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Navigating ethical tensions: Remote working experiences of female middle managers in South Africa

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Orientation: The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic led many organisations to adopt remote work, highlighting a need to understand employees' experiences. This shift has created a demand for interventions to support employees and organisations alike, particularly in managing the ethical challenges that accompany remote work.

Research purpose: This study aimed to examine the ethical tensions faced by female middle managers in South Africa when working remotely.

Motivation for the study: The study responds to calls to explore new working models, such as remote work, and their implications for both employees and organisations.

Research approach/design and method: Using an interpretivist paradigm and a qualitative approach, this study focused on a sample of 23 female middle managers from public service entities in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Narrative analysis was employed to explore participants' experiences, with data analysis incorporating three levels of meaning-making based on previous organisational behaviour research.

Main findings: Three primary ethical tensions emerged. Firstly, 'to disclose or not to disclose' captured the challenge of accounting for time worked remotely. Secondly, 'to trust or not to trust' revealed trust issues between managers and their teams. Thirdly, 'to control or not to control' highlighted the difficulty of balancing autonomy and oversight.

Practical/managerial implications: Proposed interventions include: (1) clear policy guidelines for remote work, (2) training on remote work etiquette, (3) a supportive organisational culture and (4) accountability measures to foster trust.

Contribution/value-add: The findings offer public service entities insights to transition from command-and-control models towards adaptive approaches balancing autonomy with organisational goals.

Keywords: remote working; female; managers; mental health; narratives; ethics.

Introduction

The rapid advancements in technology have ushered in a transformative era within the realm of work. Along with this change, a plethora of new terms and work arrangements have emerged including remote work, telecommuting and working from home. In South Africa, such work arrangements are seen as a game changer, fundamentally altering how work is understood and experienced (Chinyamurindi, 2022). The implementation of the new work arrangements has the capacity to affect employees extending beyond the physical domain to encompass their mental health and psychological well-being (De Vincenzi et al., 2022).

The rapid outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work arrangements, particularly for those in South Africa who had previously been restricted to traditional office settings. This unprecedented shift has profound implications for employee well-being. As the initial effects of the pandemic subside, it becomes evident that remote work is becoming a permanent fixture. This shift necessitates a deeper comprehension of the factors that influence employee well-being within this evolving work landscape (Mahomed et al., 2022).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) emphasises that remote work should be a mutually agreed upon arrangement between both employers and employees covering aspects such as workspace, working hours, communication tools, task delegation, methods of supervision and results presentation (Dávila Morán, 2023). In addition, remote work often fosters an 'always-on' culture, where individuals feel compelled to remain perpetually accessible through information and communication technology (ICT). These demands can intrude upon both physical and psychological boundaries at home, leading to engagement in work-related activities even during personal time (Walz et al., 2023).

While remote work unquestionably offers various advantages, its expansion has also revealed numerous challenges and potential pitfalls (Popovici & Popovici, 2021). As organisations worldwide grappled with adapting to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, they swiftly implemented remote work solutions that, in some cases, blurred the boundaries between work and personal life. This blurring of boundaries has had far-reaching consequences, often leaving employees with a sense of disconnection from their workplace, exacerbating the well-being challenges introduced by remote work (Petitta & Ghezzi, 2023). Notably, there is a significant challenge related to the stress associated with the use of technology (Harunavamwe & Kanengoni, 2023a; Harunavamwe & Ward, 2022).

Considering these substantial transformations in the world of work, it is imperative to delve into the intricacies of employee well-being in the context of South African remote workers. Understanding the nuances and challenges these workers face is essential, not only for the individuals involved but also for organisations seeking to strike a balance between the advantages and drawbacks of remote work arrangements.

Context of the study

This study is situated within the framework of the South African public service context, where several notable observations regarding employee well-being have been made. Firstly, there is acknowledgement of challenges of mental health in the South African public service (Chinyamurindi et al., 2023) Secondly, there is a growing call for research to propose solutions addressing mental health challenges in this context (Dlaza & Chinyamurindi, 2023). A starting point in addressing these challenges involves focusing on intra-organisational factors and issues as potential solutions to mental health challenges within the South African public service (Mathibe & Chinyamurindi, 2021; Ruzungunde et al., 2023).

