards that method of working.

A study which carries great relevance to the current economic condition was conducted by Greer and Payne (Greer and Payne, 2014) who suggested a benefit of remote working was the facilitation of business continuity. In this study they had cited work by Lister and Harnish (Lister and Harnish, 2011) whose research found that the biggest driver of remote working within the US Federal sector had been threat of a bird flu pandemic with the administration pushing for further telework as a means of continuity of operations (COOP). Even though this study was conducted some time ago, it is fair to argue that in the current climate of COVID-19 many businesses would have collapsed and the economic impact would be far worse, had employees not had the ability to work remotely.

## 2.5 Remote working challenges

Similarly to the findings regarding benefits, several consistent themes emerge regarding these drawbacks. For example, Bloom *et al*. (Bloom *et al.*, 2015) found that both satisfaction and performance levels rose in a controlled trial of 994 call centre operators when working remotely, however, greater levels of work intensification as well as extensity were witnessed. These claims were evidenced through data gathered demonstrating how the workers not only spent longer logged into their systems, but handled a greater volume of calls per minute in comparison to their office-based counterparts.

Similar conclusions were drawn by Kelliher and Anderson (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010) in a study of 2.066 employees, who found that while higher organizational commitment and job satisfaction levels were recorded, it came at the cost of greater work intensification. The work intensification was found to be largely as a result of employees being able to exercise greater

intensification due to fewer distractions than in the workplace, and spending their time saved commuting, on working rather than non-work activities, thus extending working hours.

Further evidence to support these claims has been put forward by Grant *et al.* (Grant *et al.*, 2013) who argue that one of the detracting overarching themes relating to remote working was that of over-working, particularly in the case of highly motivated individuals who may become "addicted" to work and find it difficult to "switch off".

This concept regarding the inability for remote workers to "switch off" is not a new concept. Several authors have also suggested this concept as a contributing factor, with numerous qualitative studies indicating that it may result in further negative consequences such as work-home spill-overs (Mirchandani, 2000; Crosbie and Moore, 2004; Marsh and Musson, 2008), which is the third key theme that the literature presents in terms of drawbacks.

This issue of work-home spill-overs has been discussed in various studies as a negative consequence of remote working. For example Hartig *et al*. (Hartig *et al.*, 2007) found that remote workers could experience an overlap between home and work life, resulting in stress, which in turn would reduce the restorative effects the traditional office worker would have from their home. Suggesting that even when remote workers have a dedicated home office or study setup as a separate room, the separation is still not enough to reduce the mental overlap between work and home life.

A number of studies have arrived at the same conclusion, with several authors exploring the concept even further by identifying work-life boundary strategies. Kossek et al. (Kossek *et al.*, 2006) discussed a model known as boundary management, which measures the degree to which remote workers either integrate, or separate, their work from family life. At one end of the spectrum workers who separate their work from family life draw clear boundary lines, whereas at the opposing end there are workers who fully integrate their work and family life to such an extent that the lines between both become blurred. However, managing and sustaining these boundary management strategies can be difficult and a cause of stress in itself, as evidenced by Harris (Harris, 2003), who found that of the forty remote workers which she studied, two-thirds of them experienced tension caused by boundary management.

## 2.6    Employee well-being

### 2.6.1    Definition

There is much well documented literature regarding employee well-being. However, similar to the terms discussed in section 2.2, employee well-being is a term that is also the subject of much debate and one which doesn't have a clear definition, or at least has varying definition (Simone, 2014; Zheng *et al.*, 2015; Sandilya and Shahnawaz, 2018). The result of this lack of comprehensive understanding makes it difficult to draw concrete conclusions when comparing one study with another.

That being said, many authors offered their own interpretations of EW. For example, Juniper (2011) suggests that employee well-being (EW) is subjective and multidimensional. Supporting this viewpoint is research by Waddel and Burton (Waddell *et al.*, 2007) whose study considered well-being to be a subjective state encompassing material, physical, social and emotional dimensions. Research by Padhan and Hati (Pradhan and Hati, 2019) put forward a similar consideration of well-being as one which encapsulates emotional, psychological and physical health.

One of the foremost bodies associated with EW research across the United Kingdom and Ireland (UK&I) is the CIPD who conduct regular research and produce reports regarding many aspects of EW as well as advocating for improved EW. In a 2007 report the CIPD defined well-being at work as "*creating an environment to promote a state of contentment which allows an employee to flourish and achieve their full potential for the benefit of themselves and the organisation*" (Tehrani *et al.*, 2007).

In developing the report, and following consultation with an advisory group the CIPD identified five domains of well-being with the figure below visually illustrating the interconnectedness of the domains.
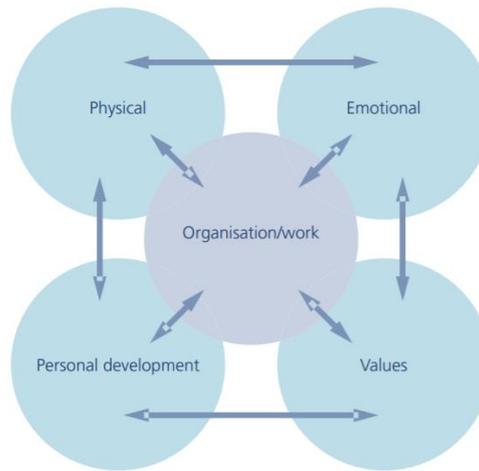
**Figure 3. Five domains of well-being (CIPD, 2007)**

Further to the classification of domains the CIPD went on to identify a continuum of well-being which charts the words most commonly adopted to describe the positive and negative aspects of well-being.



**Figure 4. Continuum of well-being (CIPD, 2007)**

Juniper (2011) on the other hand describes EW as "that part of an employee's overall well-being that they perceive to be determined primarily by work and can be influenced by workplace interventions".

This definition provides us with reference that EW is determined by work, or workplace interventions, however it doesn't do much to specify what encompasses well-being, with Pradhan (2019) arguing that the phrase "overall well-being" doesn't adequately depict EW.

Warr (Warr, 1999) however, offers the definition of EW as one which considers the experience of the employee from a physical and psychological perspective.

In this regard, a good working definition of employee well-being could be considered as all aspects of an employee's mental and physical health that they perceive to be determined by work and influenced by workplace interventions. For the purposes of this study, this is the working definition which was adopted.

*2.6.2   Well-being impact*

Across the vast amount of literature, different authors have focused on different aspects of EW in their research. Authors such as Pawar (Pawar, 2016) focuses more on the employees experience and quality of performance in the workplace when discussing employee well-being. Whereas Shier and Graham (Shier and Graham, 2010) focus more on emotions, anxiety and satisfaction which are affected by working practises and environment. Other authors have focused their attention on specific aspects of well-being health, such as Wright *et al.* (Wright *et al.*, 2007) who specifically refer to psychological well-being (PWB) when discussing overall well-being.

Organisations such as the CIPD have been championing for improved EW by working with organisation on EW programmes as well as highlighting the impact which work can have on EW, both positive and negative. One of their studies in 2018 recorded responses from over 5000 participants, and whilst it found that workers tended to believe their jobs had a positive impact, they also uncovered some worrying statistics. Over a quarter of respondents reported symptoms such as stress, exhaustion, excessive pressure or intense conditions, with two in five workers experiencing work-related health conditions within the previous 12 month period. The below chart highlights the percentage of respondents who reported each work-related condition.

| | |
|---|---|
| Backache or other bone, joint or muscle problems | 29 |
| Repetitive strain injury (RSI) | 7 |
| Skin problems | 7 |
| Anxiety | 25 |
| Panic attacks | 6 |
| Depression | 14 |
| Sleep problems | 28 |
| Alcohol or drug dependence | 2 |
| Breathing problems | 3 |
| Heart problems | 2 |
| Hearing problems | 2 |
| Road traffic accident while commuting | 2 |
| Injury due to an accident | 3 |
| Other | 2 |

