

Workplace Communication in Remote-Based Teams

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Abstract.

This study seeks to illustrate the effects of workplace communication in remote-based teams by attempting to define how working in a remote team differs from working in an in-person team. This study also addresses disconnect among remote-based teams, possible reasons why this disconnect exists, and attempts to determine where opportunities to strengthen this communication exist. Grounding this research in media richness theory, which seeks to answer the question of why and how organizations process information, survey respondents were given the opportunity to discuss how working remotely has affected communication with their colleagues, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic. Results of this study yield valid information for remote-based teams to modify and enhance existing communication structures, addressing issues such as employee neglect, cyber-ostracism, knowledge transfer, isolation, and technological failure. Study outcomes show that workplace communication in a post-COVID-19 workforce is still evolving, and workplace communication will continue to advance along with technology. This study also provides information on remote worker engagement and where communication can be improved among remote-based teams.

Keywords: remote work, media richness theory, COVID-19, digital technologies, workplace communication.

1. Introduction

Good communication is the bridge between confusion and clarity, especially in the workplace. COVID-19 has changed people's lives on the personal, professional, and even spiritual levels due to pandemic-related phenomena such as lockdowns, quarantines, social distancing, and sheltering-in-place. In the working world, the pandemic has led to the increased adoption of digital technologies, such as Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams, among others, as remote work has officially become part of the professional landscape.

According to a recent Pew Research Center study (Parker et al., 2022), roughly six-in-ten American workers (59%) who say their jobs can mainly be done from home are choosing to work from home all or most of the time. While the reasons for this decision vary from worker to worker, they can include things such as a better work/life balance and relocation away from their original office (Parker et al., 2022). This shift in the American workforce has led to a rethinking of how work can and should be done in a post-pandemic society, with suggestions of the implementation of a four-day workweek and a flexible work schedule, among others. (Parker et al., 2022). With this shift, however, comes questions regarding communication among teams that are working remotely. For example, many teams report that working from home causes them to feel less connected to their coworkers (Parker et al., 2022). This study aims to discover workers' thoughts on communication in remote-based teams,

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in order to find out what steps could be taken to help teams feel better connected, despite working remotely.

The research for this study will be conducted via the lens of media richness theory. First defined in 1986 by Daft and Lengel, media richness theory seeks to answer the question of why and how organizations process information (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Uncertainty (where there is a lack of data) and ambiguity (where there is contradictory data) are defined as two forces that influence information processing in organizations, and organization structure and internal systems determine both the amount and richness of information provided to managers (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Daft and Lengel (1986) propose that rich media can overcome different frames of reference, clarify ambiguous issues, and change understanding in a timely manner, whereas non-rich media require a long time to achieve the same ends, or are incapable of doing so. When uncertainty and ambiguity are low, non-rich media are an effective means of communication (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Face-to-face interaction is considered the richest medium, while digital means of communication fall in various places on the list (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

Because digital communication is not as rich as face-to-face interaction, researchers have focused on how remote teams can improve messaging, despite often not being in close geographic proximity. For example, Belling (2021) addresses what leaders must do to effectively lead a remote team, whether it is in a remote-first organization or in an organization trying the concept for the first time. Dunne (2021) provided an overview of various strategies that remote teams could employ to increase collaboration. For example, cloud-based storage will help promote teamwork because everyone will have access to what they need, rather than waiting for someone to send something to them. Sections on how much contact between teams was truly necessary were also pertinent to this study, because in some cases, too much contact on a remote team can be seen as micromanagement, while not enough contact is detrimental to the organization's success, which falls into a practical application of the parameters of media richness theory.

Liu et al. (2022) explored the effect of daily remote communication autonomy on positive affect and proactive work behaviors. The authors conducted a multilevel path analysis using a general survey, followed by experience sampling methodology, with a sample of 80 employees in China who completed surveys three times daily over a two-week period. The results showed that daily remote communication autonomy increased positive affective reactions, which, in turn, enhanced proactive work behaviors on the same workday. Media richness theory is evident in Liu et al.'s (2022) study because if communication is more effective in an organization, everything else seems to fall into place. The authors also wrote that positive day-level relationships leading to employee proactivity were only significant when the employees' person-level general techno-workload was not high. The findings provide a new perspective for managing employees working under continuous techno-workload and demands for remote interactions.

