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# Remote Working Human Resources Professionals: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Engagement Experiences

**Dorcas Nana Jackson**

Pacific Lutheran University, United States of America

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### \*Correspondence:

[jacksodn@plu.edu](mailto:jacksodn@plu.edu)

### ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 15 U.S.-based HR professionals working remotely, applying Kahn's (1990) engagement theory as an interpretive framework. Data collected via semi-structured Zoom interviews were thematically analyzed. Findings revealed three essential dimensions of engagement: the need for a personalized and distraction-free physical work environment; meaningful and cognitively organized tasks; and emotional support through empathetic leadership and community. This research holds value for remote work managers, organizational leaders, and employee experience designers aiming to support remote employees and HR professionals. It is also relevant for scholars exploring remote work culture, engagement theory, and applied qualitative methods in organizational settings. By centering the voices of HR professionals working remotely, this study contributes insights to an emerging remote work and engagement challenges. It offers evidence-based recommendations that can help align remote engagement strategies with real-world professional experiences, advancing both practical solutions and theory-building in the evolving digital workplace.

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Remote work has become the norm after the Covid-19 pandemic (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). The number of virtual employees in the United States is rising, with more than 90% of organizations considering, continuing or initiating remote work (Burrows et al., 2022). Keeping virtual employees engaged and productive has become a pressing leadership concern. Employee

engagement is a concept introduced by Kahn (1990), who defined it as “the harnessing of organizational members to their work roles” (p. 694). According to Kahn, employee engagement reflects an employee’s satisfaction, commitment, and involvement at work. Kahn further suggested that engagement reflects three dimensions: workers’ cognitive, physical, and emotional job role performance. Following this idea, Schaufeli et al. (2019) characterized work engagement as a positive, emotionally satisfying, work-related cognitive state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in work. While much of the research on remote work engagement focuses on general employee populations or tech-driven roles (Charalampous et al., 2022), HR professionals represent a distinct and under-examined group. While many employees have adjusted to remote conditions, HR professionals face dual pressures: maintaining their own engagement while supporting engagement initiatives across the workforce. This dual responsibility makes their engagement both complex and critical. As strategic partners managing both compliance and culture, their ability to remain engaged in a remote setting directly impacts workforce well-being and organizational continuity (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the strategic responsibilities of HR professionals, particularly in supporting remote and hybrid work arrangements, employee well-being, and digital transformation. For instance, Cooke et al. (2022) noted that HR’s role has expanded to include the design of virtual workplace experiences that promote well-being, inclusion, and performance. HR professionals are playing a critical role in managing virtual work transitions, supporting employees’ health and safety, and reshaping talent management systems to fit remote environments (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Yet, while HR has taken on more strategic functions in this new landscape, their own experiences with engagement while working remotely remain largely unexamined. This omission is a significant gap, given their central role in shaping organizational performance, employee morale, and retention (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017).

This research is relevant because understanding employee engagement remains critically important as organizations continue to navigate the long-term impacts of remote and hybrid work. Despite the emphasis on engagement strategies during the pandemic, recent data show that only 32% of U.S. employees are actively engaged, while 18% are actively disengaged, a concerning stagnation (Harter, 2023). Engagement hasn’t bounced back to pre-pandemic levels, even as remote and hybrid work have become the norm. This raises real concerns about how well current engagement efforts are working especially for the HR professionals leading them. They are responsible for shaping culture, supporting leaders, and keeping employees engaged, yet we know very little about how engaged they feel themselves. That disconnect makes this study timely. If the people tasked with improving engagement are burned out or disengaged, the entire organization feels the impact (SHRM, 2022).

This study contributes to the literature by exploring the lived engagement experiences of remote HR professionals, a population central to organizational strategy yet understudied in engagement research. It extends the theoretical understanding of engagement into a remote, function-specific context. Understanding how HR professionals experience and sustain engagement while working remotely will not only enrich the academic dialogue on engagement but also offer leaders practical strategies applicable across sectors. Unlike prior studies that focus on general employee populations or tech-driven roles, this study uniquely centers on HR

professionals navigating remote work. The use of a qualitative phenomenological approach offers deeper insight into how engagement and disengagement are experienced moving beyond what is typically captured through quantitative surveys. By focusing on this overlooked population and work context, the study introduces unique insights relevant to both theory and practice in today's evolving workplace.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Kahn's research represents the initial phase in the study of employee engagement. The theory provides a foundation for advancing investigations into the dynamic nature of employee engagement (Xia, 2022). While Kahn's (1990) foundational theory of employee engagement continues to serve as the cornerstone of engagement research, recent shifts in work structures, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, demand deeper empirical exploration. Kahn's model, which frames engagement through psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability, has been widely applied to explain how employees bring their full selves physically, cognitively, and emotionally to work. Saks (2017) emphasized the practical utility of this theory, noting that organizations can adapt engagement strategies in line with Kahn's principles. However, studies that directly apply this framework to long-term remote work contexts, particularly among HR professionals, remain limited.

## **Dimensions of Kahn's Theory of Employee Engagement**

According to Kahn, employees become disengaged when they detach emotionally, cognitively, and physically from tasks. Kahn asserted that, employee engagement has three dimensions: physical, emotional, and cognitive. While these three dimensions of employee engagement are distinct, they are also interrelated and mutually reinforcing (Blut et al., 2023). For example, when employees are physically engaged with work and feel it is meaningful, they are more likely to be emotionally engaged.

Several researchers have attempted to contextualize Kahn's dimensions in modern work environments. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) found that engagement mediated the relationship between job resources and turnover intention, showing that supportive roles reduce attrition. Charalampous et al. (2022), using a qualitative approach, explored how remote workers maintain well-being and engagement, emphasizing the value of autonomy, digital boundaries, and open communication. Similarly, Adisa, Aiyenitaju, and Adekoya (2021) highlighted the strain that digital overload places on emotional engagement, pointing to how blurred boundaries contribute to fatigue and disengagement. A mixed-methods study by Kulal et al. (2025) involving 213 service-sector employees in India found that remote work significantly enhanced engagement through increased autonomy, flexibility, and improved work-life balance. However, cognitive and emotional engagement declined when employees experienced isolation and communication breakdowns, emphasizing the need for clear digital collaboration platforms and structured managerial support in sustaining engagement. Recent empirical work by Chanana and Sangeeta (2021) has investigated engagement strategies during remote work, highlighting how flexibility, social connectivity, and task relevancy support motivation and commitment in distributed teams. Similarly, Khusanova et al. (2021) validated the role of meaningfulness in enhancing engagement and performance within public-sector contexts, although their focus was not on remote or HR specific settings. These studies help affirm

Kahn's constructs but also highlight the absence of function-specific, remote contextualized data particularly for those specializing in HR.

