e-Work versus the legacy of the traditional tête-à-tête approach: A post-pandemic agenda of organisational opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: The rapid and unexpected onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed unparalleled challenges on health sectors globally. Traditional working arrangements changed radically when e-work was introduced as a mitigating factor to the spread of the disease. Managing e-staff staff was found challenging as the health public sector navigated the unchartered territory of supporting and managing remote administrative staff. There is limited evidence in previous studies where the impact of a pandemic created exposure to first-time e-management scenarios in the public health sector. The purpose of the study is to explore how e-work influenced staff morale and its influence on remote productivity and to provide insight into feasible working practices post-COVID-19.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The authors employed a hypothetico-deductive approach, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods to attain study objectives. Purposive and convenience sampling were used to select interview and survey participants.

Results/Findings: E-work did not negatively influence staff well-being, although working hours were found to be challenging in terms of balancing home and work life. Communication issues were found to have a considerable influence on management-staff relationships.

Managerial implications: Facilitating improved communication will enable management to build on staff relationships and aid in combatting professional isolation. Revisiting existing working methodology will contribute to learning and enable an improved management understanding of the challenges coal face ranks encounter. Increased understanding of e-staff morale and the integration of work-life balance will be beneficial to making sound management decisions to facilitate a current and feasible post-COVID-19 e-work methodology.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought unexpected changes in workforces globally (World Health Organization, 2020), and social distancing was promulgated and enforced as an enabling factor to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, organisations requested non-front-line staff to work from home (Salari *et al*., 2020; Government, South Africa, 2020). The Supply Chain administrative public health sector staff under study were consequently requested to work remotely. An additional factor to be kept in mind is that the staff under study was a group of officials whose operational and corporate functions were critically instrumental to optimum levels of support to the frontline public sector health staff during the Covid-19 pandemic, in ensuring system fluidity for essential items and health services to public sector end users. Due to the rapid shift to remote work, e-workers had to be self-reliant to integrate their work and home life and to reach desirable outputs in terms of productivity (Chang *et al*., 2021). This shift to e-work was unchartered territory for workers who had never worked remotely before. In addition, they faced the challenge of managing and acquiring new virtual communication methods. The shift to e-work consequently brought the instant creation of e-workers and e-managers, with no previous exposure to how to manage this unprecedented terrain. Organisations, including public service entities, experience unique challenges when working remotely for the first time while remaining optimally productive.

This article aims to explore how remote work (e-work) influenced staff morale and well-being, to understand its influence on remote productivity and to provide insight into feasible working practices post-COVID-19. Viewpoints are then put forward by the authors as to how remote work influences staff morale and staff well-being, how remote productivity is perceived, which challenges can be expected, and what feasible working practices post-COVID-19 would entail.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Various theories and models were contemplated, as shown in Table 1. Fisher's model of conceptualising and measuring well-being at work (Fisher, 2014), Baruch and Nicholson's four factors of Teleworking (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997) and elements from Danna and Griffin's Health and wellbeing in the workplace (Danna & Griffin, 1999) provided the authors with a

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useful framework to gain an informed understanding of the factors of e-work. For this article, the application of Fisher's and Danna, and Griffin's models will be applied in the context of an improved understanding of issues influencing e-work.

2.1   Comparison and Suitability of Theoretical Context Explored

Table 1 depicts the various theories and models contemplated and indicates the advantages, disadvantages and gaps identified for each model or theory.

**Table 1: Comparison, advantages, disadvantages and gap identified of theoretical context explored**

Model/Theory	Advantages	Disadvantages	Gap Identified
Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)	The well-supported socio-psychological theory that predicts human behaviour	Better suited where an optional choice is applicable	Certain emotional aspects such as fear, threats, anxiety, and moods are not fully considered
Schlossberg's transition theory	It includes unanticipated events.	Reference is made to the relationship with the transition and to the setting in which the transition takes place.	It addresses transition over time and is better suited in an educational context.
Baruch and Nicholson's four factors of the teleworking framework	It combines individual, organisational, job and home or family factors to explain the use of remote work	Limited emphasis on communication-related issues	Limited evidence was found of external factors influencing the application of this model.
Fisher's model of conceptualising and measuring well-being at work	It recognises that well-being at work is multi-dimensional	It does not include criteria for an adjustment phase or transition period	It includes well-being in the workplace, and it can be adapted to suit an e-work setting
Danna and Griffin's Health and well-being in the workplace	It relates to dealing and coping with well-being and health in the workplace setting	Employee health is a rather large focus area in this study	Mental health is included in this model, and the work setting can be adapted to a remote setting
Burton and World Health Organization's Healthy Workplace Framework	It is the objective of this model to guide workplace health	The focus revolves around health and safety in the workplace, with a lesser focus on wellbeing	There is limited evidence of being suitable to be adapted to an e-work setting
Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)	It can predict a wide range of behaviours	The theory assumes that actions are because of decisions or choices	Does not specifically mention the beliefs that are operative for behaviour
Rath and Harter's well-being: the five essential elements of wellbeing	There is the suggestion that there is a relationship between well-being and a fulfilled career	Limited emphasis on psychological well-being and associated factors	It will be difficult to align this theory to a pandemic or stress-induced context
Job Demands Resources model (JD-R)	It incorporates an extensive range of working conditions	It includes both positive and negative outcomes and indicators of worker well-being	Its focal point is the psychosocial work environment as the predecessor of motivational and health-related end results

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Sources: Theoretical context explored (Ajzen, 1991; Schlossberg, 1984; Baruch & Nicholson, 1997; Fisher, 2014; Danna & Griffin, 1999; Burton & World Health Organisation, 2010; Fishbein & Ajzen,1980; Rath & Harter, 2010; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)

2.2   Danna and Griffin's Wellbeing in the Workplace

This model highlights work relationships as an occupational stressor, which links to job-related satisfaction, with psychological and behavioural consequences. Danna and Griffin (1999) integrated various literature on dealing with and coping with well-being and health in the workplace. Their goal was to move this phenomenon towards the mainstream of organisational-based research. This model could be a useful tool for management to better understand the work relationships, stressors, and behavioural consequences when applied to a remote work setting. Figure 1 illustrates Danna and Griffin's health and well-being in the workplace model.