Media richness theory was also the lens that was used for the development of the questionnaire that was provided to research participants, which will be covered in the Methods section.

A review of the literature shows that the remote-based workplace isn't going away any time soon. Pre-pandemic, roughly five percent of full-time employees with office jobs worked primarily from home (Levanon, 2020). Levanon (2020) predicts that this

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figure is likely to settle at 20-30 percent in the new post-pandemic normal, with variation across occupations and industries. Levanon (2020) also predicts that location will become less important in hiring, and more white-collar workers will live farther from city centers, in different parts of the United States and even outside the country, accelerating and changing geographic trends. Because people are more and more spread out, possibly working in different time zones and on different continents, communication can suffer.

Jämsen et al. (2022) sought to understand how the abrupt transfer to remote work is reflected in employees' perceptions of relational communication at their workplace. A sample of 1,091 Finnish public sector employees with virtually no previous experience in remote work completed an open-ended survey during the first wave of the pandemic. The findings present 17 aspects of relational communication that the respondents mentioned as having changed because of moving to remote work. These aspects divide the respondents into three groups: those who found remote work as a challenge for relational communication, those who found it as an opportunity for relational communication, and those whose perceptions were ambivalent. The respondents' individual characteristics are presented alongside their perceptions. The results reflect the diversity of relational communication in organizations, highlighting its importance to well-being and coping. The practical implications of the study reflect the typical time and place of relational communication in traditional organizing, offering insights into how to develop a culture that enables relational communication in remotely-working organizations.

Belling (2021) explores long-term strategies that organizations can adopt, while showing the benefits that could come with broad acceptance of remote workforces. Some of the key topics Belling (2021) covers include working with the various types of remote and distributed teams such as those that are globally distributed, discovering the evolving preference of teams as an engine for getting work done regardless of the industry or organizational type, and seeing the challenges that remote teams face with communications, culture, rapport, trust, and coordination, as well as techniques for overcoming these challenges.

Carter (2021) discusses the challenges and benefits of working remotely for businesses willing to adapt. The author asserts that one of these benefits includes how workers will skip the commute, which reduces stress and frees up time, giving them more flexibility and more control over their work environments, increasing morale and productivity as a result. Carter also claims that without a central office, the business itself will save money. By addressing common communications concerns, Carter (2021) shows how remote work isn't an island unto itself, and how it offers a new way for collaboration and new definitions for what constitutes a team. Of particular interest for this study is a section on the use and benefits of collaborative platforms and how interactive document editing might be one way to strengthen remote teams.

Reed and Knight (2010) conducted a study of more than 150 information technology practitioners regarding differences in communication risk between traditional project teams and those that operate virtually. The authors' results indicated that the level of risk from inadequate communication is not significantly greater when team members are not grouped in one location. Further, despite increased dependence of virtual teams on technology for communication, there was no evidence of significantly more project risk due to technological failure. The

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authors found that virtual team projects exhibited notably more risk due to insufficient knowledge transfer. The authors conclude that the possibility of insufficient knowledge transfer should be included in virtual project risk management plans, and consideration should be given in such projects to the extent to which knowledge that is traditionally shared implicitly might be shared explicitly through electronic means.

Pejoska-Laajola et al. (2017) wrote that informal learning in a physical work context requires communication and collaboration that build on a common ground and an active awareness of a situation. They explored whether mobile video conversations augmented with on-screen drawing features were beneficial for improving communication and remote collaboration practices in the construction and facility maintenance services sectors. They then used field studies in actual work contexts to map how participants solve physical tasks with remote help powered by augmented video calls and examined how the drawing feature was used in these contexts. The research data was collected from interviews and job shadowing. The results suggest that augmented video calls enhance remote collaboration by allowing workers to point at task objects and locations, thus potentially improving informal workplace learning. This study also shows different ways to use video conferencing software that organizations might not have thought of previously, which also links to the ever-changing and improving nature of remote-based work. This study also seems to show that a means of communication can become richer if certain adjustments are made.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace communication is a rapidly developing area of inquiry, especially because many workplaces have transitioned to remote environments. According to Cakula and Pratt (2021), the global pandemic ushered in a significant time in the field of information technology, when the performance of work duties, the receipt of services and mutual communication became most directly dependent on information and communication technologies. The authors argue that it must be taken into account that employees may experience stress as a result of the changes caused by the pandemic and the active use of information and communication technologies, which may result in psychological difficulties as a side factor. The main goal of this study is to create an effective communication in a digital workplace model that includes factors for effective communication in forced distancing conditions, as well as to provide recommendations for companies. The model consists of objectives, capabilities, and contextual elements for an efficient communication system in forced distancing conditions.