Recent Gallup findings by Harter (2024) show that remote employees can simultaneously report high engagement and high stress, highlighting the complexity of remote work. This duality supports the need to explore engagement as a multi-dimensional, lived experience especially in emotionally demanding roles like HR.

Despite these contributions, most studies focus on general knowledge workers or technology-driven roles, overlooking HR professionals a group tasked with both maintaining their own engagement and driving engagement strategies organization-wide. This dual responsibility positions them as key actors in organizational culture and strategy (Cooke et al., 2022; Kowalski & Loretto, 2017), yet little is known about how they experience or sustain engagement in remote work. Research by Swaroop and Sharma (2022) also identified a lack of role-specific insight, noting that existing models often fail to capture how engagement is felt and enacted in functional HR roles. These findings replicate Harter's (2024) "remote work paradox," where employees report high engagement levels alongside elevated stress. This suggests that engagement, particularly within HR roles, may mask deeper cognitive and emotional burdens. These findings support the need to explore engagement as a complex, context-dependent experience rather than a uniform outcome.

Recent studies continue to rely heavily on pre-pandemic frameworks that do not account for the emotional and logistical complexities of sustained remote work. While studies such as Wang et al. (2021) and Tleuken et al. (2022) examined general remote work engagement, they do not investigate how psychological availability or meaningfulness are affected when HR professionals are distanced from teams they support. Moreover, the issue of disengagement long seen as the inverse of engagement (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Kahn, 1990) has not been sufficiently explored in HR roles. During the pandemic, HR professionals were reported to experience increased levels of stress, burnout, and emotional fatigue (SHRM, 2022), yet little qualitative research exists to explain how these professionals interpret or recover from disengagement.

Moreover, much of the engagement literature relies on pre-pandemic frameworks and broad, survey-based approaches that overlook the lived realities of remote working. Studies like Wang et al. (2021) and Tleuken et al. (2022) examined environmental and cognitive factors generally but did not explore how psychological availability or emotional resilience are experienced particularly by HR professionals. The tendency to reduce human experience to instrumental metrics (e.g., productivity, turnover) further obscures the impact of remote work on emotional engagement.

The broader literature on employee engagement remains fragmented and often instrumental in its treatment of workers, focusing more on outcomes than lived experience (Bal & Brookes, 2022). By exploring HR professionals' lived experiences, this study aligns with calls for more dignity-centered inquiry that foregrounds human experiences over purely outcome-based metrics. Scholars like Ranjbari et al. (2021) have called for more human-centered approaches that account for dignity, sustainability, and the evolving nature of work. Most applications of Kahn's theory still assume traditional, office-based settings and overlook the various ways that physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement evolve in virtual environments.

Despite the growth of remote work literature since the COVID-19 pandemic, current studies largely overlook the lived experiences of HR professionals, who face unique pressures as both employees and engagement leaders. Existing research continues to rely heavily on pre-pandemic frameworks and lacks current empirical evidence from the post-pandemic period. Furthermore, while the pandemic has sparked a surge in remote work research, much of the literature remains fragmented and instrumental, often overlooking the dignity and sustainability of people in HRM practices (Bal & Brookes, 2022). Most applications of Kahn's theory remain grounded in traditional office-based work contexts, with limited attention given to how meaningfulness, safety, and availability manifest in long-term remote environments. By focusing on HR professionals' lived experiences, this study contributes a more integrated and human-centered perspective on engagement in the post-pandemic workplace.

This study addresses these critical gaps by focusing specifically on HR professionals working remotely in the post-pandemic era. It builds on prior research while offering a function-specific perspective using Kahn's (1990) theory. The study differentiates itself by using a qualitative, phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of engagement and disengagement, providing insights beyond what survey-based models typically offer. In doing so, it contributes to both the theoretical evolution of engagement and the practical understanding of how HR professionals navigate and sustain engagement in remote contexts shaped by the pandemic and beyond.

## Method and Design

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to explore the lived engagement experiences of remote-working HR professionals. Anchored in Kahn's (1990) theory of employee engagement, the design allowed for an in-depth examination of how HR professionals perceive physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement while working in remote environments. IPA was selected for its emphasis on subjective meaning-making and suitability for capturing how individuals experience and interpret significant aspects of their work (Alase, 2017; Tuffour, 2017).

The study focused on HR professionals working remotely across the United States. Participants were selected through criterion-based sampling to ensure relevance and homogeneity, consistent with IPA standards (Moser & Korstjen, 2017). Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) perform HR duties daily, (b) work for an organization with at least 25 employees, (c) have worked remotely in an HR role for at least one year, (d) be based in the United States, and (e) be at least 18 years old. Fifteen participants were recruited through LinkedIn professional groups. Prospective participants received an introductory message outlining the study and eligibility criteria, and those interested were screened via phone or Zoom. Consent forms were obtained prior to scheduling individual interviews.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. The interview guide was developed using Kahn's (1990) framework (See [Appendix A](#)), with questions designed to explore participants' remote engagement across physical, cognitive, and emotional domains. Each interview began with a broad prompt, followed by open-ended questions and probes to explore emergent themes. The guide was reviewed by two practitioner experts with similar profiles to the study participants to ensure clarity and alignment with the study's aims (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). Interviews were conducted via Zoom audio, recorded with

participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Notes were taken immediately after each interview to support reflexive interpretation.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation and confidentiality. Each participant was assigned a unique code to ensure anonymity in transcripts and reporting.