**Figure 1: Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace model**
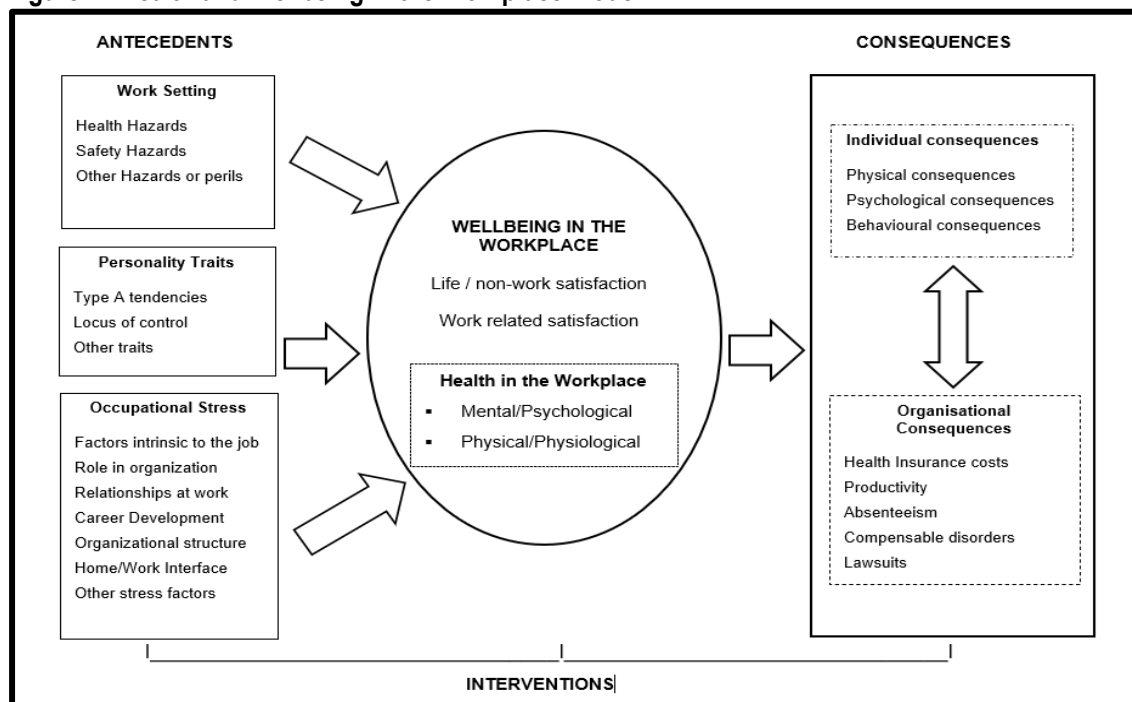
Source: Danna & Griffin, 1999

2.3   Fisher's model of Conceptualising and measuring well-being at work

A variety of variables for this study potentially falls under the umbrella of Fisher's model of conceptualising and measuring well-being at work (Fisher, 2014). Fisher lists some existing conceptualisations and definitions and discusses several approaches to measure them. He recommends means to broaden and deepen the conceptualisation

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and assessment of workplace wellbeing. This theory recognises that well-being at work is multi-dimensional. Figure 2 is an illustration of Fisher's model.

Figure 2:   Fisher's model of conceptualising and measuring well-being at work
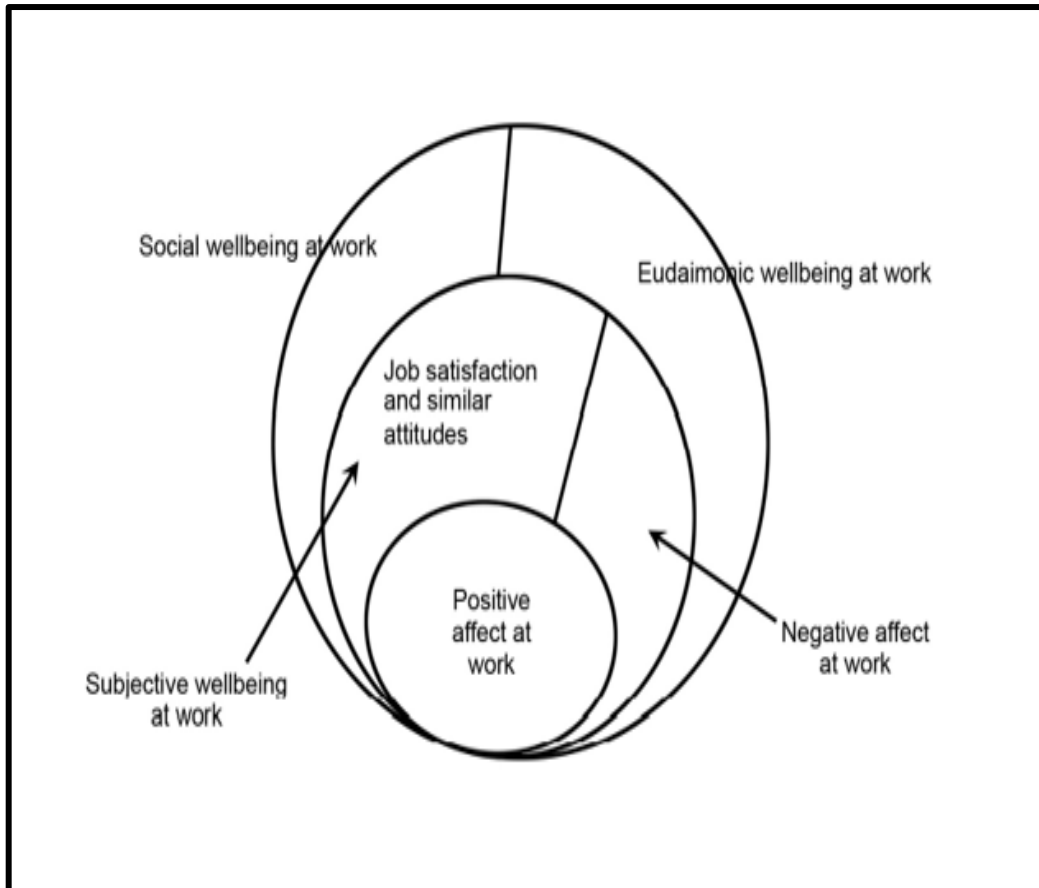
Source: Fisher, 2014

3.   REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A literature review was compiled to ensure that the phenomenon under study was aligned with previous research studies and that the relevant theoretical frameworks applied to the phenomenon under study. This section focuses on the literature gathered to create the context for this study.