Base: all workers (n=5,136)
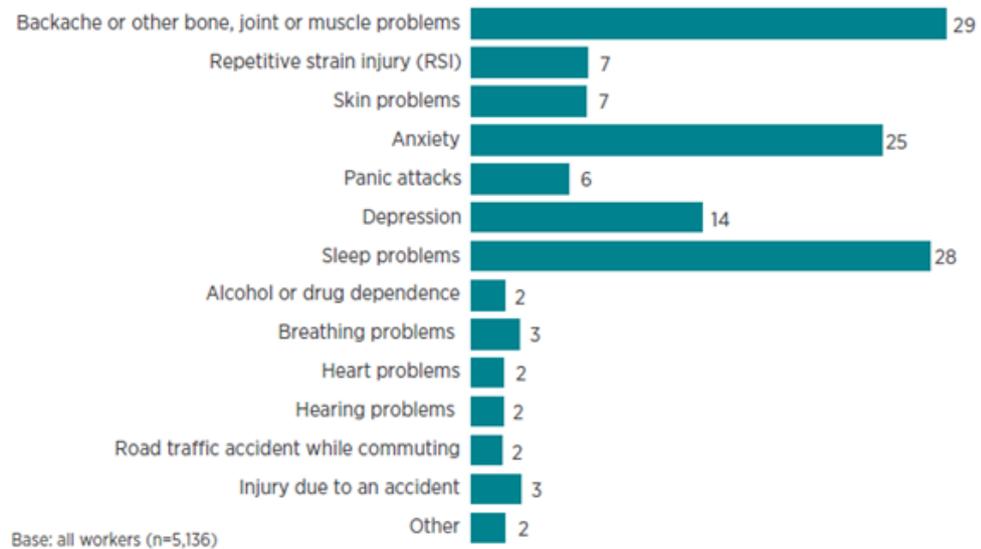
**Figure 5. Percentage of workers who reported work related conditions in 2018 (CIPD, 2019)**

The majority of the symptoms reported in the survey above relate to physical aspects of well-being, however, mental health is of increasing concern with Ireland reporting the third highest rate in Europe with 18.5% of the population recorded as having some form of mental illness such as anxiety or depression (MHI, 2016) with reports last year claiming that the cost to the Irish state was €8.2bn (Jones, 2019). Many of mental health related costs were occurred outside of the healthcare system and were borne by employers through sickness, absence and lost productivity (Stevenson and Farmer, 2017).

The next section takes this concept a step further and applies it to the context of remote workers.

### 2.7    Remote working employee, physical and mental well-being

One of the challenges in terms of reviewing the literature relating to the impact which remote working has on employee well-being is that there hasn't been much research applying the two concepts together (Grant et al, 2013). This has also been highlighted as a challenge by Felstead and Henseke (Felstead and Henseke, 2017) who pointed out that the literature regarding remote workers well-being is relatively scarce, highlighting the fact that when social survey data regarding job quality is collected, it is rarely done so alongside data regarding where work is being conducted. This poses challenges in terms of being able to accurately assess the association that work location has on employee well-being.

One report which does provide some useful insight into the well-being of remote working employees is the Whitaker report (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020) which was referenced earlier in the

chapter, which was created during the COVID-19 pandemic and is therefore pertinent to this study. One of the key findings was that 43% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that their organisation was providing them with ergonomic advice with the biggest change or improvement recommended by respondents to their employer as being the provision of a more ergonomic physical workspace. In my own personal experience I'd have to concur with this suggestion, although I was able to avail to certain equipment, subject to my own request and approval, however on previous occasions working remotely (pre-COVID) in which my role was remote working full time I did have unrequested access to sufficient ergonomic equipment as required. This would appear an interesting dilemma, particularly given the fact that we discussed in section 2.6.2 how the biggest cause of negative workplace well-being is backache, bone, joint or muscle problems. Of positive note was that many respondents indicated that their employers offered them access to employee assistance programmes (EAP) in order to support mental well-being issues.

Of the available literature pre-COVID, a study on remote working conducted by Grant, Wallace and Spurgeon (Grant *et al.*, 2013) explored the impact remote working had on three primary factors, with one of the three primary research areas being that of well-being. This was conducted using qualitative analysis of eleven in-depth interviews spanning different organizations and sectors. Their findings concluded that two critical success factors relating to well-being emerged, communication, and support from colleagues. These findings are concurrent with other research such as the study conducted by Mann and Holdsworth (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003) who concluded that remote workers felt a sense of increased loneliness in comparison to office-based workers resulting in negative emotions, attributing this to social isolation and an inability to share problems with their colleagues. This research is conducive with other research surrounding well-being from authors such as Simone (2014) who claim that long-term relationships combined with interactions with a meaningful and supportive workplace network can result in positive well-being. Research supporting a similar narrative from CIPD (CIPD, 2018) highlight key factors including co-worker relationships, teamwork and involvement. Given that the aforementioned study by Mann and Holdsworth was conducted almost twenty years ago, it is evident that those same issues around loneliness and isolation are still apparent today, despite the evolution communication technology.

Whatever the definition, employee well-being in general is a topic which has been growing in importance on the business agenda (Tehrani *et al.*, 2007) with organizations introducing welfare and health policies for their employees as they start to realize the benefits this can bring. Such examples of these benefits relating to employee well-being can include

organizational effectiveness and positive internal branding (Raj, 2018) amongst many others, hence the need to explore this in a more comprehensive way.

## 2.8  IT sector in Ireland

Over recent years Ireland has become a European hub for technology companies to establish a European presence for both start-up companies and global enterprises alike. Government funded agencies such as the IDA (IDA, 2020a) have done a great job in attracting foreign investment, largely from US headquartered companies into Ireland. Largely driven by access to the Eurozone, a highly qualified and educated workforce as well as a solid infrastructure, an ability to attract talent with multi-lingual capabilities and of course an attractive tax rate (IDA, 2020b). This has resulted in Dublin often being referred to as the Silicon Valley of Europe. Many of these tech companies use their Irish operation as Sales or Service centre to address the European market, Google, Facebook and Microsoft are just a few examples of this (IDA, 2020a).

## 2.9  Digital selling evolution

The sales teams within these companies therefore serve all European, and often EMEA based markets from their central hub in Ireland. So whilst Sales Executives are selling to their customers remotely, they are still typically based within a central office environment, working closely alongside colleagues such as Marketing, Pre-Sales, Sales Programs and many other teams who work together to drive new business and design custom solutions for new and existing customers.

This model is typically known as the digital selling model as the customer interacts with the Sales Rep via digital methods such as Social Media or video conferencing. The model evolved as a consequence of the information age and the proliferation of the internet in which customers and consumers could readily access detailed information about products, read reviews, assess companies and make their way through the decision making process, or sales cycle, without the need for Sales Reps during the early stages of a project or purchase (DMI, 2020).

In response to this, new sales models and sales methodologies were developed in order to best serve the needs of this new type of customer, a customer that arrives already well informed and educated on the product or service before the engagement with the company begins (Angevine *et al.,* 2018).

Part of these new methodologies involved new types of roles being formed within Sales Departments such as Sales Development who use digital technologies to try and identify customer which may be in the early stage of a buying cycle, or Sales Programs who aim to understand market trends to provide the Sales Reps with meaningful insights to discuss with customers (DMI, 2020).

This starts to paint a picture of how the traditional view of a Sales Rep, who was often characterized by a suit, tie, briefcase, and life on the road has slowly transitioned into someone that now tends to be slightly younger, comfortable with technology, and comfortable operating as part of a larger team in what is often a lively and upbeat office environment, surrounded by lots of interaction.

## 2.10  Growth of remote working in Ireland

Remote working in Ireland had been growing prevalence well before the enforced lockdown of COVID-19. A report commissioned in 2019 by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation was set out with the aim of understanding several factors relating to remote in working in Ireland with the goal of developing both regional and national plans for government and businesses to successfully plan for future job requirements (Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, 2019).

Since the enforced COVID-19 lockdown has driven many employees to have to work remotely. Recent surveys have been conducted on the Irish market after some of the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown, namely by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) who released figures in May 2019 as part of the Q2 Labour Force Survey (CSO, 2020) in which some of the key findings included: -

- 47% of the population have had their employment impacted by COVID-19.

- 23% have seen a change in their work hours.

- 12% have increased their number of hour's remote working from home.

- 59% have increased contact with family via telephone, Skype, FaceTime etc.

- 34% have started working from home.

- 24% of 35-44 year olds have childcare issues.

- 24% of the population are feeling lonely.

Almost all of these figures concur with issues raised in previous literature and research regarding remote working trends. For example, feelings of loneliness and isolation were discussed in the previous chapter, drawing on research conducted by Mann and Holdsworth (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003). The issues regarding themes such as a change in working hours or an increased number of hours worked also concurs with previous research regarding work intensification from authors such as Bloom (Bloom *et al.*, 2015). This would imply that many of the issues and considerations posed by remote working are not necessarily unique to Ireland as they are the same as issues faced by employees across other regions too.

The government of Ireland have expedited the consultation process in order to address the key outcomes which arose from the 2019 report in order to provide guidance to both employers and employees regarding employment conditions, data protection, health and safety, equality and the right to disconnect (Miley, 2020).

This has now led to the introduction of an Interdepartmental Group who will lead the consultation process with the aim of developing guidance on to employees and employers on those key issues.

The statement made by the department highlighted how it seeks to deliver a better work-life balance for remote working employees which aligns closely to the topics discussed in this review, thus further demonstrating the significance being placed on the issue in Ireland.