Cookson (2022) argues that the temporary or patchwork communications methods put into place in workplaces as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic will no longer suffice now that we are moving forward. He wrote that strategies and procedures need to be revised on a company level to address the shift to favor remote-based work. He discussed how employee productivity rose in traditional workplaces when they felt connected with their peers and offered suggestions on how to replicate this in a virtual environment. He also warned that there are individuals entering the workforce who may not have learned sufficient face-to-face interaction because they came of working age during the remote shift. Cookson (2012) tries to offer suggestions on how to bridge these generational working gaps and suggests how to codify workplace communications to take this into consideration.

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Hafermalz and Riemer (2021) discussed how the sudden shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic has created additional difficulties for organizations. Concerns about how employee productivity and well-being are negatively affected by the unfamiliar remote work context abound. The authors draw on a study of skilled remote workers that was conducted before the pandemic to theorize how client-facing work can be conducted effectively, in particular by examining how client-facing employees can foster a sense of belonging when they are not co-located. The authors use an abductive research approach, combining empirical material from interviews with tele-nurses with theoretical material from Goffman's categories of "communication out of character," resulting in a theory of what they call "belonging through technology," as the outcome of four types of team communication that contribute to the performance of effective client-facing work in a remote context. The authors argue that "belonging" relates to both well-being and productivity because belonging to one's team (well-being) and belonging to one's work role (productivity) are inherently connected in the performance of client-facing work, offering insights for organizations and workers.

Shockley et al. (2021) claim that effective communication is commonly cited as key to remote worker success, yet communication variables are rarely incorporated into remote work research. In this study, they examined the relationship between communication frequency, communication quality, and supervisor-set communication expectations with daily job performance and burnout in an occupationally diverse sample of employees. They used an experience sampling design, and their hypotheses were tested with data collected over a 4-week period with a sample of 471 employees who shifted to full-time remote work due to COVID-19. Results indicated that daily communication quality was associated with daily performance and burnout. In addition, the extent to which supervisors established expectations about communication practices (e.g., expected response times to email) at the onset of the transition to remote work was positively associated with performance, but not burnout. Task interdependence was also tested as a moderator. Task interdependence moderated the relationship between communication quality and performance, such that the relationship was stronger when task interdependence was higher than when it was lower.

Finally, Yang et al. (2022) sought to identify the influence of workplace cyber-ostracism on employee online work engagement and employee mental well-being with the mediating roles of remote work challenges such as loneliness, procrastination, work-home interference, and ineffective communication. Because of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, the data was collected from 303 respondents through an online questionnaire that was distributed in virtual groups among friends, relatives, and other fellows who were working in the private sector organizations of Pakistan. The findings of this study showed that workplace cyber-ostracism has a positive and significant impact on employee online work engagement and employee mental well-being. Moreover, results also demonstrated that loneliness, ineffective communication, procrastination, and work-home interference positively and significantly mediate the relationship between workplace cyber-ostracism, employee online work engagement, and employee mental well-being.

2. Methods

After conducting the literature review for this study, it became clear that existing works only touched upon certain aspects of communication in a remote-based

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workplace, such as the incorporation of new technologies like Skype and Zoom. The studies did not focus on employees' perception of how communication works in a remote-based workplace; for example, if the remote nature of the work hinders communication efforts in terms of employee instruction, collaboration, or morale. Previous studies seemed to focus on how communication was used, but not what the results of the communication were and how these results affected the employees' perception of their workplace and their role in it. Communication is a human process and, while digital tools are necessary for a successful remote-based workplace, the end user of these tools is a human being with different wants, needs, and desires that need to be taken into consideration.

To this end, this study addresses the following research questions:

Q1: How does a remote team work differently from an in-person team?

Q2a: Do workers in remote teams feel disconnected from their colleagues?

Q2b: Why might remote teams feel disconnected?