3.1   E-Work

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the way we work and live has changed, and subsequently, home or alternative locations have become the new places of work (Irawanto *et al*., 2021). The World Health Organisation's mental health definition is a state of well-being in which every person becomes fully aware of their capability, can handle normal life stressors, be productive and fruitful, and can contribute to their community (World Health Organization,

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2020). According to Beňo and Ferenčíková (2019:80), the "prefix "e-" expresses decentralised work processes not bound to any particular location". This, in essence, means e-teams remain operational by utilising ICT instead of travelling to work. This could mean that staff work either full or part-time from home, full-time or part-time from an organisational space, or follow a hybrid approach of combined office and e-work (Beňo & Ferenčíková, 2019). For this study, most of the administrative staff in the unit under study performed e-work, including management. It is also understood that e-work may lead to social or professional isolation as individuals are not in close physical proximity (Contreras *et al*., 2020). Employers are aware of this shift towards catering to more than just the physical wellness of their staff. "Work is an essential ingredient in the recipe for human fulfilment and purpose…. this suggests that we have a professional, moral, and ethical responsibility to do what we can to minimise the damage our managerial behaviours may inflict" (Quelch & Knoop, 2018:vii).

With the transition from the brick-and-mortar office to an e-work setting, additional work demands and constant virtual meetings followed suit. It was observed that staff in the public health sector worked longer and more hours daily remotely compared to their usual office-based schedule. Remote work was also associated with decreased self-reported productivity by staff (Morikawa, 2020) during the Covid-19 pandemic. In line with this information, Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés (2020:2) proposed that e-work "… can occur from multiple locations (home, office, and other places) using different technologies". In the context of this study, staff will be working mostly from home, and the terminology remote work and e-work will be used intermittently.

3.2   e-Worker Morale

Arora and Khatri (2020) noted that planned training sessions in time management, work-life balance, and stress management would be needed to maintain and improve workers' emotional and psychological well-being. A Nuffield Health report from an independent study undertaken in 2019 included studies drawn upon more than 7,000 individuals that investigated organisations of differing sizes and different sectors. This study suggested that "remote working can provide the flexibility to juggle work and home life demands" (Nuffield, 2019:38). Nonetheless, in contrast, remote working was associated to positive well-being, research is not indisputable regarding its influence on stress levels or productivity. The study furthermore proved that remote work was overall found to be positive in relation to well-being, and negative effects were found due to idiosyncratic characteristics or other factors that organisations could address, such as appropriate ICT and resources to perform remote work (Nuffield, 2019; Franklin, 2019).

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, the SCM unit faced increased job demands. When workstations shifted from organisational spaces to home offices, the authors believed that staff had to cope with the challenges of an adjusted work-life balance. However, their increased job demands did not cease during the Covid-19 pandemic. During remote work periods, the logical assumption would be that employees would have less social contact due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent social distancing measures implemented to mitigate the spread of the virus. However, the outcome of isolation on a professional level for remote staff is an important factor to consider. If e-work requires the integration of work-life balance and increased social and professional isolation, the authors posited that worker morale might be negatively influenced.

3.3   e-Work and the Future of e-Work

E-work can be understood as a substitute for traditional working arrangements (Arora & Khatri, 2020), during which employees achieve their work responsibilities detached from their dedicated or assigned workplace. Minimal direct supervision and working hours also differ when working from home. It could be advantageous to have a home office, as e-workers save time by not having to commute and, therefore, have the time to focus more on their work (Beňo *et al*., 2021). Limited evidence was found of research that specifically targeted the productivity metric for white-collar staff in remote work. When remote work commenced during the COVID-19 pandemic, management had no real knowledge or proper insight into the workers' set-up at home or whether their personal life at home would allow them to remain productive. It is, however, not clear how productivity in teams decreases with physical distance (Battiston *et al*., 2017). Consequently, the authors posited that staff's ability to stay productive might be affected by their ability or inability to rapidly react, respond, and adapt to a completely new mode of working.

A survey was performed by Alexander *et al*. (2021) into what staff are saying about future remote work. The outcome was that staff felt they had not been adequately informed about management's plans for working arrangements post-Covid-19. This was a source of anxiety among staff, as inadequate remote work planning and the non-communication of detailed guidelines left staff feeling anxious (Alexander *et al*., 2021). The authors, therefore, posited that if the concept of 'the office' in an organisational space will never be the same again because of remote work during a pandemic, then this may be regarded as the new norm of 'working of tomorrow'.

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3.4   Occupational Stressors

The revised JD-R model (Demerouti *et al*., 2001) lists burnout and work engagement as key factors that could influence employee well-being. Working remotely often leads to employees having no clear parameters between personal and work life, which may cause stress (Liu & Lo, 2018). Occupational stress is mentioned in the health and well-being in the Workplace model (Danna & Griffin, 1999), and the home-work interface links directly to occupational stress in Danna and Griffin's model. The authors posited that remote staff had increased stress levels due to the unique challenges of the e-work domain, such as Information Communication Technology (ICT) issues, connectivity, and the shifting of teamwork to a virtual sphere. In addition, it was understood that most of the staff members were affected personally by COVID-19 in that family members have become infected and possibly suffered related COVID-19 complications.