Research purpose and questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the ethical tensions experienced from working remotely among a sample of female middle managers in the South African public service. Informed by this purpose of the study, two questions were set:

1. *What are the ethical tensions experienced from working remotely among a sample of female middle managers in the South African public service?*
2. *What recommendations can be made based on the ethical tensions experienced by female middle managers working remotely in the South African public service?*

The research purpose and questions set for this study come about informed by three considerations. Firstly, there is a need to delve into how new work arrangements not only emerge but also influence individuals' experiences. It is recognised in the literature that novel forms of work, such as remote working, disrupt traditional notions of time and space (Mahomed et al., 2022). In this context, 'space' denotes physical locations separate from an organisation's permanent offices. This mode of work neither furnishes a designated physical workspace nor facilitates in-person interactions among employees, supervisors or colleagues (Arunprasad et al., 2022). It is based on leveraging digital tools, desktop and laptop computers, tablets, smartphones and other ICT to carry out duties outside of the employer's physical space (Chinyamurindi, 2022). Therefore, there is a pressing need to explore how management capabilities within organisations are impacted by the experience of working remotely, particularly concerning the effective navigation of ethical tensions.

Literature review
Theoretical framework

This study considers two theories related to how remote work is experienced and the potential role of remote work on the well-being of employees.

The first theory under consideration is Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) as a theoretical model (Anderson, 1999). Complex Adaptive Systems emphasises the need for responsiveness to change through systems that develop effective solutions (Anderson, 1999). These models function as open systems operating in highly variable conditions, consisting of independent agents (Palmberg, 2009). Within the CAS, such agents refer to distinct elements or parts of the system that communicate with each other and the environment. From an organisational behaviour point, agents would refer to employees, their employers, teams and structures within the organisation (Phillips & Rittala, 2019). To contend with the unpredictable nature of their environment, these agents continually adjust their operations (Arunprasad et al., 2022).

The evolution of information technology has brought about increased interconnectedness, transparency, individual empowerment, transaction speed and reduced information costs. These trends necessitate that organisations blend efficiency with flexibility and innovation, resulting in the emergence of organisational forms assembled on short notice, for limited durations and specific purposes (Phillips & Ritala, 2019). In the context of CAS, individual members

must be interconnected, mutually reliant and willing to co-evolve. Engaged employees are those who are fully present when fulfilling their organisational roles (Arunprasad et al., 2022).

A second theoretical consideration is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands encompass the physical, psychological, social and organisational aspects of a job that require consistent application of mental and/or physical abilities. In contrast, job resources refer to components that facilitate the accomplishment of work-related objectives, alleviate the strain of job demands or promote personal development.

According to Mahomed et al. (2022), the JD-R model suggests that prolonged job demands may lead to stress, whereas the availability of job resources may trigger a motivational process that enhances engagement. Remote workers face unique challenges because of the simultaneous obligations from home and the workplace. These pressures blur the physical and psychological boundaries between work and home life, resulting in competition for finite energy reserves during remote work (Walz et al., 2023).

The JD-R model underscores the dynamic relationship between job demands and resources, a pivotal factor in shaping stress levels, motivation and critical outcomes within organisations. In the remote work environment, challenges related to job demands can be categorised as stressors, whereas the benefits of remote work can be attributed to specific job resources. Supportive work-related factors, such as fostering a positive team environment and ensuring role clarity, have been shown to mitigate the adverse effects of job demands on individuals' personal resources and energy levels.

Two job demands relevant to remote employment in the literature are social isolation and work-home conflict. However, social support, job autonomy and effective communication are essential facilitators for productive remote work environments. Managing the work and home domains becomes more complex when job expectations result in different types of interference, such as time-based, strain-based or behaviour-based interference (Mahomed et al., 2022; Walz et al., 2023).

Empirical literature

Working remotely

In both ordinary and exceptional circumstances, remote work signifies a contemporary paradigm shift for organisations. This model offers employees the flexibility to execute their responsibilities from locations of their choosing. However, it elicits a spectrum of both favourable and adverse opinions that warrant thorough examination (Dávila Morán, 2023). This brings up another characteristic of remote work, which is temporal in nature and is sometimes defined as flexible or unusual working hours because of work-family balance issues or the intrinsic nature of the work itself (Arunprasad et al., 2022). The 'always-on' mindset prevalent in remote work environments extends to employees' personal lives, making them susceptible to requests from friends and family via face-to-face or virtual interactions (Nowland et al., 2017). Consequently, work-to-home conflict and conflicts with home obligations can arise (Walz et al., 2023).

Remote working and well-being

In today's intensely competitive corporate environment, organisations face significant challenges in safeguarding the well-being and performance of their workforce. Eudaimonic well-being (EWB) reflects individuals' inclination to seek meaning and purpose in their lives, encompassing concepts of 'happiness', 'flourishing', 'positive functioning' and 'worthwhileness' (Hill et al., 2022). Employee well-being has been linked to increased productivity, stronger organisational commitment, greater satisfaction in personal life and improved overall quality of life, including enhanced family satisfaction (Qureshi et al., 2021). Well-being, as depicted in the literature, encompasses two complementary viewpoints: hedonic and eudaimonic, emphasising both pleasant feelings and engagement in self-actualising behaviour (Hill et al., 2022).