Analysis followed the IPA framework, involving iterative readings of transcripts to identify key statements and emergent codes. These codes were grouped into themes that reflected individual experiences as well as shared patterns across participants. The researcher engaged in double hermeneutics interpreting participants' interpretations while maintaining a close connection to the theoretical lens of Kahn's (1990) dimensions of engagement. Reflexive journaling and note-taking enhanced analytical rigor and helped track the evolution of themes. Data collection concluded when thematic saturation was achieved, consistent with qualitative standards (Guest et al., 2017).

The chosen methodology enabled an in-depth exploration of how HR professionals understand and navigate engagement while working remotely, providing insight into a function-specific population often overlooked in existing remote work and engagement literature.

## Data Collection

This qualitative phenomenological study employed semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews guided by an interview protocol. The data collection primarily occurred through recorded, in-depth, virtual semi-structured interviews, each lasting 45 min to 1 h.

Each session began with an overview of the study and confirmation of informed consent. The interviews included open-ended questions focused on the lived experiences of remote HR professionals and explored how virtual organizations can enhance physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to articulate personal experiences while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions for depth and clarity (Guest et al., 2017). The interview protocol was developed in alignment with the research questions and field-tested by 2–3 practitioner experts who matched the participant profile but were not part of the final sample. This review helped ensure the questions were clear, relevant, and unbiased (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010), thereby enhancing the study's credibility.

## Data Analysis

This section presents the results of the data analysis, which was conducted using both deductive analyses adopted by Miles and Huberman (1994) and detailed in Table 2, and inductive analysis adopted by Braun and Clarke (2006) and detailed in Table 3.

**Table 1**

### *Deductive Analysis of the Data*

Step	Process Overview	Utilized Tools
1	Establish Theoretical Framework: Have a clear theoretical framework to guide the deductive analysis from existing literature or theories relevant to the study.	Interview recordings, research diary
2	Construct a Coding Framework: Generate a specific set of codes derived from the established theoretical framework, emphasizing relevant concepts or themes.	Research diary, Coding software (e.g., NVivo)
3	Gather Qualitative Data: Collect qualitative data relevant to the research question. This could include interviews, observations, or document analysis.	Research notes



4	Implement Coding: Systematically assign the prepared codes to segments of the collected data, categorizing the information according to identified theoretical concepts or themes.	Coded interview transcripts, Research diary
5	Adjust Coding Framework if Necessary: Adapt and refine the coding.	Updated interview transcripts
6	Analyze Coded Data: Conduct a detailed analysis of the data within each coded category to deduce how they corroborate or challenge the initial theoretical framework.	Coded interview transcripts
7	Synthesize Findings: Draw interpretive conclusions from the coded data, assessing how the findings relate to and inform the initial theoretical framework.	Coded interview transcripts
8	Compile and Present Findings: Articulate a comprehensive report detailing the deductive analysis outcomes, correlating the findings with the theoretical framework.	Finalized interview transcripts

Note. Adapted from *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.) by M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, 1994, Sage Publications.

**Table 2**

*Inductive Analysis of the Data*

Step	Process Overview	Utilized Tools
1	Understanding the Data: Engage in thorough reading of transcripts and note-taking for potential code generation.	Transcripts from interviews, journal of the researcher
2	Initial Code Creation: Segment the data into smaller parts that are relevant to the research question through coding.	Journal of the researcher, memos in NVIVO
3	Theme Identification: Pinpoint themes that are relevant and intriguing in relation to the research question.	Journal for research
4	Theme Evaluation: Assess and refine themes to confirm their relevance, data support, appropriate data volume, existence of subthemes, and potential for new theme generation.	Transcripts from interviews, journal of the researcher
5	Theme Interpretation: Clarify the core of each theme and its role in addressing the research question.	Transcripts from interviews
6	Narrative Composition: The concluding phase involves compiling the research findings into a documented narrative.	Transcripts from interviews

Note. Adapted from "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," by V. Braun and V. Clarke, 2006, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, pp. 77–101. Copyright 2006 by Taylor & Francis.

**Table 3**

*Demographics of the Participants*

Participant No.	Job Title	Yrs. at Org.	Total Yrs in HR	Primary Work Space
P1	Recruiting Manager	1+	18	Office space within the house
P2	HR Advisor	1+	17	Couch with chaise, small desk
P3	HR Specialist	5	5	Desk by window, apartment
P4	Program Administrator	4.5	5	Sit-stand desk, bedroom setup
P5	HR Business Partner	1	11	Desk, two screens, quiet space
P6	Human Resource Administrator	5.5	5.5	Basement with desk and ergonomic chair
P7	Lead Benefits and Leave Business Partner	8	6	Quiet guest room with desk
P8	HR Manager	3+	2+	Designated room, executive chair
P9	HR Manager	9	17	Designated room, standup desk
P10	Senior HR Manager	10	10	Quiet corner at home
P11	Human Resources Manager	5	8	Home office
P12	Senior HR Director	15+	30+	Quiet, organized home office
P13	HR Coordinator	2	2	Small desk in living room
P14	Senior HR Business Partner	1	25	Home office with cultural art
P15	Chief Human Resources Officer	6	8	Home office

Note. Participant No. is the pseudonym for each participant. Employment type is full-time for all of the participants. Yrs at the organization is the number of years employed by the current employer.

Specifically, responses to the six physical engagement questions, five cognitive engagement questions, and seven emotional engagement questions were used to address Research Question 1, while responses to the five strategy-related questions were used to address Research Question

2 (See [Appendix A](#)). This comprehensive analysis identified major and minor themes summarized in [Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7](#).

Data analysis followed both deductive and inductive approaches. A deductive structure, informed by the physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement, guided initial coding and interpretation. These dimensions shaped the organization of interview questions and framed the way engagement was examined in remote work contexts. Using NVivo software, transcripts were coded based on this framework and revised iteratively to reflect participants' unique interpretations and language (see [Table 1](#)).