3.5   A New Era in Work-Related Communication

In any organisation, staff need to be supported by management, but in a similar vein, management needs to support staff. Hutajulu (2021) rightfully noted that the work-from-home debate is always linked to electronic methods of communication. Virtual communication methods consist of virtual meeting software, social media, and electronic mail. However, the aforesaid electronic communication methods cannot always fully replace the traditional *tête-à-tête* communication methodology. It is accepted that communication methodology differs when e-working and that virtual communication becomes the primary method of communication, which replaces direct communication. However, virtual communication presents limitations (Akbar *et al*., 2021), which requires the sender and receiver in the communication process to adapt to this new method. As e-workers face barriers such as ICT adaption and workplace communication inadequacies, effective institutional communication methods remain critically important to keep e-workers connected to their managers and peers.

3.6   Organisational Support and Management Adaptability

Perceived organisational support can be defined as the extent to which the employees believe and trust that their organisation is doing their best to ensure the entire team's success. Remote work was such a sudden organisational change, and therefore, organisational support to e-workers became more crucial than ever. It is also understood that the mode of providing organisational support to remote staff will be vastly different in the virtual sphere. Lee (2021) said that dynamic organisations need e-leadership and adaptability from traditional management theories to a virtual methodology.

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4.   METHODOLOGY

A hypothetico-deductive approach was employed, using mixed methods to accomplish research aims. Methodology in research is described as a structured method to determine a research problem through data collecting, using various methods and providing a portrayal of the collected data (Murthy & Bhojanna, 2009). "Essentially, a research methodology is the blueprint of a research study" (Murthy & Bhojanna, 2009:32). The mixed methods research approach is more thorough in comparison to a single method approach, and it improves the validity and reliability of the data and strengthens the research outputs (Abowitz & Toole, 2010).

The target population for this study was the administrative cadre in an SCM unit in the Western Cape (WC) public health sector, consisting of 139 employees. A sample size of 60 was identified, however, a total number of 34 employees participated in this study. Challenges in reaching a higher respondent rate included staff working off-site with faulty ICT equipment, problematic data connections, load shedding schedules, staff not being easily reachable due to working from home and staff not being in proximity. The 34 participants comprised four management members and 30 management and lower-ranking staff members. In-depth interviews were conducted with four management members, and 30 employees participated in a survey. The sample population was chosen to be representative across the directorates within this SCM unit, representative of both higher and lower ranking staff, and respondents would have needed to have exposure to working both from an office space and from home to enable them to provide rich and appropriate data for this study. To achieve this, non-probability convenience and purposive sampling techniques were chosen based on convenience (Acharya *et al*., 2013). Preceding the data collection, a pilot test was conducted to test the questionnaire's validity, reliability and credibility.

Data was collected during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and respondents were accessed via preferred channels, with the option of in-person or virtual communication. Respondent participation was voluntary, data was sourced ethically, and information was treated with confidentiality. Graph 1 illustrates the respondents' gender profile, age profile, level of education and years of service in a public health institution. The results indicated that the largest gender group was female, the largest age profile group was between 45-54 years old, the largest group of respondents had a senior certificate or equivalent, and the majority had a 0 – 5 years of work service history.

These contrasting demographics indicate that the different categories of staff had varied levels of years of service in a Health department, had different levels of education and a good

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balance in terms of age, all of which provided for contrasting perspectives in respondent
opinions.

Graph 1: Respondent Profile
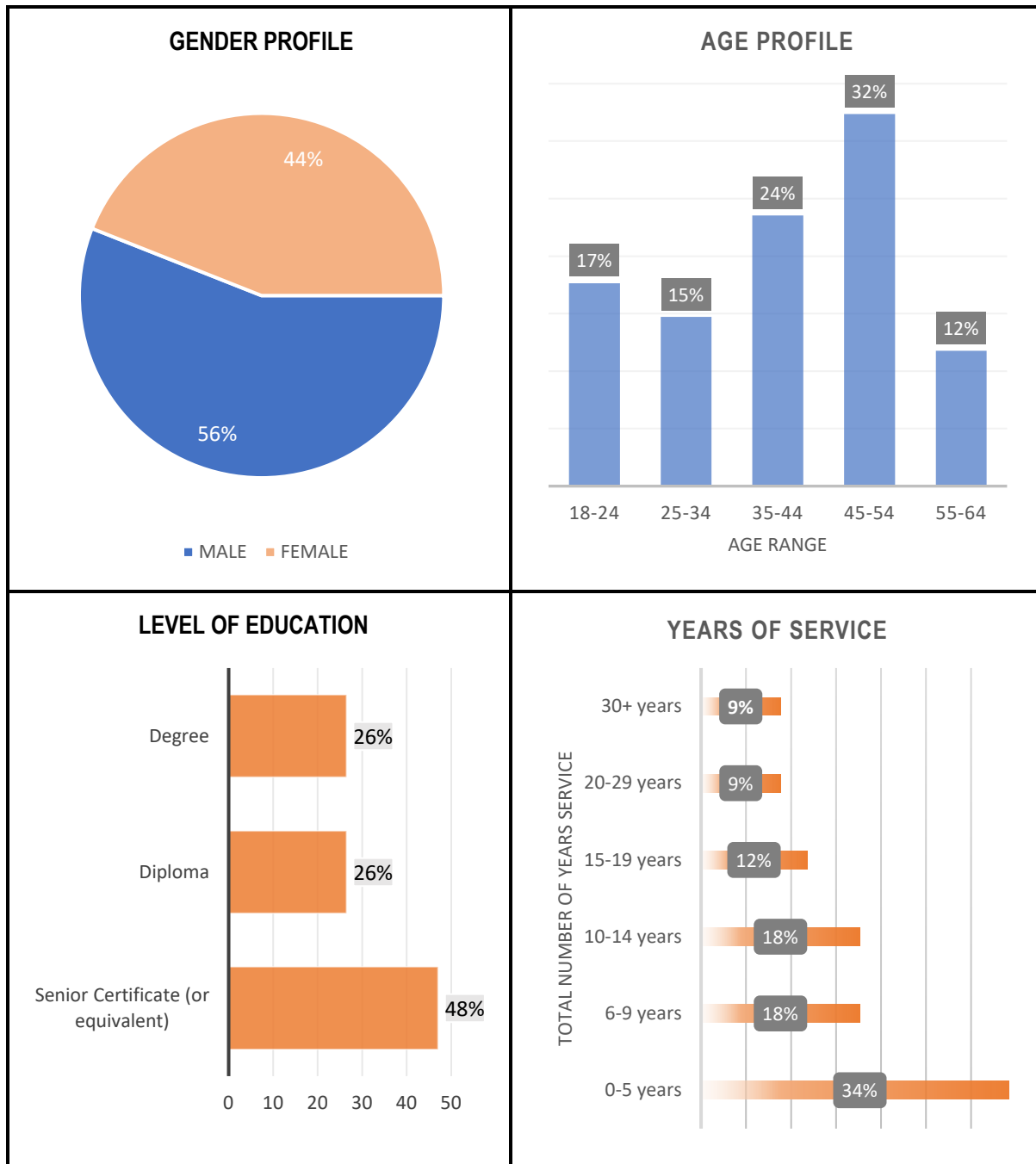
Source: Research findings