In the context of remote work, primary well-being challenges identified include work-home conflict and social isolation (Mahomed et al., 2022). Work-home conflict arises from the mutual incompatibility of work-related and family-related pressures, intensified in remote work settings. Social isolation results from limited opportunities for social and emotional interactions with colleagues, further exacerbated by measures related to social distancing (Hill et al., 2022).

Remote work in South Africa

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for organisations, compelling them to swiftly adapt to remote work arrangements as an emergency response. This transition to remote work continues to exert its influence on workplaces, leaving a lasting impact on the well-being and productivity of employees (De Vincenzi et al., 2022). Pre-pandemic data from South Africa indicated that 21% of professionals engaged in remote work. It is important to notice, however, that during the pandemic, this percentage increased to 79% (McCarthy, 2022).

Post-pandemic, an overwhelming 89% of individuals anticipate the continuation of remote work to some extent, with a strong inclination in South Africa towards embracing full-time flexible working models (Mahomed et al., 2022). The transformation brought about by the pandemic has effectively reshaped the landscape of traditional work settings, and it is evident that the post-pandemic workplace will maintain substantial elements of remote and hybrid work configurations (De Vincenzi et al., 2022). The significance of this shift lies in its potential to bridge the gap between employee expectations for an improved work-life balance and the organisation's needs for continuity and productivity (Popovici & Popovici, 2021).

While the benefits of remote work, such as increased job satisfaction and enhanced productivity, are evident, it is crucial to recognise the challenges it presents. The blurring of boundaries taking place between work and personal life, heightened work-family conflict and feelings of social isolation all pose unique challenges (Mahomed et al., 2022). Research has also shown that individuals in higher-paid positions, such as managers, professionals and consultants, are better equipped to work remotely, whereas lower-income employees cannot. Inevitably, perceptions of inequality can lead to discontent.

For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, parts of the South African workforce required to work on-site faced a higher risk of infection compared to colleagues who could work remotely (Erasmus, 2020). It is crucial to emphasise the importance of well-designed remote work modalities, as effective design can maximise the benefits while mitigating the drawbacks (Dávila Morán, 2023). This distinction holds great relevance for organisations committed to fostering employee well-being.

Remote work is not a universally applicable solution, as its feasibility varies depending on job roles and the nature of tasks involved. Recent research indicates that only a subset of South Africa's workforce can effectively transition to remote work, depending on their job characteristics and the available technological infrastructure (De Vincenzi et al., 2022). This highlights the need for a nuanced approach when considering remote work as a viable option. Access to technology plays a pivotal role in remote work.

Beyond the physical infrastructure, the provision of adequate support for maintaining continuous connectivity and availability is vital for ensuring productive remote work (Mahomed et al., 2022). Furthermore, societal shifts, including changes in workforce demographics and family structures, have made remote work an appealing choice for employees (Arunprasad et al., 2022). The priority should also be on promoting work-life balance especially within the contemporary work setting (Harunavamwe & Kanengoni, 2023b).

Research method

The study embraced an interpretivist research philosophy, employing a qualitative data collection approach that is exploratory in nature. This methodology was chosen for its ability to delve into individual behaviour, including its inherent complexity. The praise for such a philosophy, approach and design lies in its capacity to not only comprehend social action (Bryman et al., 2018) but also to explore behaviour (Cohen et al., 2018) on a deeper level.

Sampling and research participants

The study relied on the use of a convenience sampling technique with a sample of female middle managers based in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. This sample was recruited from government departments that operate from the Eastern Cape. Table 1 gives more detail around these participants.

Based on the information in Table 1, an inclusion and exclusion criteria were followed. Firstly, participants to the study had to be middle managers and have occupied the position for at least 2 years. Secondly, participants had to also work remotely as per the guidelines emerging post-COVID-19. Thirdly, participants were required to self-identify as female.

Data collection and data recording

A three-fold process was followed to access the research participants. Initially, letters of invite were distributed to the provincial head of department informing them about the study. Subsequently, the head of the department circulated a notice via email, inviting those interested in participating in the study to respond. Upon expressing interest, participants were instructed to contact the research team to schedule an interview. Through this process, 23 female middle managers indicated their willingness to participate in the study and undergo interviews. All interviews were conducted with the participants' permission and were audio-recorded for transcription purposes. The transcribed data were then prepared for analysis. Data analysis was conducted using QSR NVivo 9 software, which served as the platform for data management and analysis (Reuben & Bobat, 2014).