Simultaneously, thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method was applied to allow new insights to emerge inductively from the data (see [Table 2](#)). Initial codes were generated through repeated reading of the transcripts, then grouped into broader themes that captured recurring patterns in the participants' narratives. These themes reflected both how remote HR professionals made sense of their engagement and how they navigated its emotional, physical, and cognitive components.

Member checking was conducted to enhance data accuracy and credibility. Participants reviewed their transcripts and were invited to clarify or expand on their responses. A reflexive research journal and NVivo's coding tools supported ongoing interpretation, helping track how themes evolved and how they connected to the broader research questions.

Together, the deductive and inductive analyses enabled a layered understanding of how remote-working HR professionals experience and interpret engagement, grounding both theoretical alignment and emergent meaning in the participants' own language and contexts.

## Findings

The findings presented below are organized according to the research question that guided this study: *What are remote working HR professionals' lived experiences regarding the physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of work engagement?* The data collected from 15 semi-structured interviews revealed complex interrelationships among the physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of remote work engagement. Participants' experiences illustrate how workspace design, technology access, communication, organizational support, and leadership intersect to shape their levels of engagement. These findings also reflect adaptive strategies developed by HR professionals to remain productive and emotionally connected in remote settings. The themes are presented below by dimension, including representative quotations and participant perspectives.

### **RQ1: Themes related to the Physical Dimension of Employee Engagement**

*Physical Dimension of Work Engagement.* The physical dimension is defined as the energy exerted by individuals to fulfill their roles (Kahn, 1990). Participants emphasized the importance of physical workspaces, ergonomic support, and technological infrastructure in enabling their engagement. As summarized in [Table 4](#), five primary themes emerged.

*Physical Dimension:* The physical dimension of employee engagement is the physical energy exerted by the individual to accomplish organizational roles (Kahn, 1990).



**Table 4***Themes Related to the Physical Dimension of Employee Engagement*

Themes	Explanation	<i>n</i>	%
Workspace personalization and design	The design and personalization, including personal touches, ergonomic furniture, and adequate lighting, enhance focus and creativity.	15	100
Equipment and software	Technological infrastructure, including monitors, laptops, and tools for connectivity.	15	100
Dedicated home office spaces	Physical space or traditional dedicated spaces such as office space, desk in the living room, desk in the bedroom	15	100
Stipends for office space enhancements	Stipends provided by organizations for office space enhancements.	5	33
Ergonomic furniture	Physical comfort and ergonomics, including proper chairs, standing desks, ergonomic keyboards, and mice.	5	33

*Note.* *N* = 15. *n* = number of participants using the modifications under each theme. % is the percentage of participants using the modifications.

**Workspace Personalization and Design.** All participants described the significance of workspace personalization and design. Participants expressed how customizing their home offices, with elements like natural lighting, cultural artifacts, ergonomic chairs, and plants fostered focus and creativity. For instance, P15 shared, “My home office is a vibrant and energizing space equipped with ultramodern technology. It’s designed to reflect my personality.” P7 added, “I’ve surrounded myself with plants and natural light, which makes a huge difference in my day-to-day mood and productivity.” These narratives affirm the role of intentional space design in supporting well-being and productivity.

**Equipment and Software.** Every participant emphasized access to essential technology—including dual monitors, VPNs, HR software, and internet infrastructure—as a vital contributor to work engagement. P10 stated, “The company provided me with a laptop and access to our HR systems, which are essential for my daily tasks.” P11 explained how a dual monitor setup improved both efficiency and physical comfort.

**Dedicated Home Office Spaces.** Dedicated workspaces were deemed crucial for minimizing distractions and maintaining focus. While participants acknowledged a trade-off between solitude and social interaction, all agreed that a defined physical space positively impacted their engagement. P14 noted, “Having a dedicated space helps me focus, but I miss the energy and personal interaction of a traditional office.”

**Stipends for Office Space Enhancements.** A third of participants indicated that stipends for workspace improvements enhanced their comfort and engagement. P7 shared, “We receive a stipend of about \$50 quarterly for office supplies,” while P15 emphasized, “The company has been incredibly supportive in providing a stipend for high-end tech equipment, ergonomic furniture, and personalizing my workspace.”

**Ergonomic Furniture.** Five participants highlighted the importance of ergonomic furniture in reducing fatigue and enhancing comfort. P8 reflected, “I invested in an ergonomic chair and adjustable lighting. It’s made a significant difference in my physical comfort and overall work endurance.”

## **RQ1 Themes Related to the Cognitive Dimension of Employee Engagement**

*Cognitive Dimension of Work Engagement.* The cognitive dimension involves individuals' beliefs about their working conditions and their organizations (Kahn, 1990). The analysis revealed five interconnected themes.

**Table 5**

*Themes Related to the Cognitive Dimension of Employee Engagement*

Themes	Description	<i>n</i>	%
Space for cognitive focus	Engagement optimization through cognitive focus was a recurring theme. Elements for cognitive focus include a dedicated, comfortable, and personalized workspace equipped with the necessary technology and ergonomic furniture for enhancing focus, creativity, and overall cognitive engagement.	7	47
Effective communication through digital connectivity	Consistent emphasis on the necessity of technology such as laptops, high-speed internet, and collaborative software for maintaining focus, workflow, engagement, and effective communication.	7	47
Workload management	Discussions emerged around the intensity and management of workloads, with a focus on strategies for managing tasks, the balance between stimulating and overwhelming work, and the need for clear communication affecting cognitive load and engagement.	7	47
Supportive organizational culture	Organizational support beliefs emerged regarding organizational culture, including support from the organization, and recognition was highlighted.	6	40
Cognitive adaptation	Participants reflected on adapting to remote work as well as the challenges and benefits of work focus while working remotely.	4	27

*Note.* *N* = 15. *n* = the number of participants under each theme.

**Space for Cognitive Focus.** Participants shared that dedicated, quiet, and personalized workspaces fostered deeper focus and mental clarity. P3 stated, “I find that I do focus more, and I have this workspace setup that makes me focus more.” P5 added, “My dedicated home office, with everything just where I need it, makes a world of difference in my mental focus.”