5.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The authors disseminated the findings through an integrative mixed method analysis
consisting of 1) fusing multiple sources/types of data and 2) integrating the sources/types of

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data to obtain an advantage over separate analyses and single sources. The integration of data in this context referred to the manners in which quantitative and qualitative results were fused to accomplish greater perception, and the integration process occurred during data analysis and the presentation of the findings. Coding and thematic analysis were then used for the qualitative data analysis, and Microsoft Excel was used for the data transcription of quantitative and statistical results.

5.1   The Influence of E-Work on Morale

This study found that e-work primarily did not negatively influence staff morale. This finding is consistent with various mental health and well-being initiatives the WC Department of Health (DoH) has implemented. Mardianah and Hidayat (2020) noted that remote work would assist staff with allowing a balance between their personal life and work life. Whilst the findings indicated that staff morale was not adversely affected by working from home, the findings also indicated that organisational policies should address specific issues such as communication methods for remote staff and working hours. It is important to develop and institute best practices for working from home to facilitate improved productivity and good mental and physical health (Birimoglu Okuyan & Begen, 2022).

5.2   Perceived E-Work Productivity and the Future of e-Work

Staff initially adapted to the commencement of e-work, but after that, they felt they could remain reasonably productive. There were various views on staff productivity from home, but a significant finding was that it was contingent on individual output and work-related communication efficacies with peers and management. The findings also indicated that e-workers need to prove that they were online and working continuously. Remote working staff may feel this pressure, and that it is an expected norm to keep the appearance up to seem to be working at all hours (Powel, 2020). "The 'always on' working practice, encouraged by e-working, challenges employees in terms of mental and physical fatigue" (Molino *et al*., 2020:14). Distorted boundaries between work and personal life, together with operating on the "always on" mode (Hunter, 2019) may cause issues of concern in the long run. When working from home, the typical 9-5 schedule is perhaps a pipedream, but optimal productivity does not necessarily equal eight or nine continuous work hours. Perhaps balancing out screen time could work in a setup where there was understanding, clear expectations on productivity outputs, and trust between management and staff.

According to the findings, a hybrid e-work approach would benefit the organisation as e-work thus far has acquired a wide range of work-related efficacies. This includes reducing commuting costs and paper usage and curtailing catering expenditures due to virtual

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meetings. Distributed teams could, however, feel isolated, which may lead to feeling insecure about where they see themselves with the company in the future (Moore, 2017). Regarding work setting option choices, 90 percent of respondents chose to follow a hybrid approach, 7 percent chose to e-work only, and 3 percent favoured an office-only work approach.

5.3   Communication

Fifty-seven percent of respondents agreed and/or strongly agreed that e-work communication methodology needed attention, both upward communication processes (to management) and downward communication processes (from management). Twenty percent disagreed and/or strongly disagreed, and 23 percent maintained a neutral stance regarding improved e-work communication. This finding was that e-work communication required attention for remote work to reach its full potential and maintain organisational efficacies. Table 2 will provide insight into relevant e-work communication findings that indicate communication response time was the greatest barrier to e-work, including communication to and from management. Similarly, e-work communication preferences indicated that electronic mail was the most used method.
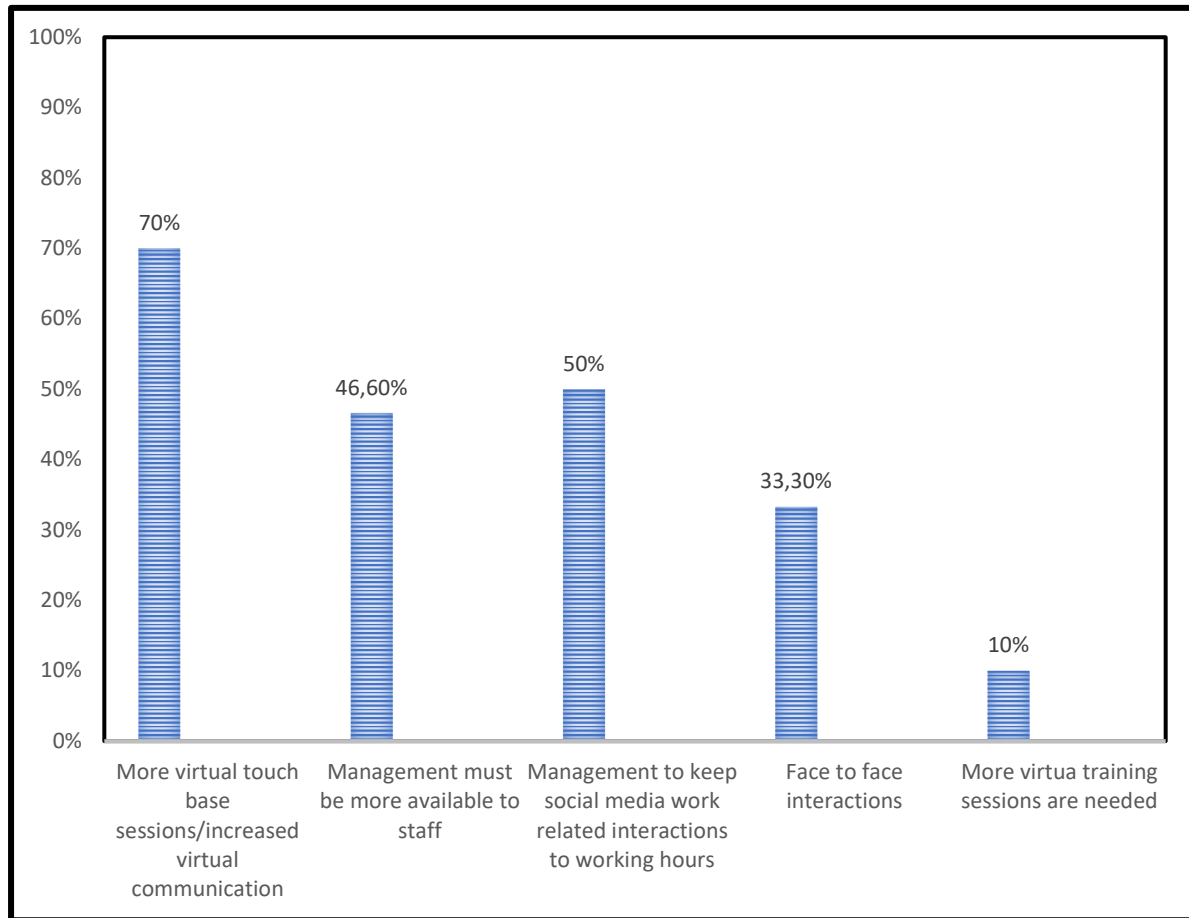
Table 2: E-Work Communication