Q3: What opportunities are there for improved communication in remote teams?

This study was an anonymous survey of people who are employed by a remote-based workplace. The survey was available via Google Forms from July 5 to July 15, 2022, following an Institutional Research Board approval of a Human Subjects Review application on July 4, 2022. Links to this survey were posted on the researcher's personal social media sites, including Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as to the Facebook group "Alumni of the Institute for Women's Entrepreneurship at Cornell University" and the LinkedIn group "Remote Workers on LinkedIn." Twenty-nine people responded to the survey.

The survey asked the following questions, combining quantitative and qualitative questions in order to gain a full understanding of the respondents' background and experiences.

1. Please provide your date of birth.
2. How long have you worked in a remote-based workplace?
3. How do you communicate with your colleagues? How do you communicate with your superiors?
4. Do you use digital technologies, such as Zoom, for meetings?
5. In your opinion, how does working in a remote-based workplace differ from working in a traditional workplace?
6. Can you recall a time when communication failed in your remote workplace? What happened? What was the outcome?
7. What are some of the barriers to communication in your remote-based work environment? How can they be solved?
8. In your ideal remote-based workplace, how would you prefer to communicate and why?
9. What are some positive experiences you have had with communication in your remote-based work environment?
10. Have you ever thought about seeking other employment due to difficult communication in your remote-based workplace?

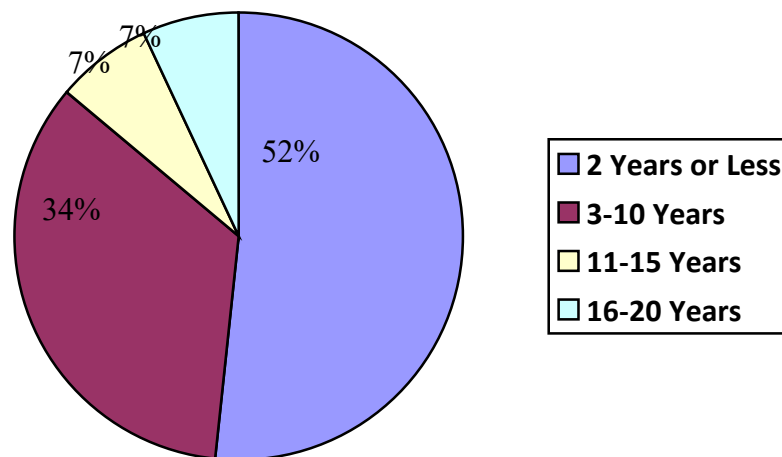
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3. Results

Seventy-nine percent of respondents for this study fall into the Generation X category, which comprises individuals born between the 1960s and 1980s, with 31 percent being born in the 1980s, 31 percent in the 1970s, and 17 percent in the 1960s. Fourteen percent of respondents were born in the 1990s, and seven percent of respondents were born in the 1950s. A 2021 study by Adobe on the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace revealed that more members of Generation X are likely to leave a job due to poor technology than their millennial counterparts (Adams, 2021). The study also revealed that members of Generation X are “thriving” in the remote-based workplace, in contrast to their millennial peers, who might need additional support due to their young age and relative lack of experience in the workplace (Adams, 2021). Generation X was the first to grow up with digital technology, raised on video games and early PCs; as a result, Generation X leaders are just as likely as millennials to be adept at using technology at work (Rothenburger, 2020). Generation X is also the most connected generation, using social media 40 minutes more each week than millennials and spending more time on every type of device (Rothenburger, 2020).

Respondents were also asked how long they have worked in a remote-based workplace. Most respondents fell into either the two years or less range or the 3-10 years range, however there were also responses that went up to 20 years of working remotely as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: How long respondents have worked in a remote-based workplace



When asked how they communicated with both supervisors and colleagues, respondents revealed that they prefer traditional means of communication, as well as messaging apps to communicate with colleagues, while messaging apps are more popular for communicating with superiors. Traditional forms of communication can work with colleagues in terms of low ambiguity and different frames of reference, while messaging apps can work better for superiors in terms of timely responses and ease of communication, especially if one’s superior does not normally check his or her email throughout the workday. While not as rich as face-to-face interaction, non-

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rich media can be effective forms of communication when uncertainty and ambiguity are low (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

Respondents were then asked if they used digital technology, such as Zoom, for meetings and if the technologies were company-mandated or a personal choice. Out of the 29 survey respondents, 96.6% answered that they do use digital technologies for meetings.