**Effective Communication Through Digital Connectivity.** Digital tools played a critical role in supporting workflow and team engagement. Seven participants described how communication platforms such as Teams and Zoom supported their engagement. P5 noted, “Instant messenger and Teams are helpful to just keep in contact with my team and get questions answered as quickly as possible.”

**Workload Management.** Participants expressed mixed experiences regarding workloads. Some felt their workloads remained unchanged, while others described increases due to role expansion. Regardless, participants emphasized the importance of clear communication and task management. P15 explained, “It doesn't feel like you are overwhelmed... you have a set goal, and you work towards hitting that goal.”

**Supportive Organizational Culture.** A supportive culture enhanced participants' focus and sense of belonging. P13 remarked, “The culture of support for remote work within the organization helps in keeping my cognitive focus sharp and engagement high.” P10 described, “Our company quickly adapted to remote work... focusing on employee well-being and maintaining a strong sense of team unity.”

**Cognitive Adaptation.** Some participants highlighted the need for mental adjustment in adapting to remote work. P9 explained, “Adjusting to remote work was taxing initially, but now

I've found my rhythm." P13 added, "Adapting my mental approach to work has been key; it's a continuous process."

### **RQ1 Themes Related to the Emotional Dimension of Employee Engagement.**

*Emotional Dimension of Work Engagement.* The emotional dimension refers to how employees feel and whether their attitudes toward the organization are positive or negative (Kahn, 1990). Seven themes emerged (Table 6).

*Emotional Dimension.* The emotional dimension is how employees feel and whether they have negative or positive attitudes toward their organization (Kahn, 1990).

**Table 6**

*Themes Related to the Emotional Dimension of Employee Engagement*

Themes	Description	<i>n</i>	%
Emotional stability	fromThe feelings that the design and personalization of a workspace, especially when working personalized workspace design remotely, play a significant role in fostering emotional stability.	5	33
Emotional impact of technology	Mentions of adequate technology influencing emotional well-being.	5	33
Feeling of isolation	Feelings of isolation such as the impact of isolation, craving for in-person interaction, and emotional and social connections in workforce engagement.	5	33
Feelings of enthusiasm	There were mentions of enthusiasm such as investment in the participant's roles.	6	40
Craving for in-person interaction	Missing in-person interactions leads to a desire for the energy and organic nature of face-to-face meetings, and emotional well-being.	4	27
Feeling valued	Participants expressed feeling valued through the support they receive from their organization, which includes regular check-ins, feedback, and acknowledgment.	7	47
Emotional adaptation setting	in a remoteMentions by participants regarding adapting to remote work. This involves continuous emotional effort and self-reflection, requiring new strategies for maintaining emotional well-being and engagement.	7	47

Note. *N* = 15. *n* = the number of participants under each theme.

**Emotional Stability from Personalized Workspace Design.** Participants noted that personalized and calming workspaces supported emotional balance. P12 stated, "The right lighting and a comfortable chair have surprisingly uplifted my mood and productivity."

**Emotional Impact of Technology.** Technology either enhanced or hindered emotional well-being depending on reliability. P9 said, "I feel frustrated when technical issues interrupt my flow of work." P13 emphasized, "The right tools make me feel empowered and more engaged."

**Feelings of Isolation.** A third of participants expressed feelings of isolation. P3 stated, "There are days I feel totally absorbed by my work, but other times, the isolation can make me feel detached." P7 added, "I do feel a little isolated while working remotely."

**Feelings of Enthusiasm.** Participants who felt enthusiastic about their roles credited flexibility, autonomy, and impact as motivators. P15 shared, "I'm deeply passionate about my role... My team's dedication and creativity fuel my enthusiasm."

**Craving for In-Person Interaction.** Some participants missed spontaneous collaboration. P1 stated, "I miss the impromptu brainstorming sessions; they not only sparked creativity but gave me a cognitive break." " P14 admitted, "Virtual happy hours are nice, but they don't quite fill the gap of in-person socializing."

**Feeling Valued.** Feeling appreciated by the organization significantly enhanced emotional engagement. P14 described, "Regular check-ins, an open-door policy, and genuine efforts to

understand my cultural background make me feel both engaged and valued.” P11 noted, “The flexibility and responsibility entrusted to me in managing HR functions remotely make me feel valued and invested in my work.”

**Emotional Adaptation in a Remote Setting.** Several participants described ongoing emotional adjustments. P7 noted, “I’ve had to find new ways to stay motivated and emotionally connected to my work.” P14 explained, “Continuous learning and adapting new tools keep me engaged but also require constant effort.”

Together, these themes across the physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions reveal a complex yet interconnected picture of how remote-working HR professionals experience and sustain engagement. These insights not only reflect personal strategies but also illuminate systemic structures and organizational supports that enable or hinder remote work success.

## **RQ2: What strategies do remote working HR professionals recommend HR leaders adopt to foster engagement among their virtual employees?**

To analyze RQ2, deductive and inductive analyses were conducted through interpretations from the raw data collected during the 15 interviews. The interview transcripts and journal notes revealed common subthemes from each theme. The themes and subthemes offered a detailed summary of the primary elements influencing engagement in remote work, including leadership, communication, organizational support, balancing work and life, and embracing cultural diversity, as revealed through the interviews. The categories capture the aspects of the workplace and the multiple factors impacting both the individual employee experience and the broader organizational context.

**Table 7**

*Themes and Subthemes related to Research Question 2*

Theme No.	Theme Title	Subtheme Title	<i>n</i>	%
1	Engagement strategies for personal well-being	Structured routines and breaks	5	33
1	Engagement strategies for personal well-being	Personalized workspace	4	27
2	Organizational policies and support	Flexible working hours and work-life balance	6	40
2	Organizational policies and support	Mental health and wellness initiatives	3	20
3	Leadership and team dynamics	Approachable and inclusive leadership	4	26
3	Leadership and team dynamics	Regular check-ins and team building	4	26
4	Communication and collaboration	Regular open communication	5	33
4	Communication and collaboration	Collaboration with teams	4	26
5	Work-life integration	Setting boundaries and managing time	5	33
5	Work-life integration	Flexibility for personal commitments	4	26
6	Cultural inclusivity and employee experience	Fostering a culture of inclusivity and recognition	4	26
6	Cultural inclusivity and employee experience	Enhancing employee experience and satisfaction	6	40

*Note.* *N* = 15, *n* = number of participants in each group.