Strategies to ensure data integrity

Ensuring data integrity is paramount in all research endeavours. A range of options were explored here. Firstly, all interview data was recorded, enabling continuous access to ensure data quality. The interview

TABLE 1: Demographic characteristics of participants.

Participant	Race	Years in middle manager position	Middle manager position
1	Black African person	7	Human Resources
2	Mixed race person	6	Supply Chain
3	Black African person	4	Accounting
4	White person	3	Information Management
5	Mixed race person	6	Supply Chain
6	Black African person	4	Legal
7	Mixed race person	3	Human Resources
8	Indian person	6	Accounting
9	Mixed race person	3	Information Management
10	Black African person	2	Human Resources
11	Mixed race person	6	Supply Chain
12	Black African person	7	Procurement
13	Mixed race person	5	Human Resources
14	Black African person	3	Information Management
15	Black African person	7	Legal
16	White person person	4	Human Resources
17	Black African person	6	Accounting
18	Black African person	4	Supply Chain
19	White person	7	Human Resources
20	Black African person	8	Procurement
21	Mixed race person	10	Supply Chain
22	Black African person	4	Information Management
23	Mixed race person	6	Legal

recordings made it easy to access the data continuously and helpful especially during the data analysis process. Secondly, because of established norms and practices within qualitative research, participants had access to have a look at the transcribed data to check for its accuracy. Thirdly, data were collected over a duration of 1 year, this allowed for ease and working around the busy schedule of the participants.

Data analysis

The study relied on the use of a narrative inquiry. Narrative research is gaining popularity in South African organisational behaviour research (Chinyamurindi et al., 2021; Dlaza & Chinyamurindi, 2023). A procedure for data analysis was followed based on the three levels of meaning-making (McCormack, 2000). Such a procedure allowed for understanding the lived experiences of the participants informed by stated research objectives (Brown, 2012; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). Step 1 of this process consisted of creating a vignette of each interview transcript with a goal of developing a more detailed narrative for each person participating in the research (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). The second step consisted of developing a longer narrative through exploring participant experiences. The final step consisted of a process of elaboration, this assisted develop narratives using quotations and detailed experiences (McCormack, 2000).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee (REC- 270710-028-RA Level 01) (CHI001). Ethical guidelines were adhered to as part of the research. The process entailed applying for ethical clearance with the participating university. Permission was also solicited for and approved through the participants. The research study also adhered to ethical standards to protect participants through respect for confidentiality, anonymity and privacy. These are standard ethical practices.

Results

Based on the analysed data, three salient narratives existed depicting the ensuing ethical tensions of working remotely and how they affect the mental health of the public service employees. Firstly, remote working as an ethical tension of 'to disclose or not to disclose' – concerning accounting for time spent working remotely. Secondly, remote working also posed the ethical tension of whether 'to trust or not to trust' – this concerned work issues between the manager and their team within a remote working context. Thirdly, 'to control or not to control' – managers expressed the difficult balance between enforcing autonomy in work and the need for allowing for control of the work.

Narrative finding one: To disclose or not to disclose

The first narrative presents an ethical tension related to issues of disclosure. For the participants, this created a challenge and balance around what to tell or what not to tell. This challenge of disclosure appears to create challenges especially those of a mental health nature. One participant narrated this giving example to issues related to blurring work boundaries:

> 'When working from home, I acknowledge the benefits this may have. However, I often find myself with a huge sense of guilt when I attend to something not related to work. Yes, I am at home and its flexibility. Often one must lie to senior colleagues when asked what you are doing. You cannot mention that you are doing your own things.' (Participant 13)

Another participant described the issue of disclosure to come with 'anxiety'. This tension is closely similar to what participant 13 described as 'guilt'. For this participant, the 'anxiety' came on matters around how they perceived remote working muted their voice to speak out. In essence, disclosure was not even possible but towing a line of conformity especially to top managers:

> 'There is an anxiety that comes with working remotely. There is a level of mistrust as to what one is doing remotely. Often one just follows the prescribed line especially from top managers and provincial heads. At times I balance between my own work and that of my employer. This is not always interpreted well. I have an opinion on how I can work especially remotely. This does not matter, it's what those on top of you want.' (Participant 22)

The issue of extra work featured among participants. It appeared that some of the public service managers were engaged in extra work outside their formal government job. An issue of disclosure was needed here through formal work declaration processes. Some employees did not declare this extra work. One participant described this lack of disclosure as an issue that caused 'stress':

> 'An issue that causes stress is one related to extra work one can do on the side. One must usually declare formally this extra work through the employer. The outcome of this is often endless debate and a rejection for an employee to engage in extra work. A number of employees prefer not to disclose extra work being done. The challenge is living with this weight of stress and uncertainty. Hoping you are not found out.' (Participant 16)

In support of the narrative finding one, additional quotes are provided in Table 2 supporting this narrative.