Other studies have been carried out on the Irish market which demonstrate similar growth trends such as that of the CIPD (Beatson, 2019) who claimed that the 60% of businesses engaged in remote working practises is likely to increase to 70% by the end of 2020. Note that this study was conducted in 2019 and therefore didn't consider the impact of COVID-19.

As we can see, there had been a growing demand towards remote working in the Irish market pre-COVID, and combined with the statistics from the CSO survey we are seeing similar trends in terms of challenges faced by employees forced into remote working. This has prompted the government into taking action through the public consultation forum which highlights the significance which should be placed on further research into the subject area.

## 2.11  Conceptual Framework

This section outlines the conceptual framework guiding this research as a result of the literature review. Like many topics discussed in this study, the conceptual framework is one which carries varying definition and is often used interchangeably with terms such as

theoretical framework (Green, 2014). For the purposes of this study however we can draw upon the work of Jabareen (Jabareen, 2009) who, when describing his main features of a conceptual framework, offers a definition which outlines it as a network of interlinked concepts. Further going on to state that these concepts form a framework which support one another and together offer a comprehensive understanding of a topic.

Throughout the literature review several common themes or concepts emerged in relation to remote working well-being. Some of the themes which contained a largely negative sentiment included over working, work-life balance, inability to switch off and feelings of isolation. Conversely, many other aspects were identified which contained a largely positive sentiment, including themes such as flexibility, autonomy, the ability to manage own working hours and time saved commuting.

The relationship between the impact factors is that they are all specifically related to remote working and wouldn't be a consideration should the employee be based at a traditionally centralized office location and therefore poses different types of challenges to employees engaged in this method of working.

In line with Jabareens' definition I have linked these concepts to the research objectives in order to support a greater understanding of the subject area for the specific research cohort to assist in answering the research question.

*First objective:*

The first research objective seeks to explore what impact, either positively or negatively, remote working has on the mental well-being of the employee as a result of being forced into a remote working arrangement due to COVID-19. The literature reviewed in relation to the psychological well-being of remote workers identifies a number of both positive and negative characteristics such as stress, anxiety, sense of flexibility and improved home life. However the research since COVID began is limited and the situation is changing rapidly. The types of employees that are now working remotely are not the same type that voluntarily opted to work remotely pre-COVID, therefore it's vital to gain perspective from these "new remote worker" to ensure organisation and employees are kept aware of both the challenges and benefits that may present themselves as this working arrangement evolves. I have established the following interview questions to support this research objective:

1. Explain how you have found remote working since the COVID lockdown.

2. How does this compare to your work life previously being based in the office?

3. What challenges or benefits have you encountered since working remotely?

*Second objective:*

The second objective seeks to explore what impact, either positively or negatively, remote working has on the physical well-being of the employee as a result of being forced into a remote working arrangement due to COVID-19. The literature regarding physical well-being which was conducted since COVID produced relatively similar results to that of finding from pre-COVID studies. There questions will explore how these factors have evolved now that we are 4 months into the lockdown.

4. In what ways has your physical well-being been affected since working remotely?

5. How do manage to look after your physical health when working remotely?

6. Would you say your physical health has improved or worsened since working remotely and in what ways?

*Third objective:*

The third objective aims to evaluate what measures remote working employees feel themselves or their employer could make in order to improve their well-being. The questions here aim to harness a great understanding of what, if anything, employees have been doing since COVID induced remote working to maintain positive well-being and what support they either already have requested or plan to request from the employer should the remote working continue.

7. What, if anything do you feel you could do or change which would improve any aspects of your well-being should you continue to work remotely?

8. How have you adapted your lifestyle to suit this new form of working?

9. Have you requested any support, or would like to request support from your employer should you continue to work remotely, and if so, what would that be?

## 2.12 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed and critically assessed the pertinent literature relating to that of remote working, employee well-being (both physical and mental), discussed the evolution of digital sales models and explored characteristics relevant to the Irish marketplace.

It is clear that remote working in general bring about many positive benefits for both employees and businesses, but also highlights many of the challenges that the growth of this sector brings.

It offered viewpoints from various authors relating to that of employee well-being as well as remote working employee well-being and some of the positive aspects such as no commute, better work-life balance and flexibility for the employee to manage their day. The literature also highlighted many challenges and negative consequences of both remote working and well-being such as the inability for the employee to switch off, blurred lines between work and home life and feeling of isolation and disconnection.

It is evident however that there is great scope to build on this literature with further research into specific areas which will hopefully benefit both employees and organisation and allow them to better address the challenges faced, particularly in light of COVID-19 and the potential future of the workplace.

The outcome of this literature review was the creation of the conceptual framework which ties together all of the concepts discussed to paint a holistic picture of the subject area. This conceptual framework then guides the next part of the study which uses empirical evidence gained via interviews with a selected cohort in order to address the objectives of the study and substantiate the existing literature with further knowledge and insight into the subject area.

# 3 Methodology and Research Design

## 3.1 Overview

For the purposes of the research process the model of the research onion (Saunders *et al.*, 2019) was followed through the stages: research philosophy; research approach; research strategy; research choices; time horizons and techniques and procedures. Throughout each section a relevant justification was offered as to why a particular method was selected in order to conduct the research effectively.

The primary data was obtained through the use of interview with participants who are currently engaged in a forced remote working scenario as a result of COVID-19 lockdown measures. The respondents all work as sales executives for multi-national IT companies based in Ireland. The use of interviews as a means of objective primary data collection was selected as it allows the participants the ability to more accurately articulate their subjective opinions as opposed to other methods of primary data collection such as surveys which only allow for a limited fixed scope of responses.

## 3.2 Research Philosophy and Approach

The research objective for this study is to explore how forced remote working impacts the well-being of the sales person. Due to the exploratory and subjective nature of complex matters relating to an individual's perspective and perception of the particular situation, an epistemological research paradigm position of interpretivist research philosophy was followed.

The nature of this study has gathered qualitative data from first hand interviews with sales employees working for multi-national IT companies based in Ireland, all of whom have had recent experience working remotely due to the lock-down measures enforced as a result of COVID-19. Saunders et al (2019) discuss how the interpretivist philosophy seeks rich understanding and interpretation of contexts and social worlds. Applying this philosophy to the study, allowed the author greater opportunity to gain valuable and in-depth insights into complex issues, which may otherwise be missed if a quantitative, or positivistic philosophy had been taken.

The research approach to theory development is typically categorised as either inductive, or deductive. The inductive approach takes the viewpoint that a research project starts with a rather broad theory and seeks distil this down into specific details, usually associated with

qualitative research. The research approach for this study is that of an inductive, rather than a deductive approach due to the fact that we are not testing a pre-determined theory, but rather, gathering data through research to explore a phenomenon to generate and build theory, to understand the factors which influence an employee's well-being (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Therefore we are not searching for statistical validity, but more so, statistical reliability, achieved through reaching saturation when exploring the in depth context and understanding of the complexities of remote working situations in order to best help organizations address these challenges going forward into this expanding category of working.

## 3.3   Research Strategy

This research is exploratory in nature with the qualitative data gathered systematically by direct interviews and analysed using comparative analysis. In line with the intention to follow an inductive approach, the research strategy and methodology followed for this study is that of a qualitative mono-method using grounded theory as a means to discover theory from the data (Nunes *et al.*, 2010).

It is exploratory in nature due to the purpose of the study being one which aims to understand the responses and reactions from humans when working under certain conditions, and understanding why, how, or what impacts the well-being of remote working employees.

## 3.4   Collection Primary Data

The means of collecting primary data for this study has been via one to one interviews with individuals with whom fit the selection criteria of respondents. The participants for this study are individuals who are employed as sales professionals working within multi-national companies in the IT sector in Ireland.

A range of employees from different IT companies' were selected to partake. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures these interviews took place remotely via telephone calls or video conferencing facilities such as Zoom or Skype.

The approach applied to the interview follows a semi-structured format in which the questions were open-ended and projective in nature. This approach will allow for more narrative from the responded and greater analysis by the author on key issues.

This form of data collection is typically applied when the research approach is exploratory in nature, largely due to the ability to capture more descriptive, complete and precise information required to deal with the complex nature of the research.

### 3.4.1   Sources

Aside from the data gathered throughout the literature review, the main source of primary data collection for this study will be gained through one on one interviews, and where not possible, detailed questionaries' seeking descriptive responses from respondents through probing and open-ended questions.

In terms of respondent criteria, statistical reliability was sought by ensuring an adequate source of data points were collected from sales employees working for multi-national IT companies in Ireland. The decision to focus specifically on this sector is as a result of the authors' direct experience in the sector gathering observational analysis and anecdotal evidence from extensive interactions with employees in the sector.

The questions relate to remote working experiences both in isolation and in comparison to working from a centralized office location. The author sought to understand how these individuals experience remote working both in isolation and in comparison to working from a centralized office location. Then further going on to explore the drivers of well-being within the respondent's role, and what if any, the impact of remote working has on these topics. The author sought descriptive answers with, where possible, justifications from the respondents as to the reasoning behind their responses.