**Engagement Strategies and Personal Well-being.** Participants consistently emphasized structured routines, regular breaks, and personalized workspaces as important. P10 noted, “Regular breaks, a structured routine, and clear boundaries between work and personal time help keep me focused and engaged.”

P1 recommended designing a workspace that reflects one's personality, while P15 stressed that team-building activities and flexibility improve engagement. Several mentioned that physical design impacted emotional and mental focus.

**Organizational Policies and Support.** Policies that supported flexibility were strongly favored. P11 explained, “Flexible working hours and the ability to work from different locations are the most beneficial for me.” Mental health resources were also appreciated. P14 said, “The flexible working hours and the emphasis on mental health have been most beneficial in keeping me engaged and balanced.”

**Leadership and Team Dynamics.** Participants highlighted the importance of inclusive, empathetic leadership and regular team check-ins. P13 said, “Leaders could be more engaged with their remote teams. Regular feedback and inclusive decision-making would make a big difference.”

Team-building activities and feedback loops were common strategies. P8 explained, “Doing the regular check-ins that my manager and I have been doing has helped. We do have team meetings. I think that’s all helpful.”

**Communication and Collaboration.** Clear, consistent communication and collaboration tools were crucial. P6 noted, “This collaboration has kept me engaged and able to do the work without any disruptions.” P5 added, “Try to connect and collaborate with your team on a very frequent basis. That will help you succeed or at least know that you are not just by yourself.”

**Work-Life Integration.** Time boundaries and personal flexibility were repeated themes. P6 suggested, “Have a schedule with your family and tell them when they can’t come in to disturb you.” P10 stated, “Regular breaks and clear boundaries between work and personal time are key.”

**Cultural Inclusivity and Employee Experience.** Participants valued inclusive work environments and diverse representation. P14 explained, “Regular check-ins, an open-door policy for any concerns, and genuine efforts to understand my cultural background make me feel both engaged and valued.” P13 recommended more recognition and feedback from leadership.

P15 summarized well: “Balancing structured schedules with flexibility, incorporating regular team-building activities, and encouraging open dialogue are key.” These findings offer a blueprint for HR leaders to cultivate employee engagement in a virtual workforce.

These results affirm that physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement are deeply interconnected in remote settings. Personalized workspaces, flexible policies, digital tools, inclusive leadership, and emotional adaptation are central to sustaining high engagement among remote HR professionals.

## Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of remote-working HR professionals and the strategies they recommend for fostering engagement in virtual environments. Findings from the 15 interviews revealed a relationship between physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of engagement. While themes emerged consistently across all dimensions, some subthemes reflected minority responses, particularly under RQ2, pointing to the diversity and complexity of remote work experiences.

Harter's (2024) report on the "remote work paradox" supports these findings by revealing that even highly engaged remote employees often experience elevated levels of stress and emotional fatigue. This contrast emphasizes the complexity of remote engagement and aligns with participants' mixed emotional and cognitive responses.

For **RQ1**, participants stressed the importance of ergonomically sound and personalized workspaces for enhancing physical comfort and productivity. These results echo prior research by Adisa, Ogbonnaya, and Adekoya (2021), Galanti et al. (2021), and Tleuken et al. (2022), who emphasized how environmental features such as lighting, noise control, and space design impact performance and well-being. Access to reliable technology and infrastructure also emerged as a critical factor influencing all engagement dimensions, reinforcing findings by Wang et al. (2021) that disruptions from home-based work environments can affect focus, emotional stability, and job effectiveness.

Kulal et al. (2025) similarly found that while autonomy and flexibility improved with remote work, lapses in communication tools and collaboration structures led to a decline in engagement. This reinforces the importance of stable infrastructure and structured interaction in virtual environments.

Cognitively, participants emphasized the value of meaningful work, autonomy, and technological tools that support workflow and focus. This aligns with Kahn's (1990) theory and research by Garg et al. (2017), Shamsi et al. (2021), and Lartey and Randall (2021), all of whom link engagement to cognitive demands, clarity, and ICT proficiency. However, excessive mental load, blurred boundaries, and monotonous tasks were cited as contributing to burnout, consistent with Glaser et al. (2015) and Orhan et al. (2021).

Emotionally, employees reported greater engagement when they felt recognized and connected to a broader community. The study corroborates Albrecht et al. (2015) and Golden et al. (2008), who highlight the emotional costs of isolation and the benefits of social belonging. Emotional strain, particularly during long stretches of remote work, was consistent with findings from De Vincenzi et al. (2022), who observed a rise in stress and loneliness due to pandemic-induced isolation.

Recent evidence from Nowrouzi-Kia et al. (2024) reinforces these findings. Their analysis identified that remote employees with low managerial support and high emotional demands experienced higher burnout and lower engagement. This adds empirical support to participants' concerns about the emotional weight of remote HR work and the need for accessible leadership and role clarity.

Kausar et al. (2024) also found that remote workers often deal with increased emotional exhaustion, especially when recognition is low and human connection is limited. This came through clearly in participants' comments about how difficult it can be to draw emotional boundaries and the invisible emotional labor they carry while working in isolation.

For **RQ2**, participants recommended a set of strategies for HR leaders aimed at enhancing engagement. These included fostering structured routines and breaks (Kicheva, 2022), providing flexible work hours (Xia, 2022), and cultivating leadership that is inclusive and communicative (Pugh & Dietz, 2008; Wiley et al., 2010). Flexibility was repeatedly noted as essential for balancing personal and professional roles, reinforcing insights from Straus et al. (2022) and Leslie et al. (2012). While flexibility was broadly viewed as beneficial, some



participants cautioned that it requires careful management to avoid unintended negative consequences.

Communication and team cohesion were central themes. Participants emphasized the importance of open channels and frequent check-ins, echoing De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021). Moreover, as remote settings continue to evolve, adaptation was key: participants described the emotional and logistical challenges of adjusting to ongoing changes. The need for clear expectations, inclusive culture, and recognition of individual contributions were cited as essential, supporting findings from Engelen et al. (2014).