Greatest barrier to e-work communication (to and from management)			
E-Teams differing work rhythms	*Inefficient ICT*	*Inefficient Virtual communication methods*	*Communication response time*
7%	**13%**	**23%**	**57%**
Primary methods of communication between e-workers and management for work-related issues, ranked from 1 to 4 (with 1 being the least used and 4 the most used)			
Telephone	*Social Media*	*Virtual meeting platforms*	*Electronic mail*
1	**2**	**3**	**4**

Source: Research findings

5.4   Management Support for E-Workers

Respondents were asked how organisational management could support e-workers. From prior reading, the authors were able to narrow the scope to predetermined answer options, as displayed below in Graph 2. Respondents were allowed to choose *multiple answer* options, and from the findings, it was clear that the most chosen answer option was *"more virtual touch base sessions/increased virtual communication,"* with a score of 7 percent. This is in keeping with the finding that improved communication would benefit e-work.

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Graph 2: Management support for e-workers

Source: Research findings

The findings show that e-workers require additional management communication sessions and would need increased management availability when respondents answered the question *"how can remote staff support management",* the responses illustrated that communication was once again a prevalent finding. The findings show that e-workers also understood their role and responsibility in remaining productive, being available, and showing management support where required. Responses relating to manners in which e-workers could support management are summarised below:

▪ Being available when your manager needs your assistance.

▪ Being available during working hours for work-related matters (answering phone/MS Teams/messages)

▪ By staff doing what was asked of them within the timeframe given.

▪ Performing jobs effectively and efficiently.

▪ Always completing tasks.

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- Improving communication.
- Showing their manager support.
- No conflict.
- Encouragement.
- Assisting management after hours if required.

5.5   Isolation

The findings show evidence of e-worker isolation. Management should consider staff mental health needs as a critical part of their roles (Nuffield, 2019). It is crucial that staff feel they are connected to their relevant departments and the organisation, as this forms part of their unique inherent organisational identity. The workplace is a central and crucial element in individuals' daily lives. In the workplace, the staff engages and builds relationships with supervisors, subordinates, and peers. These relations were important in shaping workers' perception of what work encompasses (Collins *et al*., 2016).

E-workers are operational mainly from home and, therefore, experience a loss when face-to-face contact or employee relations are discontinued. For some workers, e-work may result in professional or social isolation, which may have an adverse influence on work performance (Golden *et al*., 2008) because staff may feel they do not have their colleagues or supervisor in proximity for support or problem-solving (Contreras *et al*., 2020). Professional isolation can also be linked to decreased opportunities for reward and the lack of personal/work development, such as training initiatives. In contrast, social isolation may occur because staff miss their interactions with co-workers. Based on the findings highlighting professional isolation's existence and negative influence, the recommendation is to have more communication sessions.

5.6   Current Organisational and Management Support Initiatives

5.6.1   *Employee Health and Wellness Programme (EHWP)*

The DoH, Western Cape Government (WCG) caters for organisational employee health and wellness through the Employee Health and Wellness Programme (Western Cape Government, Department of Health and Metropolitan Employee Health and Wellness Programme, 2021.). EHWP is a dedicated person-centred quality care programme for employees. According to the Western Cape Government, South Africa, Department of Health Annual Report, 2019/2020, the programme is "focussed on maintaining a work-life balance which has multi-faceted benefits and is adapted to the changing workplace trends in South Africa and globally" (Western Cape Government, South Africa, Department of Health Annual

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Report, 2019/2020:124). EHWP is a free service for all employees and can also be utilised for immediate household members of employees. The trend to cater for employee health and wellness increased when staff started to work remotely. The EHWP program encompasses the following: individual wellness (physical), individual wellness (psycho-social and psychiatric), organisational wellness and work-life balance, group therapy for specific occupations, occupational therapeutic services, and strategic leadership development.

While employees worked from home, they received e-mails through the corporate communications channel. The e-mails recognised that Covid-19 had placed all employees under immense pressure, with feelings of compassion, fatigue, stress, insomnia, anxiety, burnout, and depression that are increasingly coming among staff. The e-mails further emphasised that employees recognise that they are performing a crucial role and doing their best with their resources. Employees were also thanked for their hard work during the subsequent COVID-19 waves and told they were valued and appreciated. The e-mails also provided valuable information on dealing with emotional trauma and how to seek support for working through feelings of exhaustion, loss, or despair. Another e-mail that was sent to employees provided valuable information regarding mental well-being and advice on how to connect and share emotions. In addition, emails were sent to employees regarding working from home and caring for children, with helpful advice on balancing screen time and creating a sustainable routine while working from home. The helpline numbers were provided in the e-mails, and employees were encouraged to use this service.