Narrative finding two: To trust or not to trust

The second narrative finding spoke to the issue the female middle managers experienced related either as employees or as those given custodianship of being managers. There appeared to be a perception of mistrust related to the remote working within the public service. This level of mistrust did not always produce a conducive working environment. Often some of the managers even admitted that their managerial approach to such a situation may have led to some damage on their mental well-being and that of the employees they manage:

'Can one ever trust employee working remotely? The office space offers a level of control to the employee-employer relationship. I am sceptical that work is being done remotely. This approach is then reflected in how I manage. This is managing from a space of being overly critical. Such an approach comes with pain not just on me but on those who report to me. The pain can be unbearable and often psychological on both sides.' (Participant 1)

One manager working in the legal division while praising the remote working viewed it as 'untenable' to the work of a legal person with trust issues featuring:

'I do legal secretariat work. I can do most of this work remotely. However, I feel the perception around legal work being done remotely is viewed as untenable. The perception often is that working away from the office is akin to not working at all. I think it comes from a space of a trust deficit. With this a lot of suspicion and nerve wrecking moments.' (Participant 6)

The trust issue also featured with one manager from procurement. This manager narrated how the lack of trust shown in the working-from-home strategy potentially destroyed relationships. In effect, the destroyed relationships were a potential ground for a toxic work culture:

'For the governments sector – one is not sure how we should feel about remote working. We already have challenges around high abseentism. Often the challenge then allowing people to work remotely could be an open ticket for not doing the work. In turn such a situation of a lack of trust has led to a very toxic culture and one in which work becomes difficult.' (Participant 12)

In support of the narrative finding two, additional quotes are provided in Table 3 supporting this narrative.

Narrative finding three: To control or not to control

The final narrative finding presents the issue of control or not to control as an ethical tension. This narrative also relates to aspects of how middle managers carry out their managerial duties. One manager views this control to be an inherent way of working within the public service:

'The remote working model came out of the experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic. I really believe the public sector was never ready for such a mode of working. So post-COVID

questions linger as to the value of remote working. A response could be a perceived brutality towards those favoring remote working. There is a great deal of suspicion that working remotely is just another way to evade responsibility. So as managers we are told to minimize such opportunities. This does not sit well with some employees.' (Participant 23)

A second manager expressed the control tactics to be manifested through excessive surveillance:

'Working remotely has its benefits especially for us as managers with a peace of mind. However, the response has been for us as managers to make sure we monitor how people are working. The monitoring does not sit well with us as managers. I also think it causes distress to our workforce as well. Unfortunately, in some cases the monitoring is needed.' (Participant 22)

The level of control and its impact on well-being was described as also present through an online etiquette through the technology used for remote working:

'In allowing for remote working, there is an emergence of procedures related to how we use the technology. For instance, in all online meetings cameras must be switched on. Further, if working from home you get the sense that you are monitored a lot – the endless phone calls. It's really a sad state of affairs.' (Participant 20)

In support of the narrative finding three, additional quotes are provided in Table 4 supporting this narrative.

TABLE 3: Additional quotes supporting the narrative finding two.

'The public service is an essential means through which service delivery happens. It is also the same context that is filled with many trust issues. The figures and Zondo Commission report show this. Now, imagine having to work remotely, given this context. It becomes not only stressful but also untenable. The challenge for us is having to be managers in such a situation.' (Participant 2)	'You need a level of trust to be able to work remotely. The issue for us as managers is our need to have that control that we usually have in a face-to-face setting. When we do not have such control, we become unbearing and can be very retrogressive in our approach. Such a way of working then leads to a toxic work setup.' (Participant 4)
'In the last year, we have had to deal with grievances. Most of them emanate from fights around issues related to work. Employees complain about why some are allowed to work from home. There are also issues of accountability and reporting issues while working remotely. In most cases, when a grievance comes our way, we have to resolve disputes around working arrangements.' (Participant 7)	'At the core of remote working are two issues. We trust that the work will be done first. Secondly, there is a need to monitor the work being done. The two issues alone are enough to cause distress, especially given the work context we operate within.' (Participant 11)

TABLE 2: Additional quotes supporting narrative finding one.