This mirrors Shokrollahi's (2023) themes around Communication Practices, which showed that meaningful team interaction, feedback loops, and managerial support are foundational to sustaining engagement in remote settings. Your participants' appreciation for structured communication and recognition reflects this broader trend.

Overall, the study's findings demonstrate that remote engagement is shaped by an interplay of environmental, relational, and organizational factors. While dominant themes highlight clear strategies for improving remote work, the presence of divergent and minority perspectives shows the importance of context-specific approaches.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

To support the physical aspects of employee engagement, participants emphasized the importance of comfortable and personalized work environments. Remote workers are encouraged to optimize their workspaces by designating areas that resemble traditional office settings to promote focus and productivity. Incorporating elements like plants or artwork and ensuring adequate natural lighting can increase motivation and energy. Leveraging technology for connection through video calls and virtual meetings helps maintain team cohesion. Notably, Tleuken et al. (2022) found that specific environmental factors, such as a dedicated work area, lighting, and noise control, significantly influence remote workers' productivity and satisfaction.

Leaders should recognize that employees have diverse needs for their home work environments. Providing access to essential office tools and technology through stipends or reimbursements can improve comfort and performance. At the organizational level, investing in ergonomic assessments and providing financial support for equipment like ergonomic chairs, desks, or computer accessories is crucial. Organizations should implement comprehensive remote work policies that include guidelines for home office setup and access to secure collaboration platforms. According to Haynes et al. (2017), physical workplace conditions directly impact employee productivity. Offering workshops and periodic feedback assessments can further refine workspace support strategies.

Participants highlighted the role of emotional connection in sustaining engagement. Creating a culture of regular and open communication, including informal virtual gatherings like coffee breaks, was seen as essential to combat isolation and enhance emotional well-being. As one participant (P7) emphasized, nonstop communication and virtual presence were critical to their engagement.

Remote employees are encouraged to actively participate in video meetings and informal virtual events, fostering meaningful relationships and community. Platforms like Slack, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams can simulate in-person dynamics and sustain team connectivity. Leaders

should proactively encourage communication by scheduling both structured and casual interactions. Pološki Vokić et al. (2020) found that internal communication significantly impacts employee engagement levels. Additionally, recognizing achievements and planning adaptable team-building activities can maintain cohesion and belonging.

Organizations can foster this communication culture by organizing virtual social hours, optional interest-based clubs, and randomly paired “donut” meetings. Leadership should also maintain open office hours for informal discussions and adapt initiatives based on employee feedback. Ensuring access to collaboration tools and considering time zones and cultural contexts helps create an inclusive, connected work environment.

Building an inclusive culture where everyone feels recognized and valued emerged as a critical factor for engagement. Participants stressed the importance of inclusivity in enhancing the remote employee experience. For example, one participant (P8) noted that virtual events and recognition helped foster a sense of community.

Remote workers can contribute by participating in Diversity and Inclusion training, advocating for respectful and open dialogue, and celebrating diverse identities and perspectives. Leaders, in turn, must ensure inclusive communication practices and foster a respectful culture. Encouraging virtual team-building activities and modeling inclusive behavior such as empathy, openness, and accessibility is essential. Leaders should also support the formation of employee resource groups to foster peer support.

Organizations should implement inclusive policies that address anti-discrimination, cultural competency, and accessible communication. Facilitating open dialogue through inclusive channels ensures all voices are heard and respected, thereby strengthening organizational culture and commitment to diversity.

Participants also identified visible, approachable, and responsive leadership as instrumental in driving engagement. Remote employees should take initiative by reaching out to leaders with updates and participating in organizational forums to maintain active dialogue and access to support.

Leaders must adapt traditional leadership strategies to remote environments, focusing on trust-building, transparency, and communication. Regular virtual check-ins, open-door policies, and empathetic engagement are key to creating a supportive work climate.

At the organizational level, investment in leadership development programs tailored to remote work is essential. These should address digital engagement, inclusive leadership, and emotional intelligence. Organizations can promote transparency by using communication platforms that connect leaders across departments and levels. Regular feedback loops, such as surveys or focus groups, help assess leader effectiveness and guide continuous improvement efforts.

## **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the environment in which interviews were conducted. If participants were interviewed during work hours or within employer-associated settings, their willingness to share negative experiences may have been constrained, potentially leading to response bias. To address this, future research should incorporate a more diverse set of data collection methods including anonymous surveys, focus groups, and interviews in neutral settings to allow for fuller disclosure. Supplementing interviews with anonymous post-surveys

may also capture withheld insights. Longitudinal approaches, involving repeated interactions over time, could further support trust-building and richer data collection.

Another limitation was the study's delimitation to full-time remote HR professionals in the United States, which excluded broader dimensions of remote work such as productivity and communication styles. Future studies should broaden this focus to explore how engagement, productivity, and communication intersect across sectors and roles, offering a more comprehensive view of remote work dynamics.

Finally, the use of a qualitative phenomenological design limited the study to subjective lived experiences. Future research should integrate quantitative methods such as standardized engagement surveys or statistical assessments to quantify engagement and compare trends across HR roles, industries, and regions. This mixed-methods approach would complement the present study's depth with broader generalizability.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study highlighted the importance of comfortable working arrangements, personalized workspace setups for effective time management and stress reduction, and the right tools and environment for enhanced productivity and innovation. Future research should consider exploring the relationship between workspace customization and productivity, particularly in the context of remote work. This study shows that personalized work environments can significantly impact employees' efficiency; therefore, future research should aim to quantify how specific elements of workspace customization, such as ergonomic setups, natural lighting, personal aesthetic choices, and technology tools, correlate with improvements in productivity and job satisfaction among remote workers. Understanding these dynamics can guide organizations in supporting employees to create optimal workspaces that enhance performance and contribute to overall well-being.