When asked whether the technologies were company-mandated or a personal choice, 55.2% of survey respondents answered that the new technologies were company-mandated, with 34.5% choosing the “Combination” response. Respondents were given the chance to elaborate if they chose the “Combination” response, these responses included choosing which mode of communication worked best depending on the person the worker was trying to reach or, if advance notice was given, the people on the call would choose the platform that worked best for their purposes.

When asked how the remote-based workplace differs from a traditional workplace, most survey responses focused on the work/life balance that remote work can provide. Respondents also said that it is harder to communicate with colleagues when working remotely and that management needs to place more effort on communicating for there to be success. Cakula and Pratt (2021) wrote that the ability of management and employees to communicate effectively in a digital environment is crucial to its success, stressing that not all people have a natural talent for using different forms of communication and doing so effectively.

Respondents also discussed the lack of a commute, as well as the opportunity to schedule meetings, which gives them time to prepare versus having to go to a meeting on the spot. Potential burnout was also cited because respondents aren't leaving their homes like they used to. One respondent wrote, “You have more flexibility with getting other things done, but there's also a lot more distraction if you're not careful.”

According to Hafermalz and Reimer (2020), remote work is a key source of economic and organizational resilience in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Employee benefits of regular remote work include autonomy and temporal and spatial flexibility in individual work processes; however, feelings of isolation can be a problem when working from home (Hafermalz & Reimer, 2020). Maintaining a sense of social and organizational connection is a significant challenge in remote working arrangements (Hafermalz & Reimer, 2020). Confirming this statement, several survey respondents replied that they felt separated from their teams due to the remote nature of their work. One respondent wrote, “Remote work is very different in terms of building trust and connection with peers and staff members.” Another respondent wrote, “If all members of the team aren't a pro at working remotely, it's easy to be left out of important meetings, conversations, etc., and it can affect your job.”

Reed and Knight (2010) wrote that since virtual teams are dependent on electronic communication, any “down” time could effectively isolate members of the team and halt the flow of work, but technologies such as web conferencing, instant messaging, document sharing sites, and the like can be important in providing a rich communication environment for team members who cannot have face-to-face encounters. Echoing Reed and Knight (2010), when asked how workplace communication failed in their remote workplaces, most responses to this survey had to do with technology—either the computer was not working, or there was an Internet

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outage. Some users also reported difficulties using video conferencing software. Other issues reported included not being kept abreast of important meetings, missed messages via chat, and misunderstandings of tone in emails. One respondent cited how learning how to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic changed office communication styles for the better, “When the pandemic first began, our teams overcommunicated. We had meetings every other day to check in. Eventually we realized it was too much and now we have a weekly staff meeting.” Another respondent cited how text-based communication can cause unintended misunderstandings, “I had a coworker who thought I didn’t like her because I am short on my messages and write like how I text. My boss called and asked if I was upset, and I said no.”

Communication failures can also affect the bottom line, as one respondent wrote, “Communicating the level of urgency is significantly easier face-to-face than it is in remote environments. I once failed to understand the urgency of a project and thought I had prioritized it correctly in my workload but did not understand it was needed more quickly than I had planned.” This links back to Shockley et al. (2021), who cited supervisor-set communication expectations as critical to remote worker success, especially in the post-COVID-19 workforce. Shockley et al. (2021) also wrote that greater interaction between coworkers simply provides greater opportunity for performance-enhancing communication processes to occur; for example, had expectations been more clearly communicated to this worker, the assignment would have been prioritized correctly and completed in a timelier manner.

Barriers to workplace communication also included not being able to see people face-to-face, and a lack of clarity in setting up team expectations that need addressing because teams often aren’t sure of their tasks in a remote environment. Lagging response times for emails, as well as time difference issues were also cited. Methods for solving the issues included choosing a company-wide preferred method of contact and more training from company IT departments on how to use new digital technologies. One respondent wrote, “I can’t just pop my head into someone’s office for a quick answer. I often have to wait a bit for them to read and respond to a text or email.” Differing preferred modes of communication were also problematic, as one respondent wrote, “Some departments request communication via email instead of picking up the phone, but that can be frustrating because something that can be solved with a 30-second phone call can take all day emailing back and forth.”