### 3.4.2   Access and Ethical Issues

Access to willing respondents for this study is not anticipated to be an issue. The author has worked in this sector for over 10 years and is closely connected to an extensive network of individuals who would fit the respondents criteria and due to the topical nature of the study, it is anticipated that there will be a strong willingness to participate.

The author will obtain consent, either formally or informally, that will be recorded in advance of any interview taking place, along with the anonymity of the individual and their data at the participants' request.

There is of course no obligation for a requested participant to take part in the interview and this point will be highlighted at the point of request. This will be in addition to highlighting all other rights that interviewees will have, such as that of the right to remain anonymous and the right to withdraw at any point in time.

There will however be obligations by both myself and the participant to treat the process as confidential whilst remaining honest and unbiased throughout the process.

One ethical area which I will take care around is the sensitivity regarding COVID-19 and any participant who may have been personally impacted in some way by the situation.

In advance of conducting any interview the author has: -

1. *Provided and received back a signed letter of consent.*

2. *Provided an overview of the study and information regarding the interview and questions.*

3. *Set expectations with participant regarding interview format, duration and confidentiality.*

Upon commencement and during the interview the author has: -

1. *Reinforced the messages listed above for confirmation.*

2. *Conducted myself in a professional manner.*

3. *Ensured permissioned to transcribe interview.*

Upon completion of the interview the author has: -

1. *Ensured anonymity of data.*

2. *Advised participant in the next stage of the dissertation process.*

## 3.5   Approach to Data Analysis

As the study is qualitative in nature, a framework must be applied to the free-form irregular data, otherwise known as unstructured data, gathered via the interview transcripts, in order to organize it in such a way that it is possible to extract meaningful insight from it.

The process which will be followed for the purpose of this research is a technique known as Template Analysis. Template Analysis is essentially a technique for thematically organising and analysing qualitative data usually in the area of social sciences (King and Brooks, 2016) allow the me to categorize and summarize the narrative in such a way that it may be possible to identify relationships between themes in order to draw reasonable conclusions.

King and Brooks (2016) describe Template Analysis as a process which is undertaken in a sequence of steps which are outlined below:

1. Familiarization with the data. Thorough reading and understanding of transcripts.

2. Preliminary coding. Note of anything contained within the data relevant to the research question.

3. Clustering. Emerging and priori themes clustered into groups.

4. Producing the initial template. Serves as a draft coding template.

5. Developing the template. Further development of the initial template.

6. Applying the final template. Final template used to develop interpretation of data.

7. Writing up. Final template to organize presentation of analysis.

Below is the coding template used to structure the findings of the transcribed interview data. Several sub-themes were identified and then grouped into 6 main themes. The codes and associated colour is detailed in the first column which were used to highlight the themes throughout the interview transcriptions.

| Code | Main Theme | Sub-Theme | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| ED | **Exercise & Diet** | Walking<br>Exercise<br>Morning workout<br>Alcohol<br>Hangover<br>Outdoors | *Relating to changes in physical exercise routine or eating habits* |
| HI | **Human Interaction** | Human interaction<br>Team interaction<br>Contacting customers<br>Building relationships<br>Support<br>Management support | *Relating to any aspect of face to face interaction with other people* |
| RS | **Routine & Structure** | Routine<br>Morning shower / workout<br>Separating weekday / weekend<br>Commute<br>Home office setup<br>Phases | *Relating to how the employ has changed or structured their working day* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **WL** | **Work Life Balance** | Flexibility<br>Personal errands<br>Family time<br>Personal time<br>Work life boundaries<br>Commute<br>Switch off<br>Living situation<br>Hybrid working | *Relating to all aspects of how the employee has changed or manages their work and home life* |
| **WE** | **Working Environment** | Contacting customers<br>Pressure<br>Distractions (in & out)<br>Support<br>Technology<br>Management support<br>Living situation<br>Home office setup<br>Costs<br>Hybrid working | *Relating to the working environment remotely or in the office* |
| **PF** | **Performance** | Motivation<br>Output<br>Focus | *Relating to how the employees workplace performance is affected* |

**Figure 6. Coding template developed by researcher for the purpose of thematic analysis**

**(Bates, 2020)**

## 3.6    Conclusion

The aim of this study is to explore the impact which remote working has on sales employees within the IT sector in Ireland. The intended outcome of the research is to build further knowledge around the aspects of remote working to help employers better understand the factors which could affect the well-being of their employees.

To achieve this an epistemological position of interpretivism was selected allowing for qualitative research to be undertaken with an inductive approach seeking statistical reliability, through achieving saturation.

The selected research strategy follows a mono-method with the sole source of primary data being gather through semi-structured one on one interviews given by a sample population of sales employees working remotely within the IT sector in Ireland.

## 4 Presentation and Discussion of the Findings

### 4.1 Overview

This chapter provides a presentation and discussions of the themes which emerged from empirical data collected during the interviews with the participants, as outlined in the Research Methodology section.

A total of 8 interviews were conducted over a one week period in August 2020 whilst the Irish society was in Phase 3 of the COVID-19 lockdown (Government of Ireland, 2020). All participants were still working remotely due to office facilities not being reopened at the point in time at which the interview was conducted.

| # | Location | Gender | Age | Children | Tenure | Home status |
|---|----------|--------|-----|----------|--------|-------------|
| 1 | Dublin | F | 45 | 2 | 2 yr | Home owner |
| 2 | Dublin | M | 28 | 0 | 2 mon | Renting (sharing) |
| 3 | Dublin | F | 41 | 0 | 5 yr | Renting (on own) |
| 4 | Dublin | M | 25 | 0 | 3 yr | Renting (sharing) |
| 5 | Dublin | M | 26 | 0 | 3yr | Renting (sharing) |
| 6 | Dublin | M | 40 | 0 | 1 yr | Renting (on own) |
| 7 | Dublin | M | 47 | 2 | 6 mon | Home owner |
| 8 | Dublin | M | 42 | 2 | 6 yr | Home owner |

**Figure 7. Overview of participant demographics (Bates, 2020)**

This sections focuses on highlighting the findings from the interview process and has grouped these into six key themes which emerged throughout the process. The table below visually demonstrates by heat map, which themes were discussed by which participants.



| # | ED | HI | RS | WL | WE | PF |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 1 | | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | |
| 4 | | | | | | |
| 5 | | | | | | |
| 6 | | | | | | |
| 7 | | | | | | |

**Figure 8. Heat map developed by researcher displaying the themes which each interview participant discussed (Bates, 2020)**

It is clear to see how most of the themes identified were shared across many of the participants, with several key themes being discussed in some part by every single participant.

Appendix A includes an edited and coded transcript from a participant interview which effectively illustrates how the coding methods were applied to identify the themes which emerged during the process.

## 4.2    Findings

### 4.2.1    Exercise and diet

Participant 1, a junior level sales executive with a multinational software company recently moved out of his family home to co-habit with his partner. He stated that "*we usually eat lunch together, and then go for a walk and we've done that since the start, I enjoy doing that*".

Participant 7 who is also a junior sales executive for a multinational software company had a similar situation to participant 1 in that he moved out of his family home during lock down and moved in to co-habit with two friends. He stated that "*I think overall it's been positive … when you take a break at home you can go out for a walk or take the dog out for a walk, you're actually properly switched off (from work)".*

Both participants 2 and 4 are seasoned sales executives who share the common trait of living on their own. They both also used walking as a mode of exercise, but additionally used it as a way to meet up with colleagues or friends they would have usually seen in the office. Participant 2 stated that one of his colleagues lives about 500 meters away so they "*would meet up each day and go for a stroll*". Similarly, participant 4 stated that "*I was in my house on my own so we started motivating each other so we'd pick a time where we'd walk and talk … that worked out brilliantly for us because we still do it because it gives me an hour each lunchtime to go out for a walk so that brightens up my mental well-being*".

Whilst there is a lack of literature relating to how specific activities impact the well-being of remote workers (Crawford *et al.*, 2011), it is clear from the findings that the activity of walking is popular amongst the participants and contributes towards a positive outlook with regards to remote working and provides an opportunity for the employees to switch off from work.

Which may slightly contradict findings by Grant et al (2013) who concluded that remote working often resulted in an inability to switch off from work.

However, participant 3, also a seasoned sales executive with many years' experience in the IT sector in Ireland, discussed how he had a slightly different view in stating that "*one thing I miss is my lunchtime 20 minute walk and it was something where I was doing a few km a day and then another couple of km in the office, up and down stairs as well*", adding that "*the lunchtime walk is just the break from work and the chatter was that mental break from work as well and to talk to your colleagues*". Perhaps this lack of motivation to continue walking whilst working remotely is a result of not having colleagues physically there to walk with, or could be a result of childcare challenges at points throughout the day.

