

REMOTE WORK REVOLUTION IN STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: IDENTIFYING AND EXPLORING MEMBER NEEDS OF A GEOGRAPHICALLY-DISPERSED WORKFORCE

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ABSTRACT

Remote workspaces are an integral part of the future landscape of work. As more employees and gig workers are interested in working from a location other than the organizations' offices, it is vital for human resource management to recognize why a potential member of the organization would prefer a particular location over others and how to manage team members who prefer working remotely. Understanding member needs goes a long way towards achieving this. Yet, the number of published studies that try to understand the basic needs of remote workers is low; studies exploring the business context of North Macedonia and the Western Balkan countries in general are even scarcer. In this research paper, our objective is to discover and investigate remote member's needs in the digital workplace, structured through the lens of the self-determination theory. The research was conducted in North Macedonia, and we collected data through semi-structured interviews with remote employees who work in North Macedonia as a qualitative research approach. 24 member needs for the remote workplace were defined and categorized. The research makes an effort to contribute to the existing literature on remote work by addressing the significance and identification of member needs of remote workers, which can help human resource professionals humanize the digital workplace.

Keywords: Remote work, Member need, Self-determination theory

JEL Classification: M12

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of work, the concept of remote workspaces has emerged as a transformative force, reshaping the dynamics of employment across industries and geographies. The rise of remote work has been catalyzed by advances in technology, changing employee preferences, and the evolving nature of work itself (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). When the coronavirus pandemic started spreading in 2020, many industries adopted remote or hybrid work practices in what seemed like a global experiment characterized by the emergence of good practices, massive returns to the office in some instances, and sweeping debates between executives and employees in others (Yang et al., 2022). Further, on one hand, remote workers have expectations of increased freedom, flexibility, and autonomy in how they arrange their work patterns, while on the other employers handle the process of keeping the status quo and at the same time managing the onset of new working arrangements (de Vaujany et al., 2021).

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Yet, as more employees and gig workers express a growing interest in working from locations other than traditional office spaces, organizations are faced with the imperative to adapt and harness the potential of remote work. This paradigm shift calls for a fundamental reevaluation of how human resource management (HRM) approaches the recruitment, management, and retention of talent in the digital age (Jeske, 2021). In the pursuit of a more comprehensive understanding of remote work, it becomes crucial for human resource (HR) professionals to discern why individuals gravitate towards specific remote work locations and how to effectively manage team members who opt for remote work arrangements (Davies, 2021). Central to this endeavor is the recognition that understanding the needs and motivations of remote workers is paramount.

However, despite the increasing prevalence of remote work arrangements, there remains a significant gap in the existing literature when it comes to exploring and interpreting the fundamental needs of remote workers. This gap is particularly pronounced when considering the context of businesses operating in the Republic of North Macedonia and even the broader Western Balkan region. The country has long been hailed as one of the best places for digital nomads, luring international remote workers with an affordable standard of living, captivating culture and beauty, and low limitations for residence permits (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023).

Our approach to the endeavor of uncovering remote workers' needs is grounded in the self-determination theory (SDT), a psychological framework that delves into the intrinsic motivations and needs that drive human behavior (Deci and Ryan, 2014). Even though SDT has been applied in different research areas, we have identified scarcity in studies on using SDT in a remote work context. By applying this theoretical lens, we aim to unravel the intricate web of motivations and necessities that shape the remote work experience. Using the theory's approach, we look at member needs as descriptions of jobs that consider intrinsic psychological nutrients, which in turn positively impact mental growth, integrity, and satisfaction (Deci et al., 2017). Moreover, basic needs can refer to psychological motivation theory, which recognizes three fundamental needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2014). Also, this theory about needs claims that the prevailing culture and social environment significantly impact one's performance and satisfaction as much as the physical setting (Sjöblom et al., 2016). That is why insights into how the workplace environment thwarts or supports the process of satisfying needs start gaining ground and relevance for HR professionals and managers to maintain and boost the well-being and engagement of their remote workers (Ozimek, 2020).