The above-mentioned barriers demonstrate the need for increased remote communication autonomy as defined by Liu et al. (2022), which refers to the extent to which employees believe they can control the scheduling, sequencing, and conduct of their work-related remote communication. Employees with such autonomy can determine when they reply to remote messages and which remote communication episodes they should process first (Liu et al., 2022).

Echoing media richness theory, respondents said that video conferencing was the next best thing to face-to-face communication as it simulated the environment despite being remote. Other preferences included communicating via email only so messages could not be misunderstood, having phone calls when necessary, and using chat features when it is for quick messages. One respondent mentioned that there should be a moratorium on work-related messages during evening hours because working remotely causes employers to think employees are 24 hours on call. In terms of attempting to build team morale despite working remotely, one respondent wrote,

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“Ideally, I love having everything in writing, but working in a remote environment has taught me the importance of connecting with my team on camera via Zoom to make sure we don’t miss out on building our team’s culture.”

Jämsen et al. (2022) wrote that because of the abrupt change to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic bringing several new practices to organizations, it is important to understand what consequences remote work and the use of communication technologies can have for work relationships on relational communication, adding that positive experiences in work relationships have been found to increase well-being and organizational commitment while decreasing turnover intentions (Jämsen et al., 2022). Meeting coworkers in person, even occasionally, has been found to result in positive effects, such as job satisfaction (Jämsen et al., 2022). Most respondents cited that having control over communication and possible in-office distractions was one positive that comes from working remotely. Other respondents said that they feel they are better workers and, therefore, better communicators when working from home, as they can focus better because they aren’t stressed from their commute to the office or other factors that are beyond their control. Respondents also liked being able to create their own schedules when they could, which, in turn, made them better employees.

When asked if they had thought about seeking other employment due to difficult communication in their remote-based workplace, all but one respondent replied “no.” The flexibility that remote work affords was the main reason why workers choose to stay in this kind of environment. The worker who said that they are thinking about seeking other employment wrote the following:

Yes, I am currently seeking other employment. One of the reasons is due to lack of communication from my manager as well as poor communication and the tone used with me in a call. Communication is so important, and expectations and outcomes can change due to just one statement or conversation.

The above statement echoes Yang et al. (2022), who wrote that remote employees could feel neglected, which makes it hard to perform their work tasks and reach the goals of the virtual workplace. Leaders must have effective online communication with all employees, and everyone must meet deadlines without any unwanted delays, and special attention should be given to the mental health and contentment of employees (Yang et al., 2022). When employees feel deserted by their supervisors while working from home, they begin to show a lack of interest in ongoing projects, which can result in the decline of the growth, repute, and goodwill of the whole organization (Yang et al., 2022).

4. Discussion

Communication is the lifeline of any relationship, including those formed in the workplace. The results of this study show that in order for a remote-based workplace to thrive, measures need to be taken by management in a top-down approach to ensure that workers feel comfortable with new modes of communication that replace face-to-face interaction. Management needs to demonstrate effective online communication with employees so they can follow suit in their respective roles. The results also show that technological failures, such as computers not working or Internet outages, can add to employee frustration as well as isolation. In addition, employee isolation is a more common occurrence in a remote-based workplace, as teams are often not in the

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same geographic location or time zone. Ways to solve these issues include establishing company-wide preferred methods of contact, additional training on how to use new technologies, and establishing a remote-based company culture that might differ from the company's physical culture.

5. Conclusion

This study has illustrated the effects of workplace communication in remote-based teams by attempting to define how working in a remote-based team differs from working in an in-person team, by addressing disconnect among remote-based teams as well as possible reasons why this disconnect exists, and by determining where opportunities to strengthen this communication exist. The responses to this survey show that workplace communication in a post-COVID-19 workforce is still evolving. While responses were limited in nature due to the size of the population sampled and the 10-day availability of the survey, much is to be learned from this research in terms of remote worker engagement and where communication can be improved. Further studies could include revisiting the definition of media richness theory to determine where new and emerging technologies, including videoconferencing, fit on Daft and Lengel's (1986) scale of richness. Additional further studies could be conducted by analyzing social media's effects on remote workplace communication and whether remote-based workplace communication will continue to improve as technology advances.

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