Participants also discussed other forms of physical activity and how they had adapted this since working remotely. Candidate 1 stated that "*a few mornings a week I might get up an hour early and go to the gym or I bought resistance bands so when things were in lockdown I could do a workout at home, get showered, dressed and be ready to start work for 9am*", further adding that "*I got a bike on the bike to work scheme also so I've been getting out on that 4 times a week, once or twice in the morning and once or twice in the afternoon. A lot of my friends were struggling with lock down and I noticed that they weren't doing any physical activity so I guess that's why they were struggling a little bit*".

In a very similar comment, participant 4 remarked "*I could get up for a class at 6 (am) and then after gym go and do an hours walk on the waterfront, get showered and still be at my desk for 9 o'clock, and then go out for my walk at lunchtime.*"

For other participants such as 7, physical activity has both improved and increased, offering the viewpoint that "*I think my physical health has improved … I got in a rowing machine which I'll use to do quick 30 minute workouts, and then of course all of the walking I've been doing, so I'd say it's improved even though there's been no gyms open*".

Similarly, participant 4 shared her experience stating "*I find I'm doing more exercise now than I'm used to and more outdoor exercise. Before I was going to the gym more but now it's outdoor exercise which has definitely had an effect (positively) on my mental health*".

Other participants however did make comments to say that they physical exercise had actually decreased as a result of remote working but on both occasions participants claimed this was due to personal motivation rather than anything else. Participant 2 stated "*it's probably worsened if anything, there's been no gyms open etc., plus I was walking a lot more to work*

*etc. But that's probably on me as much as anything rather than a result of working from home. Like, there's nothing stopping me going for a run every day".*

Participant 5 also claimed to have deteriorated in terms of physical health stating that "*It has 100% worsened, due to the inactivity I'm finding my muscles and joints are becoming stiff and aching quite regularly".*

These findings would indicate that where employees have made a conscious effort to fit physical activity into their new remote working routine then it has benefitted them in terms improved physical well-being, which the participants saw as a benefit of now having the flexibility to do so.

Where participants said their health had actually deteriorated, that may be as a result of other external factors. As a note, both of these participants (2 and 5) were the oldest of the population and both had two children.

These statements start to address gaps in the literature regarding the physical activity and well-being of remote working employees.

### 4.2.2    Human interaction

Participant 1 stated that "*I do miss just being able to go for lunch with the lads*", adding that if he were to return to the office it would be "*really just to maintain that camaraderie amongst the team".*

Similarly participant 2 stated that *"the biggest challenge for me has been collaboration and social interaction. Just having the interaction with colleagues in the office very useful".*

Along the same lines as those remarks is that of participant 3 who stated that in relation to remote working "*the downside is you miss out on, those water cool moments … The more junior members of staff are missing out on that, the ability to ask the more senior members their opinion on something".*

Perhaps unsurprisingly this was a theme that was discussed by all participants, and highly probable that the impact of this was emphasised due to enhanced social restrictions due to COVID lockdown.

The findings are in line with what the literature suggests, which is that the most common challenge amongst remote workers is lack of face-to-face communication (Greer and Payne, 2014).

The main sub-theme which emerged in relation to human interaction was relating to receiving support. Participant 4 stated that when working remotely and considering who to ask for help on a particular matter that "*it's hard to gauge peoples moods … that part is challenging. It's easier to gauge someone's mood in the office or see if they are busy, but you can't do that over the phone*".

Participant 6 stated that working remotely "*gave me a different appreciation for being able to learn from people around you … What I really struggled with was not being able to physically call over to someone's desk to ask for help*".

A similar sentiment provided by participant 7 stated that "*when I was in the office it was easy to turn around to someone on the team and ask them, how do I do this*"?

These findings would suggest that this is a significant challenge for remote working employees and addresses gaps in the literature. Perhaps suggesting that this may be an issue that is unique to characteristics of this particular study.

In addition to seeking practical, several participants also made reference to how human interaction in the office can also offer emotional or mental support with participant.

Participant 5 commented that "*in the office you can meet with colleagues and friends who can boost your morale … I'm generally not feeling as motivated or upbeat as I usually do … I think it's down to missing the interactions with people*".

Similarly participant 6 stated that "*having the water cooler chats with your colleagues can be really useful, especially if you're struggling on a particular day, it can be reassuring to know that perhaps other people are in the same boat and you're not struggling alone, but you don't get that working remotely*".

These findings are concurrent with other research such as the study conducted by Mann and Holdsworth (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003) who concluded that remote workers felt a sense of increased loneliness in comparison to office-based workers resulting in negative emotions, attributing this to social isolation and an inability to share problems with their colleagues.

Two participants discussed the importance of using face to face interactions as a method of building relationships which they feel they are now missing out on. Participant 4 stated that *"Business travel also gave us the opportunity to network with people such as business partners and build relationships. Have these good relationships make it easier to do your job and avoid conflict".*

Similarly participant 5 stated that *"I haven't physically met any of my colleagues yet and I'm still trying to get to know them and build relationships remotely but it's not the same as being face to face".*

This research is conducive with other research surrounding well-being from authors such as Simone (2014) who claim that long-term relationships combined with interactions with a meaningful and supportive workplace network can result in positive well-being.

### 4.2.3    Routine and structure

Participant 1 commented that when working remotely at home with his partner that *"I actually quite enjoy it to be honest, we go our separate ways at 9 and we're pretty much both in our own home office spaces for the rest of the day. We come together around lunch time and try to plan our day to have lunch together".*

Similarly participant 3 stated *"we've managed to work a routine. The kids know what that routine is and we work around it to get what we all need done out of the day",* when discussing how he's managed to adapt to the new scenario.

Participant 4 stated *"once I started walking I made a point of getting up and washing every morning, doing my hair, putting a full face of make-up on, so that psychologically makes me feel motivated to work … when lockdown first happened I was eating junk food all throughout the day. Since then I've got into a better routine of making breakfast, lunch and dinner".*

Participant 6 stated that as a result of having the opportunity to lie in bed longer in the mornings that *"I do have to focus on managing my working hours correctly",* effectively meaning he has to have that structure of set working hours.

Participant 2 also eluded to that point of having to focus on the structure of set working hours, in his case as a result of not having to be in an office during working hours, stating that *"I find*

*the office environment a lot more structured, you have set times to be there … so I guess it's less structured at home, at least for me any way".*

The volume of unprompted responses on this theme would imply that it is a significant factor when working remotely, however no trends were identified in terms of how or why participants chose whether to implement a routine or not.

Whilst there are gaps in the literature in specific relation to this it is an important factor work has typically been seen to provide individuals with routine and a social network and lack of such poses risks to mental health (Waddell *et al.*, 2007).

In relation to boundary management, participant 3 stated that "*I think mentally it's important that people have the ability to say its Friday. I think it's another way to break the cycle of living at work and to have a Friday routine. For us, Friday night is pizza night, it always was*".

Similarly participant 4 stated that *"Monday to Friday I try to be as healthy as possible … I separated my weekday from weekends … so you knew the difference between mid-week and weekends".*

These boundary management strategies deployed by the participants are recognised within the reviewed literature, however in contrast, there were no signs of any tension or stress caused yet by boundary management as suggest by Harris (2003).


### 4.2.4   Work life balance


The benefit of flexibility is a theme which has been suggested by other authors, for example, Crawford (Crawford et al., 2011) and Keeling (Keeling et al., 2015) both cited this in their studies as one of the reasons for an employee's decision to work remotely.

Participant 2 commented that "*you can get errands done during the day that you wouldn't be able to if you were tied to the office. You're in control of your own calendar to a certain extent as well".*

Similarly, participant 4 stated that *"I dropped my car off to get serviced this morning which is great, out of work hours, so I'll either make that time up, or I'll stay make a really productive day out of it so it's handy from that point of view".*

Interesting to note how these participants actually saw it as a positive benefit to be able fit their working day around their personal when required. This seems to conflict with previous research by Hartig et al (2007) who concluded that individuals encountered stress when the work and home life lines became blurred due to employees losing the typical restorative effects of the home.

In relation to commuting, participant 5 was able to use the time saved commuting to spend with the family, commenting that "*on a positive note, not being stuck in rush hour traffic for the commute to and from work is great, it also means that I'm always home for time with the kids who I saw much less of when I was based in the office … having more time with the family has been great and not having to travel for work has been a great benefit*".

Participant 7 used his time saved by not commuting slightly differently, commenting that "*I've been going to bed a little later, I don't have to be up as early in the morning for the commute so I have a bit more time in the evening to stay up that bit later*".

Whereas participant 1 stated "*I've also enjoyed the fact that once I've finished work I'm already at home. I have more time for myself to play golf and can get out to play much earlier*".