Based on this, this study's main objective is to identify and explore the needs of remote members of modern organizations and afterward structure them through the lens of the self-determination theory. The research will attempt to contribute to the broader literature on remote work by shedding light on the fundamental needs of remote workers, thus providing a valuable resource for HR professionals seeking to improve working conditions and employee morale in this category of the workforce as much as the ones working in the office. As the landscape of work continues to evolve, understanding and catering to these needs will not only enhance organizational performance but also foster a more inclusive and productive remote work culture, ultimately shaping the future of work in the new age.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 The remote work revolution in strategic human resource management

The notion of remote work began to rise in the 1970s. These were the times when the practice of distance working from the organization's office using methods of technological communication as a replacement for physical traveling was called simply working from home

(Daneshfar et al., 2023). The enthusiasm for teleworking or remote work reached new heights in the 1980s when employees, managers, and experts hailed it as the next revolution in the working environment (Yang et al., 2022).

Before the pandemic, remote work was a privilege and an opportunity for certain socio-economic groups and a handful of individuals in an organization. To illustrate, the right to choose where you want to work more often was limited to employees who had high education, better-paid jobs on average, higher grade occupations, and were male (Xiong et al., 2023). Faced with the double impact of rapid digitalization and the lockdowns imposed by the pandemic, HR professionals deal with the challenge of managing a workforce who works in the office, remotely or hybrid, which is why we are calling it the new remote work revolution in SHRM.

Existing literature defines remote work as a type of flexible, work-from-anywhere approach, involving telecommuting and distance work, which heavily relies on the utilization of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Petani and Mengis, 2023). The term falls under the broader umbrella category of flexible working arrangements, whereas remote work, itself, encompasses different variations of working-from-home, co-working, home-based telework, mobile telework, working from remote offices, nomadic work, and similar (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). There are instances when the management controls the workplace, which is distanced from the primary offices, known as a satellite office (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). Telecenters and telecottages are other attempts at accommodating remote workers – the primary differentiation being that the former type of workplace is characteristically paid for by the managers, whereas the expenses for the latter are paid for by clients (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020).

The underlying theme across all these working arrangements is that there are noteworthy spillovers and collisions between the personal life and professional one of the workers – whether they are full-time employed, part-time, or freelancers (Petani and Mengis, 2023). Another common denominator is the use of information systems and digital technology in a broad sense as enabling or mediating tools and infrastructure (Petani and Mengis, 2023).

Table 1: Why do people remote work?

	<i>Barrero et al.</i> (2021)	<i>Ferreira et al.</i> (2021)	<i>Ozimek</i> (2020)	<i>Thompson</i> (2019)	<i>Raghuram et al.</i> (2001)
Greater flexibility and autonomy		x	x		x
Increased productivity	x	x	x		x
Fewer distractions		x	x	x	
Less non-essential meetings	x		x	x	
Less (commuting) costs	x	x	x	x	x
Work-life balance		x		x	x
Increased job satisfaction	x	x		x	

(Source: Authors' analysis)

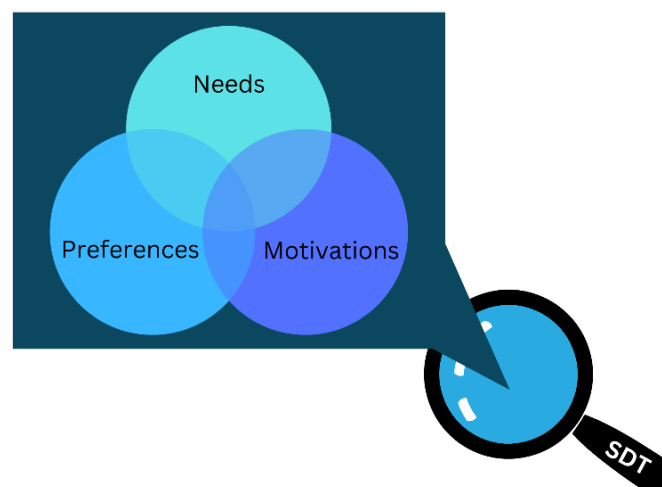
This results in a variety of benefits for both employers and remote workers (presented in Table 1). Studies have found that remote work can stimulate time-planning skills and autonomy in the organization, reduce workers' turnover as they take fewer sick days and have more options about the preferred location, and save costs considering that organizations can cut back on infrastructure, utility costs, office size, and similar (Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi, 2020). At the same time, remote workers can enjoy more family time and flexibility, and save on travel expenses (Yang et al., 2022). On the other hand, remote work can easily translate into professional isolation and have a negative impact on manager-employee and worker-worker relationships due to the nature of communications, lack of feedback, and lack of opportunities for out-of-office socialization (Yang et al., 2022).