This study found that the shift towards remote work raises essential considerations regarding mental health. The potential isolation, blurred work-life boundaries, and the stress of managing work in a home environment pose risks to employees' mental well-being. Future studies should investigate the effectiveness of organizational support mechanisms in mitigating these risks. This includes evaluating the impact of initiatives like virtual mental health resources, regular check-ins by managers, and creating online communities for social interaction among remote workers. Research should also examine how different remote work arrangements, from fully remote to hybrid models, affect mental health outcomes. The goal is to identify best practices for maintaining mental health in remote work settings, ensuring employees thrive and sustain a healthy balance between their professional and personal lives.

Insights from this study provide an understanding of how remote work environments impact cultural inclusivity and employee experience. Based on the findings, it is clear that fostering a supportive and inclusive remote work culture is not only beneficial but essential for the modern workforce.

Future research could focus on the impact of remote work models on organizational culture development and employee engagement. Specifically, researchers could explore how these work models affect the formation and maintenance of a cohesive and inclusive organizational culture and identify strategies that successful organizations have implemented to foster a strong sense of community and shared values among employees who may not share a physical

workspace. Abduraimi et al. (2023) observed that organizations with a positive culture adopting proactive practices see heightened employee loyalty and commitment levels. They characterized these environments as a culture fostering individual and collective development, dedication to the organization, and a strong sense of belonging.

Another recommendation for future research is to investigate the obstacles to achieving cultural inclusivity. Future research should identify systemic biases, leadership representation issues, and challenges in implementing Diversity and Inclusion initiatives. Engelen et al. (2014) found a link between employee engagement and organizational culture, noting that a negative organizational culture often leads to challenges with low employee engagement. Through qualitative and quantitative methods, the goal is to uncover the root causes of exclusion and propose targeted interventions to cultivate a more inclusive workplace.

Another recommendation is for future research to explore how cultural inclusivity and employee engagement affect organizational performance. Studies should examine the connection between a positive employee experience and key performance metrics, highlighting the importance of Diversity and Inclusion in strategic business planning. This research could provide evidence to support Diversity and Inclusion investments as integral to enhancing productivity and innovation. Future research can offer valuable insights into creating inclusive, engaging workplaces that benefit employees and organizations by focusing on these areas. Organizations can build a more engaged, productive, and inclusive workforce ready to face the challenges of the modern digital workplace.

## Conclusion

This study conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of 15 interviews to explore the lived experiences of remote HR professionals, focusing on the physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of work engagement. It also identified key strategies for enhancing engagement, particularly relevant amid increasing remote work in the United States.

Findings revealed a complex set of themes related to workspace setup, cognitive focus, emotional well-being, communication, leadership, organizational policy, flexibility, and inclusivity. These dimensions collectively influence how remote professionals remain engaged and productive. The results emphasized the need for supportive leadership, structured routines, personalized workspaces, and inclusive practices. These themes reflect the interconnected nature of engagement in remote settings.

This study contributes to the broader literature by expanding the understanding of remote work engagement beyond surface-level issues, providing a more comprehensive view that integrates physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects. It also reinforces the importance of leadership, organizational culture, and flexibility factors found in earlier research.

Practically, the study offers concrete guidance to leaders, HR professionals, and organizations. Strategies such as fostering open communication, implementing flexible policies, and supporting employee well-being can enhance engagement and satisfaction in remote environments. The findings serve both theoretical and applied purposes, laying the foundation for future studies and offering actionable solutions for the evolving remote workplace.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

The following questions will be asked to each participant during the video/audio Zoom interview by the researcher.

Date of interview:

Location:

Time of interview:

Interviewee code:

- 1) Verify informed consent verbally.
- a. Ensure that Zoom video and audio recording consent is signed.
- 2) Review and answer any participant questions about the interview.
- 3) Define the study, including key concepts of virtual workplace engagement, and describe the purpose of the interview.
- 4) Remind the participant that the interview will be recorded—initiate recording.

The following questions will be asked to each participant during the video/audio Zoom interview by the researcher. Participants must respond in entirety to each interview question.

#### Background Questions

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you worked for your organization?
3. How long have you been working in HR or performing HR functions?
4. Do you work part-time or full-time?
5. Do you work remotely?

#### RQ1.

What are remote working HR professionals' lived experiences regarding the physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of work engagement?

#### Physical

The physical concept of employee engagement is the physical energy exerted by the individual to accomplish organizational roles (Kahn, 1990).

1. Describe your physical environment (workspace) while working remotely.
2. How has your physical environment affected your engagement while working remotely?
3. What infrastructures (tools) have been provided to you by your organization?
4. How have the tools impacted your ability to be engaged in tasks?
5. How has the infrastructure provided to you by your organization improved your engagement?
6. How has the infrastructure provided by your organization hindered your engagement?

#### Cognitive

The cognitive concept concerns itself with the belief of the employees about their working conditions and their organization (Kahn, 1990)

1. How would you describe your workload while working remotely?
2. How has working remotely impacted your workload?
3. Has the influence of tasks affected your capacity to maintain engagement while working remotely?

4. Have you ever felt disengaged?
5. Describe a situation where you were seemingly disengaged while working remotely.

**Emotional**

The emotional concept is how employees feel and whether they have negative or positive attitudes toward their organization. (Kahn, 1990).

1. Describe the culture of your organization in terms of remote work.
2. How has the culture of your organization impacted your engagement while working remotely?
3. Do you feel a sense of enthusiasm and emotional investment in your role while working remotely?
4. If so, could you elaborate on what contributes to this feeling or any challenges you might face in maintaining it?
5. Do you ever find yourself craving more social interaction or missing certain aspects of being in a physical office environment while working remotely?
6. Would you say that you feel engaged and supported by your organization while working remotely?
7. How do you feel or not feel engaged and supported?

**RQ2.**

What strategies do remote working HR professionals recommend HR leaders adopt to foster engagement among their virtual employees?

1. What steps do you recommend for staying engaged at work?
2. What are your thoughts on the policies and procedures put in place to keep remote workers engaged in your organization?
3. In your opinion, which policies and procedures are the most effective in keeping you engaged while working remotely?
4. What are your thoughts on how your organization can improve your engagement while working remotely?
5. What leadership strategies do you think would help you feel more engaged?