On a similar note participant 6 stated "*I'm loving the fact that when I do finish work I'm already home, there's no having to get up an hour earlier to shower and commute*".

Even participant 2 who didn't have a relatively long commute commented that "*Another thing I've heard is that people are saving over 2 hours per day commuting to work which is time they've got back for their own personal time or can dedicate to work*".

These findings further support to the claims of flexibility of work schedule as being a key benefit to remote workers is findings by Tremblay (Tremblay, 2002) who concluded in her study that the benefits derived from remote working were as a result of eliminated travel time and allowing employees the flexibility to be at home for important parts of the day.

*4.2.5   Working environment*

The main sub-theme in this case which was common amongst all participants was the home-office set-up. Participant 1 commented that "*I was working on my kitchen table for the first couple of months and that was straining my back so I setup one of the rooms as an office …*

*since setting that up it's been dead easy, it's been really good. I don't have the distractions like I have in work".*

Similarly participant 2 commented "*How I did eventually normalise was to buy a desk and chair and lamp for my room and I hooked up a monitor etc., until then I was working between the sofa and the kitchen table and that wasn't an ideal setup".*

Participant 3 also discussed a similar scenario in commenting "*I quickly realised that after a couple of hours on a laptop on the kitchen table it was a bad place to position myself for a number of reasons, the table is too low etc. So we built an office as somewhere to go with a proper desk chair and desk".*

Participant 7 also discussed some of the challenges he faced before setting himself up with the correct office equipment when he stated "For the first half of the lock down I was sitting at home on the couch or on the table … by the end of a couple of months my back was just in agony, so that's definitely been a negative for my physical health".

This findings concur with recent findings from the Whitaker report (McCarthy et al., 2020) which stated that 43% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that their organisation was providing them with ergonomic advice with the biggest change or improvement recommended by respondents to their employer as being the provision of a more ergonomic physical workspace.

In relation to future working preferences, participant 1 stated "*If we were to go back to the office, I really don't think I'd like to go back for any more than … certainly 2 days, even just 1 day".*

Similarly participant 2 stated "*The ideal scenario would be to work in the office part-time but not full-time, to have the ability to be flexible, something like 2 days a week in the office".*

Participant 3 offered a less specific, but as convincing comment, stating that "*I think it has to be hybrid, people have the ability to have get so much done at home. Also they're not spending hours per day commuting when they don't have to".*

Participant 4 also shared the same viewpoint when she stated "*My ideal situation would 2/3 days in the office and 2/3 days at home so that you're still getting to meet your team".*

If we consider that Lautsch et al. (2009) found that flexibility in terms of work schedule, improved family life, alongside the elimination of having to commute to the office, all resulted

in an alleviation of work-family conflict and an attractiveness towards remote working. The findings from the interview process indicate that all of those factors discussed by Lautsch are experienced in some form by the participants, and could help explain why a significant majority of participants would prefer to continue working under this arrangements.

In relation to distractions, participant 3 commented how *"little unplanned interruptions during the day, such as the kids needing to be fed, somebody ringing the doorbell, stuff like that, that you wouldn't have in an office environment, became, kind of minor annoyances"*.

Participant 5 shared a similar perspective when he stated how *"having the kids at home whilst working has been a big challenge too, there is too many distractions which interfere with productivity"*.

Similar conclusions were drawn by Kelliher and Anderson (2010) in a study of 2.066 employees, who found that work intensification was largely as a result of employees being able to exercise greater intensification due to fewer distractions than in the workplace, and spending their time saved commuting, on working rather than non-work activities, thus extending working hours.

## 4.2.6   Performance

Essentially this theme discusses all findings relating to how the individual feels they are performing at their job, or the ability they have to perform at their job when considering some of the themes relating to remote working.

Participant 1 stated how he "*feels like it's a much slower process which delays everything*" and goes on to describe how this may be due to the challenges around seeking immediate support when not based in the office, a theme which was discussed in section 4.2.3.

A similar perspective was offered by participant 6 who mentioned how "*something like this that could have been solved in seconds now took over 45 minutes because I had to message someone and then wait until they were to ask them*", once again linking this challenge to the lack of on-hand support.

On the other hand, participant 3 took an opposing view stating that *"You can be an awful lot more productive when you don't have people coming over to you asking do you fancy coming for a coffee? Or that office classic "quick question".*

Two participants did actually discuss challenges around motivation levels since working remotely. Participant 5 commented how "*It has been negatively impacted for sure, I'm generally not feeling as motivated or upbeat as I usually do*".

## 4.3    Discussion

### 4.3.1    Objective 1 - To explore how enforced remote working affects the mental well-being of the employee.

Some of these sub-themes have already been identified in previous studies and discussed in the literature review, however some of them have not, such as work-related support, which emerged as an overwhelmingly common discussion point.

A lot of the narrative extracted from the interviews discussed the challenges around receiving immediate support for tasks or processes that the sales executive weren't familiar with and required help in order to complete. The general feedback was such that the participants found that type of support readily available when based in the office due to having a wider pool of colleagues to ask for help face to face. However when working remotely, this help wasn't readily available and resulted in tasks taking longer to complete. This type of challenge could have the ability to cause stress and anxiety to the individuals involves, particular if the task is time sensitive, thus impacting mental well-being. Although, no participants mentioned not being able to receive support at all, the challenge was more so the length of time to receive the support. Interestingly, it was inferred by many participants that this may have been due to psychological pre-conceptions, such as assuming someone was busy so not wanting to reach out for help in fear of disturbing them. Whereas when based in the office and have the ability to see someone face to face there is the ability to gauge an individual's mood or whether they "look" approachable at a point in time.

Due to the frequency of this response, combined with observational analysis and personal experience it would imply that an IT sales executive is heavily dependent on other members of

the organisation in order to execute their role effectively. This could be something as simple as asking a colleague what an acronym stands for, or could be something more complex such as determining pricing and commercial terms to be drafted into a contract.

There were also direct references made towards mental health throughout the interviews with all participants, particularly in relation to outdoor activity with many participants mentioning how their outdoor physical activity has increased and as a result, their mental well-being has improved. The one participant that displayed a largely negative sentiment towards the current situation was participant 7, and interestingly did not mention outdoor activity at all, in fact the opposite comment was made when he stated that *"being confined to the house has certainly impacted my mental health and well-being".* However, this may be as a result of other factors such as childcare arrangement issues resulting in an inability to have as much "free time" as other participants.

Of the participants interviewed, two of them were parents and both of whom discussed childcare issues conflicting with work. From personal experience I would concur that whilst it is a great benefit being at home to spend more time with the children, it certainly has its challenges. Predominantly being that of distractions throughout the day which were also identified by participants 3 and 5, which can be a great cause of stress.

*4.3.2    Objective 2 - To explore how enforced remote working affects the physical well-being of the employee.*

In relation to physical well-being the overwhelming discussion topic was regarding a correct ergonomic home office setup. There were numerous factors behind this discussion point. From a physical well-being perspective, unsurprisingly complaints of back and neck pain were discussed by several participants which is largely in line with current literature around this subject. Interestingly, no participant made reference to support regarding this as forthcoming from their employer and all participants who made adjustments to their ergonomic setup did so by their own accord. Particularly as this is the leading cause of workplace sickness in the UK and Ireland. Although, no participant identified this as an ongoing issue once the initial adjustments and setup had been made.

Other than that the general sentiment towards physical well-being was relatively positive. Most participants discussed ways in which they had made a conscious effort to look after their

physical health, largely through walking or outdoor activity. One area of concern however will be how that is impacted as we move towards autumn and winter when the weather changes and doesn't present as many opportunities to go outdoors, a concern that was discussed by participant 1. It may be possible that if the cases of COVID continue to reduce and the Irish government can start to re-open more facilities such as gymnasiums then this could present further opportunities for individuals to find new ways of managing their physical health. However, if this doesn't happen and the situation either continues or worsens then there is the possibility that employees physical health could deteriorate if provisions or interventions are not made which should be an area of concern for employers.

An example of an alternative solution was discussed by participant 7 in which he had started doing online virtual workouts at home. However, as a result of this he ended up injuring his knee, which meant he not only had to stop the virtual workout sessions, but had to stop walking and other forms of physical activity too whilst he recovered. This is another example which should be an area for concern as if employees are undertaking physical activity outside of the supervision of qualified coaches or guidance then there is a risk of injury. Whilst this may not prevent an employee from physically being able to work from their laptop at home, there is a concern that prolonged physical injury can have a detrimental impact on mental well-being.

### 4.3.3    Objective 3 - To evaluate what work or workplace interventions remote working employees feel their employer could make to improve their physical and/or psychological well-being.