2.2 Member needs, preferences, and motives through the lens of the self-determination theory

SDT has been primarily used in the field of organizational psychology for encouraging well-being and productivity in an organizational context and has found a wide application in HRM research, too (Deci et al., 2017). As a motivational theory, it perceives needs as psychological nutrients, which are vital for the individuals' integrity, wellness, and mental growth (Deci and Ryan, 2014). In other words, the essence of the theory is the individual needs and when people feel their basic psychological needs are met, they behave with feelings of willingness, drive, and enthusiasm, and become more self-inspired.

For the purpose of this study, we employ the SDT lens to uncover, inspect, and combine the pressing user needs or the needs of people who work remotely. The theory considers three types of needs, which are autonomy, relatedness, and competence: 1) the need for *autonomy*, which is different from independence in this context, refers to the state of acting from interest and viewing the behavior as self-expression; 2) *relatedness* focuses on the willingness for connection with others, notions like one belongs in a community, cares for someone and is being cared for; 3) *competence* – the sense of reflection in the relations with the surroundings, expression of one's capacity, and experience of opportunities (Deci and Ryan, 2014). When these three needs are fulfilled, organizations can reap the benefits of higher intrinsic motivation, mental growth, and overall wellness; if they aren't satisfied, this can result in higher levels of psychological distress, lower performance, and irritation (Deci et al., 2017).

Figure 1: Needs, preferences, and motives through the lens of SDT



(Source: Adapted from Deci et al. (2017))

SDT differentiates the concept of needs from other broader concepts like desires, motives, and endeavors (Deci and Ryan, 2014). For instance, the desire to be a part of an online community as a remote worker (Davies, 2021) can be considered a motive and a need, however, it isn't a preference. Although these three concepts overlap, one still can't put an equal sign between them (Figure 1). This is why we follow the definition of a member need which describes it as a characteristic of a job that refers to intrinsic psychological nutrients, which are vital for the individual's psychological well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2014). Further, for this study, we view motivation as the quality of the experience that empowers certain behaviors, while the preferences represent a significant liking of one option over others (Weinstein and Ryan, 2010).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We chose North Macedonia as the research context as it is one of the new favorite destinations for digital nomads due to the affordable cost of living, picturesque locations, interesting culture, and reliable technological infrastructure; data confirms this, placing the country in the second place when it comes to fastest growing digital nomad centers in the previous five years (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023). This makes it captivating for national and international remote workers alike. There is still no option to obtain a digital nomad visa from the country, yet the temporary residence permit is easily obtained and renewed (Sánchez-Vergara et al., 2023).

Regarding the method, we employ a qualitative method of semi-structured interviews to understand the member needs of remote workers, which is encouraged by Bettencourt and Ulwick (2008) for studies that aim to identify user or member needs in a particular environment. Moreover, we held 11 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with remote workers, gig workers, freelancers, and digital nomads who are working in North Macedonia. To cover a diverse group of respondents with different characteristics like gender, age, occupation, employment time, size of organization, and similar (Table 2), we adopted a purposive sampling approach, which is encouraged by Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) when researching a diverse, specific socio-economic group.