5.6.2   *Departmental Managerial Consultancy Service*

The DoH offers a consultancy service for managers to address workplace challenges. According to the Western Cape Government, South Africa, Department of Health Annual Report (2019/2020), assistance was sought for the following issues: absenteeism, conflictual work relationships, disciplinary issues, performance management, general stress, substance abuse and work-life balance issues about subordinates. The WCG DoH partners with firms to offer expert support structures to employees to enable a structured and well-thought-through road to employee wellness. In addition to the managerial consultancy services, managers at all levels were supported by Top Management during the COVID-19 period, and management was guided to create a psychologically safe workplace for staff. Management guidance was provided via virtual means; Table 3 is a good example of management guidance.

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Table 3: Tips for managers to create a psychologically safe workplace (WCG DoH, 2021)

	Tips for Managers to create a psychologically safe workplace.
1	Practise self-care so that you are able to support those in your span of care.
2	Use genuine check-ins and encourage people to show vulnerability, express how they feel and who they are.
3	Connect more with employees, by using deep listening, asking questions, and to be empathetic in your dialogues.
4	Focus more on opportunities, less on problems.
5	Allow yourselves to admit that you will not always know if you are making the correct decision but ultimately you still have to make decisions.
6	Create intentional spaces for employees to **"Pause"**, for example creating a space where employees can talk about emotional turmoil they are experiencing and having check-ins with all employees in your span of care. Allowing and creating opportunities in the workplace for employees to take intentional breaks where they can recharge physically and emotionally. Acknowledging and allowing employees to grieve loved ones.

Contact your EHWP on 0800 611 093 for any psycho-social support you require.

Source: WCG DoH, 2021

5.6.3   E-Care Programme

The DoH offers an e-Care programme that "enables employees to manage their well-being online and send employees a weekly e-mail with information on various health topics to promote physical and emotional wellbeing" (Western Cape Government, South Africa, Department of Health Annual Report, 2019/2020:125).   According to the WCG DoH Annual Report (2019/2020), 808 employees used the e-Care service. In addition to the support offered to employees from the DoH, as mentioned above, employees also received support directly from the SCM unit during interdepartmental sessions facilitated by various ranks of staff.

5.6.4   Consultants for Healing and Grieving Sessions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the DoH also used outsourced consultants to host healing and grieving sessions. The DoH recognised that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees could be overwhelmed in terms of personal loss the loss of colleagues and witness distress in others. The facilitated sessions strived to assist staff to process their experiences better and offer an opportunity for mourning, grieving, and ultimately healing.

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5.7   Managerial Implications

Based on the outputs of each team or staff member, management should review previous and current work methodologies. Revisiting working methods will contribute to learning and enable an improved management understanding of the challenges the coal face e-workers encounter. Increased understanding of staff morale and the integration of work-life balance will be beneficial to making sound management decisions to permanent, current and feasible e-work methodology. Management trust to allow e-work was also mentioned as a positive outcome of e-work. Subsequently, management and human resource officials may support workers by familiarising themselves with the consequences, barriers and challenges associated with remote work, including work-related stress and other problematic home dynamics.

According to Como *et al*. (2021), as more research emerges on similar phenomena, it is likely to uncover additional strategies for supporting remote workers' development and mental health. The findings showed that where possible institutionally, the WC DoH allowed the staff under study to e-work during a time when they were uncertain and scared of what was happening around them. This perhaps proves that listening to staff and showing humanity from an organisation can go a long way to assist staff during the remainder of the pandemic and post-pandemic. Remote work should not be regarded as the easier work-style alternative and would require substantial time, energy, and management skills for it to work effectively (Nuffield, 2019).

When respondents were asked to suggest new or different e-management methodologies, the answers in Table 4 summarise the responses received. The responses align with the issues management should address in e-work policies.

Table 4: New or different e-management methodologies

• Policy should provide some guidelines as the process is still relatively new compared to abroad, and no formal announcements about working methodologies post-Covid have been made yet. However, not all staff are working from home, and sometimes, staff working from the office in a disconnected way also need support.
• Show appreciation; we are all in it together.
• Make training readily available.
• Adopt a hybrid approach, enabling staff not to feel totally isolated; being at the office sometimes will still provide a feeling of belonging.
• Clearly defined outputs, provide necessary tools and training; supportive.
• Weekly planning to achieve monthly goals.
• Regular engagement and feedback.
• Financial assistance in relation to the resources being used at home while working from home.
• Supporting each other.
• To respect the employees' time and that he/she can't be available 24/7.
• Managing the outputs on a weekly basis so that employers can see results.

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• Communication - the bedrock of a successful system.
• Ensure the working equipment (laptops etc.) is in good condition.

Source: Research findings

According to Moore (2017), a remote team's success will primarily be dependent on the management style and the staff in the team.

6. CONCLUSION

E-work is set to increase going forward, and facilitating improved and current communication methods will enable management to build on staff relationships and combat professional e-worker isolation. Care should be taken not to take the *'one size fits everyone'* approach to e-working individuals (Nuffield, 2019). Revisiting working methods will also contribute to learning and enable an improved management understanding of the challenges the coal face e-ranks encounter. Although adequate findings indicate the staff under study felt supported during the COVID-19 pandemic, an increased understanding of staff morale and the integration of work-life balance will be beneficial to making sound management decisions to permanent a current and feasible future e-work methodology.