As discussed in section 4.2.5 the most discussed theme throughout the entire interview process was that of an ergonomically friendly home office setup. Not one participant mentioned that support from their employer was forthcoming in this regard and they had to proactively seek support. The concern here is that once employees start asking for support it's usually because it's too late and they are already experiencing issues. Perhaps the lack of employer support on this issue is a result of the unusual set of circumstances we presently find ourselves in and the uncertainty of how or when employees can return to office. There may be a reluctance from employers to absorb any additional or unnecessary costs that may result from this, particularly in a time when many businesses are encountering volatile economic conditions globally. It may also be due to larger organisations not having the protocols or

process in place to enable them to deliver this type of service to their employee. It's definitely an area that needs consideration if remote working is set to continue for the long term as the impact is not limited to physical degradation but mental also.

The other key area for discussion was regarding access to support. Many of the participants discussed challenges around not feeling able to request support as quickly as they would be able to in the office. This demonstrates a heavy dependence by sales executives on other members of the organisation to execute their roles. Given this dependence it wouldn't be unreasonable to expect the employer to put some kinds of provisions in place to help address this. As was discussed with the previous point, this may be as a result of organisations not responding quickly enough due to the uncertainty of market and economic conditions, but it may also be the case that they just aren't aware of how much of a challenge this is.

Potentially what the bigger issue here is that employees aren't being given the opportunity to voice their concerns and thus, management, or the organisation as a whole aren't aware of what types of challenges employees are facing. Throughout all interviews there wasn't any mention of managers or the organisation proactively reaching out to employees to discuss any concerns they have with regards to remote working well-being.

## 4.4    Conclusion

To conclude this section of analysis and discussion on the findings of the primary research it is clear that remote working has had both positive and negative aspects for both mental and physical well-being of the employee.

The findings conclude that all participants except one had a clear preference for a hybrid working scenario should they have the option in the future, with most stating they would only like to attend the office one or two days per week, mainly for the purpose of human interaction and to maintain relationships with colleagues.

The majority of the themes discussed in relation to physical well-being were dominated by the need for an ergonomically friendly home office setup which is consistent with existing literature.

This was closely followed by the introduction of a new physical workout routine such as outdoor walking which also served to benefit mental well-being as well as physical.

The one consistent theme relating to mental well-being was that of human interaction which was discussed by all participants. This theme is closely related to a core theme which emerged throughout the literature review which was that of feelings of isolation and loneliness. Although feelings of loneliness and isolation were not discussed specifically by participants, it could be inferred through the responses which discussed a desire for closer human interaction with colleagues. At time of interview the participants had only been in lockdown for five months so this theme may continue to emerge if the current situation prolongs.

Other findings relating to mental well-being aspects were mixed. Generally speaking the younger participants indicated that they had adapted to the new scenario and settled into the new routine quicker than the older participants who perhaps struggled initially but then made adjustments to help them cope.

# 5 Concluding Thoughts on the Contribution of this Research, its Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

## 5.1 Implications of Findings for the Research Questions

In addressing the research question of *"How does remote working as a result of COVID-19 impact the physical and mental well-being of young to middle-aged individuals employed as sales executives in the IT sector in Ireland"* there were several implications which can be drawn from the findings.

At the point in time at which the interviews were conducted I observed a generally positive sentiment towards remote working with aspects of both physical and mental well-being showing improvements as a result new working arrangement and a strong desire from participants to continue working in this manner.

This positive attitude towards remote working was largely derived from the employee's ability to have additional flexibility to both their work and personal schedule when not confined to the more rigid regime of standard office hours which characterises their work experience in Dublin. This is largely in line with conclusions drawn from other studies identified in the literature review (Crawford et al., 2011).

Closely linked to this concept of flexibility is the elimination of the office commute which allows the employees more flexibility in the mornings and evenings to have more time to themselves to focus on personal things such as going for a walk or playing a sport, which in turn can reduce the stress of sitting in rush hour traffic, something of a common occurrence when working in Dublin city centre. This is conducive with existing literature which concludes that eliminated commute times result in reduced work-related stress and have a positive influence on well-being (Beauregard *et al.*, 2013).

One challenge identified in the literature review as a key challenge was the concept of over-working, work intensification or an inability to switch-off from work (Grant *et al.*, 2013). Interestingly this wasn't discussed as an issue by any of the participants to this study.

The other key challenge identified in the literature review was regarding the management of boundaries between work and home life. Whilst participants had subconsciously deployed some aspects of boundary management, such as setting up a dedicated office space in the

spare room and away from any distractions, there was no evidence to indicate that this was an issue which was causing stress as the literature would state (Harris, 2003). This could be related to the demographics of the participants however

## 5.2 Contributions and Limitations of the Research

Literature relating to the well-being of remote workers is fairly limited and of the available literature, qualitative research into industry or country specific factors is even more limited. This study has contributed to that existing body of literature and provided insight into the factors which relate specifically to the IT sales sector in Ireland.

The study also provides additional insight into factors relating specifically to COVID-19 lockdown measures which resulted in enforced remote working. As a new phenomenon there has been no research to date which assesses enforced remote working at the scale with which was encountered in 2020. Therefore this study should stand to contribute further to studies which consider the impact of enforced remote working as a result of a pandemic or otherwise.

Having worked in the industry for over ten years in IT sales roles both remotely and traditionally office based within several companies I had a unique appreciation for the context within which the interview participants have found themselves. As the interview participants knew this it allowed them to be more upfront and direct and generate insights that may not have been captured otherwise.

However, in contrast to that, as all except one participant was known to me it is possible that some participants may have held back on certain responses, perhaps in fear of revealing too much about their own personal situation.

In relation to the timing of the study itself, the empirical data gathered during the interviews were a point in time study. Whilst the lockdown had been in place for five months at time of the interview, it is possible that the findings of the study may change if the situation progresses into further months or even years.

Whilst there would appear to be gender imbalance across the participant population the weighting which is favoured towards males is reflective of the actual average ratio of workers in the IT sector.

From my perspective, there was the lack of research experience which may have been a factor in conducting the interviews and structuring the research in such a way that a more focused objective and outcome could have been derived. On reflection, a greater depth of understanding may have been derived if I had drilled further down into specific drivers behind the responses to some questions.

## 5.3    Recommendations for Practice

In terms of recommendations for practise, there are a number of key areas which can be addressed.

Firstly, it is evident that the correct home office environment is required by the employee to help prevent physical issues such as back and neck pain, but as well to allow the employee to focus on the task they are doing without any distractions. This should be proactively offered by employers, or at the very least, some form of home ergonomic assessment provided to ensure the correct setup to prevent issues occurring rather than responding to them after they have occurred. Under normal remote working circumstances these options may be readily available to employees, but under the prolonged and enforced conditions of COVID the support wasn't forthcoming for any employees interviewed throughout the study.

Secondly, employers need to consider what interventions they have put in place to ensure employees have access to the relevant support, help or guidance they require on any tasks they are unsure about. This could be in the form a technical solution such as a forum or microsite which is monitored if employees don't feel comfortable relying on their peers all of the time. Or it could just be something as simple as providing a "cheat sheet" or FAQ to help guide employees through common requested issues. Similar to the first point, the interview participants would have been recruited by their employers under the expectation of shared learning within the office environment. Therefore provisions need to be considered by employers to find a way of bridging this gap.

The third key recommendation is one which may need to be developed over time in line with government health updates regarding COVID, and that is how employers help their employees manage and facilitate human interaction in order to strengthen working relationships and share knowledge and learnings amongst colleagues. Under normal working conditions this may

be more accessible, however under the restrictions of COVID this challenge is more pronounced.

## 5.4    Recommendations for Future Research

There is still scope for greater research into the subject area, and surrounding subject areas. Particularly in relation to COVID impacted remote workers for whom the situation is still evolving so this needs to be monitored on an ongoing basis. It's possible that the impact of such drastic changes in working conditions have not yet been felt employees or employers.

Further research into domain specific remote workers needs to be conducted as the characteristics or personality traits between professions may vary greatly. What is important for a sales executive may not be relevant for say, a computer programmer. If the unique characteristics and requirements of each employee are not considered specifically, or worse even, not considered at all, then it could have a great negative impact for employee well-being.

The third key driver for future research would be the rapid pace at which technology is advancing. Whilst communication and conferencing technologies have gone some way to bridging the gap between virtual life and human interaction, they haven't fully replaced the need.

## 5.5    Final Conclusion and Reflections

Upon reflection and final conclusion of the research I would propose that this topic area is one which is incredibly complex and one which considers aspects of human psychology, organisational culture and public policy to mention a few, which far outreaches the scope of this research.

For the most part it can be concluded that the way in which IT sales executives in Ireland experience the current remote working scenario is not significantly different from how typical remote workers experience it with most of the findings being closely related to similar findings in other studies. Despite the fact that the participants in this study were enforced to work

remotely as a result of COVID, I found that the majority actually preferred it to being based in the office and wanted to continue should they have the option.