'Everyone knows that we are engaged in non-work-related things when working remotely. These do not necessarily have to be disclosed. However, when there appears to be enforcement, it is not enjoyable to work remotely with such hard tactics.' (Participant 3)	'Our technology systems are getting a revamp. This allows us to have an interface between working at the office and working from home. We often get employees flagging challenges with equipment to avoid working. The challenge is not with technology but the attitude towards technology. Dealing with such attitudes is not easy.' (Participant 9)
'From an HR point of view, remote working has helped us. Most of our services remain either paper-based or make a transition to the use of technology. We have introduced remote working to try to make the process seamless. So, in working remotely, I find it difficult and painstaking to manage people away from the office. I am already facing challenges with face-to-face interaction with employees; you can imagine the challenge this poses.' (Participant 19)	'The challenge of working remotely is the existence of too many unknown factors. Some of these need to be known by the employer. For instance, doing side gigs during a time meant for remote working is out of the question for me. Then we have issues such as allowing for work-life balance. We may allow for this, but obviously with disclosure. Managers become stressed as to what is really happening behind the computer at home.' (Participant 18)

TABLE 4: Additional quotes supporting the narrative finding three.

'I think from my legal experience, we lawyers have traditionally been working remotely. Our profession allows us the opportunity to work remotely. Since joining the public service, I have learnt this is not the case. The insistence is that one must be in the office at all times. I think for me it does not work. I like being away from the office and manage my own time. This is something my superiors are indifferent to.' (Participant 23)	'Our experience of remote working has been mixed. As a functionary we note challenges that already exist with aspects relating to supply chain. For instance, we need to be available at the office in dealing with issues of procurement and supply chain. So in most cases for work directly related to what we do, we really cannot work from home However, the nature of the work we do requires transparency and level of audit. This I believe cannot happen remotely.' (Participant 21)
'Remote working has been a bit of nightmare for us. Traditionally human resource management activities are seen to be routine and mundane. Often this means we need to be on site. The challenge we have is that remote working takes away from the site of work. It merely gives us less control to the situation.' (Participant 10)	'There is a fine line between ensuring that employees are working well from home and intrusion of their privacy. Working from home makes one more accessible and is often an invasion of private space. At the same time we really to make sure that people are doing what they are being paid to do which is to work. It's a fine balance …' (Participant 9)

Discussion

The study sought to explore the ethical tensions experienced while working remotely among a sample of female middle managers within the South African public service. The study identified three main ethical tensions arising from remote work, affecting the mental health of managers. The tensions include disclosure, trust and control. These tensions present unique challenges and stressors threatening mental health. The results are discussed in detail next.

Findings from the study indicated that remote working has brought about the ethical dilemma of whether employees in management roles should fully disclose how they spend their work hours or not. The participants expressed feeling guilt when attending to personal tasks during working hours, they also experienced anxiety because of the need to conform without voicing personal work strategies. It is clear, that most employees, including those who are not doing extra work outside their formal jobs, experience stress and uncertainty over disclosure. Consistent with these findings, Grant et al. (2019) noticed that remote work creates conflicts between professional and personal roles increasing anxiety, stress and mental strain. In line with this, Harunavamwe and Ward (2022) observed that remote workers often experience blurred boundaries between work and personal life leading to stress and guilt. The flexibility and work-life balance increase the desire to work remotely but pose a challenge regarding the spillover between work time and family responsibilities making disclosure more complex (Laß & Wooden, 2023; Raišienė et al., 2023).

There is need to account for time effectively while maintaining a level of privacy and autonomy. This practice resonates with what Hafermalz (2021) termed voluntary visibilising, where employees respond to the ethical tension of disclosure by engaging in activities that ensure they are virtually visible to their managers; these activities may include prompt response to emails, consistent calling and asking for clarity even where instructions are clear and visibility on company apps such as Skype. This behaviour is triggered by a pressure and motivated by a desire to give supervisors a favourable impression. Hafermalz (2021) argues that remote working employees, in fear of possible 'exile' and invisibility, voluntarily engage in actions that may be observed by supervisors 'to make themselves visible at the perceived center of organisational life' in an effort to connect with others and obtain recognition. To avoid directly seeking disclosure and accountability on how employees spent their time in remote settings, some managers have turned to time management apps that aim to ensure that teams' performance and hours are rendered as intended for maximum productivity and efficiency whether through synchronous or asynchronous communication (Delfino & Van Der Kolk, 2021). However, studies have indicated that some managers are taking a dark turn with these time-tracking apps. Evidence indicates that the majority of managers heavily abuse the monitoring features of these applications transforming them into micro-management tools that threaten the privacy and morale of employees (Delfino & Van Der Kolk, 2021). Thus, the extent of disclosure needs to be clarified. Employees face the pressure to be transparent about their work hours to prove productivity, which can conflict with their desire for privacy. This tension can lead to stress and anxiety, as employees may feel constantly monitored or judged based on their disclosures. In terms of mental health, the pressure to disclose time usage can lead to feelings of mistrust and insecurity, which may result in stress and burnout. As a result, some flexible employers have allowed remote teams to track time at their own pace, features such as apps include distraction alerts, website and application usage, website and chat monitoring and real-time screenshots (Delfino & Van Der Kolk, 2021). In such set-ups, productivity increases but at the same time employees are overworked to meet expectations, further exacerbating mental strain (Galanti et al., 2021).