One of the primary objectives of any research is to build knowledge. In that context, this study could be instrumental in facilitating improved learning of public sector e-work methodology for full-time staff, which is unchartered territory, to say the least. Learning will, in turn, enable management in the public sector, as well as management in non-public sector entities, to gain an improved comprehension of challenges that lower ranks of staff encounter, and this will be beneficial in decision-making as we advance. Similarly, various aspects of e-work productivity and e-work communication were disseminated during this study. This should assist management in understanding which challenges staff face in staying optimally productive and connected while working remotely. In line with the findings, the authors could extend Danna and Griffin's Health and well-being in the Workplace model (1998), as seen in Figure 1, to include a remote work setting, as seen in Figure 3. The current model includes a work setting, but the authors included a remote work setting to extend the model to include current e-work practices. Under the remote work setting, the authors noted the following:

▪ *E-work Policies Inefficacies*

   (Influencing behavioural consequences such as work output uncertainty, longer or non-predetermined specified working hours and different working schedules, which could lead to an always-on behaviour and increased stressors in e-work patterns).

▪ *Virtual Communication Challenges*

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(Influencing behavioural and psychological consequences in e-workers feeling disconnected/out of touch, professional isolation enhancers, and various e-work ICT challenges).

▪ *Perceived Organisational E-Work Support to E-Workers*

(Influencing behavioural and psychological consequences when e-workers feel the need to be more supported in a virtual work environment, necessitating increased organisational communication and support sessions).
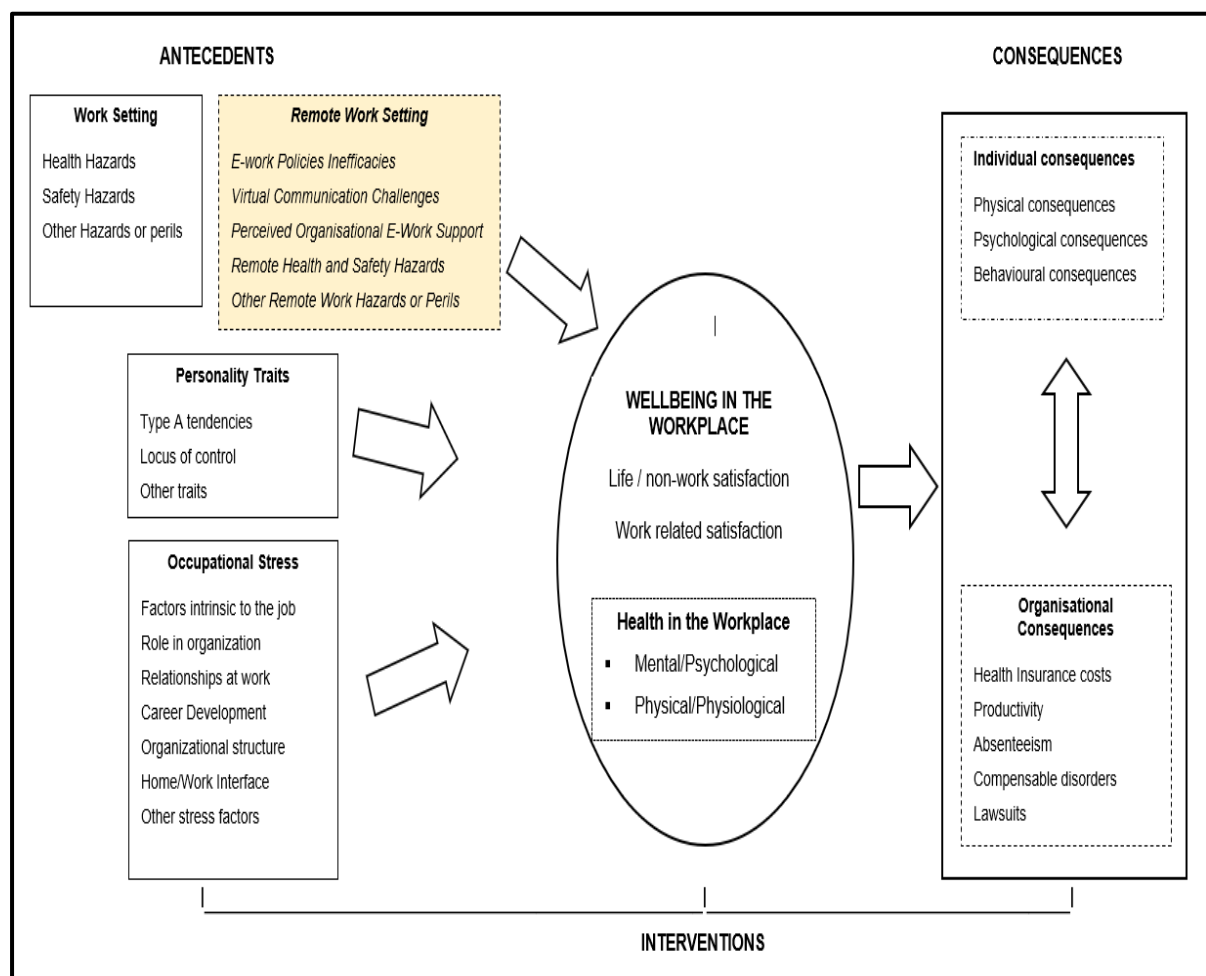
▪ *Remote Health and Safety Hazards*

(Influencing behavioural, physical, and psychological consequences where e-workers suffer from wellness-related issues such as depression, occupational health and safety issues at remote working sites and the possibility of physical injuries while e-working).

▪ *Other Remote Work Hazards or Perils*

(Could include other remote work hazards or perils not named above).

Figure 3: Extended model - Danna and Griffin Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace (2022)

Source: Van Heerden & Naicker, 2022 (as adapted from Dana & Griffin, 1999)

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Recommendations for future research would include, but are not limited to, virtual meeting effectiveness compared to the traditional *tête-à-tête* meeting approach, functional pandemic/disaster planning, retaining e-work organisation efficacies, and acquiring a sounder understanding of a relational e-leadership style versus task-orientated leadership style applicable to staff working remotely. Since the remote work method was not generally practised before COVID-19, there is currently a limited understanding of how it affects staff and management, particularly in public sector staff in South Africa. This study thus contributes new insights into how public sector entities could and should navigate and manage e-work operations.

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