The concept of hybrid-working strongly prevailed with all participants stating opting for a scenario in which they could attend the office a few days per week but still be based predominantly remotely. This is an area which will require far greater research by organisations should they wish to deploy such measures in the future as it may not be cost effective of viable to maintain an office facility that would be only partly utilized. It could present new opportunities for organisations to scale down existing office facilities to accommodate a future of hybrid-working.

Additionally, the COVID lockdown has enhanced the restrictions of human interaction. When we consider that the main reason given to attend the office on a hybrid basis was simply to maintain human interaction, we must consider how this will change once, or if, COVID restrictions are ever lifted, as employees will be freely available to have those interactions outside of office space.

My interest in this topic arose from the experiences I had encountered when working remotely in the sector on two separate occasions, once by choice and once enforced by lockdown. During the literature review and initial research it became evident that some of themes were conducive with my experiences and some were not, drawing the assumption that ones experience of remote working will change from individual to individual or company to company.

Upon reflection I do feel that with greater research experience and more time available this study could have been greatly improved. As I progressed through each stage of the study and began linking the findings with the objectives and literature review it became evident that a more focused research question and comprehensive literature review may have been possible. I believe the qualitative semi-structured approach was still correct but with more experience I could have structured the interview questions in a way which would have generated more focused insights.

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**Appendices**

*Appendix A – Participant 7 interview transcription*

1. **Explain how you have found remote working since the COVID lockdown.**

**Response** – I think overall it's been positive, I find I'm not under pressure as much, not under time pressure, I find I can get the same amount of work done, in some cases more. Then when I need to switch off I can take a proper break, I don't need to go down to the canteen when you're still with the same people you're working with and still talking about work. When you take a break at home you can go out for a walk, take the dog for a walk or something, you're actually properly switched off (from work). So overall I've actually quite enjoyed it, if they open for volunteers to go back into the office I certainly won't be putting my hand up for it, I'll be waiting til I'm told to go back in, so I'm actually pretty happy with it so far.

2. **Have your feelings changed over the course of the lockdown?**

**Response** – Yeah, absolutely, it took some getting used to, for example, at the very start I was reluctant to reach out to any customers, because I felt it was maybe a bit insensitive, whereas now it's basically business as usual, everyone seems used to taking calls from home and it doesn't feel as intrusive so things have changed for the better as time has gone on.

3. **How does this compare to your work life previously being based in the office?**

**Response** – For me, not much has changed, although as I'm still fairly new to the company I'm still getting used to systems and processes etc., when I was in the office it was easy to turn around to someone on the team and ask them, how do I do this? Whereas now, I might hold off on doing something like that, something small, because it doesn't seem worthwhile, so I suppose there is a little bit less support, but it kind of makes you throw yourself into a bit more too, so I don't know whether that's a positive or a negative. It'd be nice to be able to walk over to someone's desk and ask them something rather than having to setup a call.

**4. What challenges or benefits have you encountered since working remotely?**

**Response** – It's been a benefit having my own office, when you're in work, sometimes talking on calls can be a bit daunting, especially if you're the only one speaking on the floor, it can feel like everyone is listening in on you. Like now, you're at home, on your own, you're the only one there, if you make a mistake it's not a big deal, I mean it isn't a big deal anyway, but there's less pressure.

**5. In what ways has your physical well-being been affected since working remotely?**

**Response** – For the first half of the lock down I was sitting at home on the couch or on the table, leaning over, the table was really small, my legs wouldn't even fit under it, by the end of a couple of months my back was just in agony, so that's definitely been a negative for my physical health. I ended up having to go into the office and bringing my work chair home. I never realised how much I needed it until it wasn't there. Other than that, it's actually been kind of good for my physical health, I'm getting out walking a lot more when I take a break, I'm not just going down and eating in the canteen, I can go to the park or go to the beach, I was going out on the bike a lot. Because we have a bit more leeway now we don't have to be back at a certain time and we don't have to be up and showered so early, we can get up and go out and do stuff then still be back and ready to start work at 9 o'clock, you don't need to set aside the time for the commute. So that's been good for my physical health, and mental health.

**6. How do manage to look after your physical health when working remotely?**

**Response** – Well I had cortisone injections in my knee last year which I had fully recovered from and I was out running again, and then in the very first week of the lockdown, I was doing a Joe Wicks home workout in the sitting room and re-injured my knee, so I was out of action for a few months, I still am really, but now that everything has re-opened I'm back in the gym and basically training everything except my legs.

**7. Would you say your physical health has improved or worsened since working remotely and in what ways?**

**Response** – I think my physical health has improved other than the knee, I got in a rowing machine which I'll use to do quick 30 minute workouts, and then of course all

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8.  **What, if anything do you feel you could do or change which would improve any aspects of your well-being should you continue to work remotely?**

**Response** – I think I'd invest more in a better desk and some proper equipment for my monitors. I've got my laptop plugged into a TV at the moment, they're not at the same height, they're different colours etc.

9.  **How have you adapted your lifestyle to suit this new form of working?**

**Response** – I don't know if this counts as lifestyle but I've been going to bed a little later, I don't have to be up as early in the morning for the commute so I have a bit more time in the evening to stay up that bit later.

10. **Have you requested any support, or would like to request support from your employer should you continue to work remotely, and if so, what would that be?**

**Response** – I haven't requested anything, mainly because we received a lot of mails in the beginning (of lockdown) saying we couldn't order this and that and couldn't submit expenses, but if the option was there I'd 100% ask for the correct office equipment.

11. **AOB?**

**Response** - Just from speaking to other lads on the team, a lot of the distractions for them are looking after the kids, or finding somebody to look after the kids.

12. **Would you continue working remotely if you had the option?**

**Response** - Yes, absolutely

## GRIFFITH COLLEGE DUBLIN
## Graduate Business School
## Participate Information Form

**Candidate:** James Bates

**Course:** MBA

**Title:** An exploration of the impact that remote working has on the mental and physical well-being of employees: A case study of sales employees within the I.T. sector in Ireland.

**Purpose of this study:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that remote working has on the physical and mental well-being of sales employees in the I.T. sector in Ireland. The recent events of COVID-19 have forced many individuals into a remote working arrangement that was not expected and not prepared for. Additionally, employee well-being has been growing in importance on the business agenda so the aim is to understand how remote working affects this, and what could be done to improve employee-being if remote working is set to continue.

**Objectives of the study:**

- *To explore how enforced remote working affects the mental well-being of the employee.*
- *To explore how enforced remote working affects the physical well-being of the employee.*
- *To evaluate what work or workplace interventions remote working employees feel their employer could make to improve their physical and/or psychological well-being.*

**Confidentiality and Privacy:**

No participant will be individually identified by their responses as all responses will be anonymised to ensure participant privacy. No company names or other information which may lead to identification of participant or company will be recorded within the dissertation paper.

All information will be used specifically for the study and purpose intended.

**Data Privacy:**

Information gathered from participants during the study may be thematically coded before being abstracted to present the findings of the dissertation. All data will be destroyed upon completion of Dissertation Exam Board.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person.

Please contact:

Dr Garrett Ryan,

Griffith College Research Ethics Committee

South Circular Road, Dublin 8, Ireland

Mail: garrett.ryan@griffith.ie

Tel:   +353 1 4163324

E

**Participant Sample Questions**:

1. Explain how you have found remote working since the COVID lockdown.

2. How does this compare to your work life previously being based in the office?

3. What challenges or benefits have you encountered since working remotely?

4. In what ways has your physical well-being been affected since working remotely?

5. How do manage to look after your physical health when working remotely?

6. Would you say your physical health has improved or worsened since working remotely and in what ways?

7. What, if anything do you feel you could do or change which would improve any aspects of your well-being should you continue to work remotely?

8. How have you adapted your lifestyle to suit this new form of working?

9. Have you requested any support, or would like to request support from your employer should you continue to work remotely, and if so, what would that be?

**Research Study Title:**

An exploration of the impact that remote working has on the mental and physical well-being of employees: A case study of sales employees within the I.T. sector in Ireland.

**Purpose of this study:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that remote working has on the physical and mental well-being of sales employees in the I.T. sector in Ireland. The recent events of COVID-19 have forced many individuals into a remote working arrangement that was not expected and not prepared for. Additionally, employee well-being has been growing in importance on the business agenda so the aim is to understand how remote working affects this, and what could be done to improve employee-being if remote working is set to continue.

**Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement**

*I have read the Participant Information Statement.*
*I understand the information provided.*
*I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study.*
*I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.*
*I am aware that my interview will be recorded.*
*I may withdraw from the Research Study at any point.*

**<u>Signature:</u>**

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

**Participants Signature:** _____

**Date:** _____