In line with the aforesaid, the second ethical tension emerging from the results revolves around trust issues between managers and their teams in a remote working context. Enaifoghe and Zenzile (2023) observed that although limited evidence indicates the negative impact of remote work on employees' productivity remote work can cause counterproductive work behaviours. Thus, managers may have doubts regarding how employees manage time while working remotely. Findings from the participants indicated that they perceive employees' experience of their management style as being an overly critical management style that caused psychological pain and is often viewed with suspicion, exacerbating trust issues. Similarly, other participants described a lack of trust as contributing to a toxic work culture in remote contexts. Aligning with the findings of this study, recent research indicates that due to trust issues, many organisations have adopted productivity apps with time-tracking features to monitor employees' work hours throughout the day (Enaifoghe & Zenzile, 2023). Although from a judiciary perspective, workplace monitoring in South Africa is considered legal, subject to the expectations that it is made known to employees that their work is being monitored (Hafermalz, 2021). This monitoring should fall within business interests and not for personal matters, in which jurisdictions could interpret its legality differently, once employees perceive the monitoring process as a micro-management tool the whole process may threaten their privacy and autonomy. Modern employees are highly averse to micromanaging; thus there is need for managers to trust their employees to work effectively without direct supervision within the remote context. To make matters worse for managers, remote work ethical practitioners are urging employees to be vigilant and stay alert for signs that their employers are monitoring their activities with or without consent (Žvirelienė & Lipinskienė, 2023).

When the privacy line is crossed, employees are encouraged to share their concerns with proper authorities. There is, thus, need for managers to trust their employees to work effectively

without direct supervision within the remote context. Managers who exhibit trust in their employees can foster a positive and motivating atmosphere. Conversely, a lack of trust can lead to micro-management, reducing employee morale and negatively impacting work engagement (Delfino & Van Der Kolk, 2021). When the managers lack trust in their teams, it creates a pervasive sense of doubt and anxiety among employees. Feeling mistrusted can lead to diminished self-esteem and increased stress, as employees might feel they need to constantly prove their worth (Hafermalz, 2021). This can also strain relationships between team members and their managers, leading to a toxic work environment.

Related to the concept of trust is the issue of control; the results of this study indicated that managers are faced with the ethical tension of balancing control over their employees' work while allowing for autonomy. Results indicate that managers struggle to balance autonomy and control, often resorting to excessive monitoring eventually causing stress. One of the participants, the Legal Manager, indicated that post-COVID-19 general scepticism and controlling attitudes were noticed among most managers. Another participant the Information Manager also indicated that employees may feel distressed even when exposed to necessary surveillance. Recent studies indicate that an increasing trend towards various forms of employee autonomy in remote settings presents a tension for organisations as they struggle to reconcile this relinquishing of control with organisational leaders' inherent desire for more control (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016).

The Procurement Manager's experience as an employee highlighted discomfort from mandatory online etiquette and continuous monitoring. Consistent with the findings, a recent study documented that some managers made use of software packages to monitor employees' activities and increased the number of digital meetings (Delfino & Van Der Kolk, 2021). In addition, supervisors become more demanding leading to more constraining control over employees, using audits and access logs as tools for monitoring unusual activity. This contradicts with the Self Determination Theory's expectation that self-government of the working day (i.e. autonomy) is important for facilitating intrinsic motivation. This suggests that less action control can provide employees with a stronger idea of self-determination (Merchant & Van Der Stede, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In some organisations, employees working remotely are instructed to keep Skype apps open for managers to control employees and make sure they do their work, observe whether employees are attending meetings, are in calls or whether they are away and if so for how long (Parker, 2020). It has been highlighted in the literature that these technologies used for remote working can become a means to exercise micro-management from a distance (Parker, 2020). Literature indicates that some employees refrain from taking lunch or coffee breaks from work out of fear for their supervisors, who could call or check the employees' status and find out that they left their computer (Parker, 2020).

Consistently, control practices that align with the principles of CAS, which recognise the interdependence and adaptability of agents within an organisation may initially promote a culture of flexibility, cooperation and adaptability. However, because of the emergent nature of CAS, these control mechanisms may unintentionally trigger over-commitment and self-exploitation over time. In environments where agents (employees) fear job loss or future uncertainties, their willingness to engage in voluntary transparency practices may escalate beyond normal levels, amplifying risk to their well-being (Hafermalz, 2021). This can lead to a self-reinforcing loop, where the adaptive pressure to demonstrate commitment pushes employees to continuously exceed personal limits, ultimately threatening the overall health of the system and its individuals (Delfino & Van Der Kolk, 2021).

In addition, it has been argued that a strong motivation to engage in extra work and a fear of being overlooked has the potential to turn into over-commitment and self-exploitation, which could subsequently lead to higher levels of stress or even burnout (Hafermalz, 2021). Complex Adaptive Systems offers a framework to understand how well-intended control practices might spiral into unhealthy adaptive behaviours within the organisational system. Employees believe they can do better alone yet managers feel the need to control processes. Given the positive link between remote work and productivity, managers should release control and allow employees some autonomy. Bloom et al. (2022) examined employees who were given the opportunity to work from home instead of the office and discovered that a significant increase of 13% in performance was noticed. The employees worked more efficiently per shift, had fewer breaks and had less absence because of sickness.

Excessive control can lead to micro-management, stifling creativity and innovation and limited control or too much autonomy without proper guidance can result in decreased productivity and accountability (Delfino & Van Der Kolk, 2021). In turn, environments that are highly controlled lead to feelings of being micromanaged and undervalued, causing stress and frustration. Yet environments that allow too much autonomy without support may result in feelings of isolation and lack of support, which may result in anxiety and lack of direction. It is therefore clear that both extremes negatively impact mental health, highlighting the need for a balanced approach to management in a remote working environment.

The collected evidence suggests that managers who provide more autonomy to their employees and employ less strict types of control will likely have team members who are more motivated. Consistent with this, Self Determination Theory suggests that in a situation in which an employee receives more autonomy, intrinsic motivation is facilitated (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Practical implications

To avoid consistent disclosure, it is important for organisations to design clear policies on remote work. These policies should be initiated by offering training for managers and employees on best practices for remote work, including effective communication, time management and proper use of technology. This training should then be followed by defining daily expectations, indicating activities that are acceptable during working hours to reduce ambiguity and anxiety about disclosure. Encourage honest communication between the employees and the managers to foster a culture of transparency and reduce feelings of guilt and the need to conceal activities. This communication can include using SurveyMonkey or Google Forms to gather anonymous feedback on remote work experiences and use the insights to make necessary adjustments. It is also important to establish straightforward and transparent processes for declaring extra work outside formal employment, which helps to reduce the stress and uncertainty associated with potential conflicts of interest or breaches of policy.

With trust as one of the ethical tensions, there is need for organisations to implement trust-building activities and regular check-ins to strengthen relationships between managers and employees. The managers should adopt coaching techniques and recognise employees' accomplishments and provide them with autonomy to make decisions about their work, which can help reduce the scepticism and mistrust that can arise in remote work settings. In line with that, it is important to balance control and autonomy, managers should develop fair and reasonable monitoring practices that ensure accountability without infringing on employees' privacy or causing undue stress, which may include the use of periodic check-ins. Additionally, organisations should foster transparent communication, regularly check in with employees to address concerns and involve them in decision-making processes. Relationship-building activities like team-building and mentorship programmes strengthen personal connections, while consistent support, constructive feedback and fair conflict resolution maintain trust. Cultivating a culture of accountability where both managers and employees follow through on commitments further enhances trust and cooperation within the workplace. To deal with the ethical tension of control managers should be trained to adopt a supportive rather than controlling approach, it is advisable that managers become more of coaches than managers emphasising guidance and support over micro-management.

Given that the previously discussed ethical tensions threaten the well-being of employees, it is important to provide access to mental health resources, such as counselling services, stress management workshops and employee assistance programmes that can be administered virtually to help employees cope with the stress and anxiety associated with remote work. This should be aided with work-life balance initiatives such as flexible working hours that assist employees to manage their professional and personal responsibilities more effectively.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex ethical tensions in remote work and their profound impact on employees' mental health. Woking remotely has emerged as a transformative phenomenon, reshaping the work environment and introducing a blend of opportunities and challenges to employee well-being. Addressing the ethical tensions identified in the study requires thoughtful management strategies and a nuanced approach that considers the diverse needs and preferences of employees. Thus, the study identified strategies that balance transparency, trust and autonomy to alleviate the mental health challenges posed by remote working. Clear communication and setting mutual expectations are identified as ways to enhance trust and reduce the need for stringent controls or exhaustive disclosures.

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