The interviews were separated into two parts – the first one comprised of two design-thinking-inspired activities and the second part consisted of a semi-structured interview. During the first part, respondents were asked to narrate a day of conducting remote work, shedding light on their productivity during the day, the location where they worked, how long they stayed in a certain space and other aspects. Then, they were asked to provide three keywords from their remote work that they associated with something that made the remote work easier and one keyword about something that made them feel frustrated. The second part of the interview was performed per an interview guideline, which was iteratively modified to cover emerging topics and needs.

What's more, the interview questions were grounded in the self-determination theory to gain an in-depth understanding of the remote workers' psychological needs. Questions from previous research (Deci and Ryan, 2014; Rådman et al., 2023) were the inspiration for some questions, which were custom-tailored for the remote work environment. They covered themes like productivity, motives, sense of belonging, fostering relationships with others, opportunities, and challenges.

Table 2: Characteristics of respondents from member interviews

#	Age	Gender	Occupation	Job tenure	Size of organization
RA	25-34	Male	Insurance Salesperson	0.5 years	Medium
RB	55-64	Male	Entrepreneur	2 years	Small

RC	45-54	Male	Data Engineer	1.5 years	Large
RD	45-54	Female	Management Consultant	5 years	Small
RE	35-44	Male	Entrepreneur	1.5 years	Small
RF	25-34	Female	Software Developer	3.5 years	Medium
RG	25-34	Female	Salesperson	1 year	Large
RH	25-44	Male	Software Developer	4.5 years	Large
RI	25-34	Male	Social Media Manager	1.5 years	Large
RJ	25-34	Male	Salesperson	3.5 years	Medium
RK	25-34	Female	Graphic Designer	3 years	Small

(Source: Authors' analysis)

The interview statements were coded and clustered into similar main themes. The primary method for clustering the data into themes was affinity mapping, which draws its roots from the Kawakita-Jiro (KJ) approach (Iba et al., 2017). This type of mapping enlists several visually based steps that include analysis, categorization, and assignment of codes. Afterwards, we perceived the data through the lens of SDT. This means that we expressed the member needs per the affordance theory, which is used in spatial, product, and relation design and takes the form of 'to be able to...' statements (Rådman et al., 2023). Once the themes were put together into finalized versions of needs, these needs were put together based on the previously elaborated three basic psychological needs of the self-determination theory, which included relatedness, autonomy, and competence. We found that some needs are more strongly related to each other, so we established six all-encompassing categories to structure the SDT-grouped remote workers' member needs.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

We found a total of 24 distinct member needs which are seen in remote workers, viewed through the prism of SDT's classification. They are grouped into six major categories (Table 3) and all needs are discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Table 3: Needs of remote workers

Category	SDT classification	Need
Health and well-being	Autonomy	To have good physical and mental health.
		To be in control of the personal work-life balance.
Productivity	Competence	To be able to maintain focus on the core work activity.
		To feel more productive from a chosen location and/or at a chosen time.
	Autonomy	To be in control of choosing an adequate work area.
		To interact with other without causing disturbances.
		To be able to control the cost structure.
		To be able to manage and safeguard confidential organizational information.
Social needs	Autonomy	To be able to be transparent and honest in the work.
		To be in control of interactions with others.
	Relatedness	To feel valued, noticed, and welcome at a workplace.
		To feel energized at the workplace.
		To feel meaningfulness from a certain job.
Confidence	Autonomy	To feel belongingness in a community.
		To be able to undergo a safe and just performance

in technology and infrastructure		management and evaluation procedure.
	Competence	To be able to solve issues without traditional requirements related to collocation. To be able to work without technical disturbances or any other interruptions.
Networking	Autonomy	To know who else is a member of the organization.
	Relatedness	To have your chosen workplace be presentable to guests, clients, and other members.
	Competence	To be able to meet people that can lead to new opportunities. To be able to expand the personal network with contacts from relevant stakeholders.
Knowledge sharing	Competence	To be able to receive feedback, directions, or input from colleagues.
		To upgrade skills and knowledge from colleagues and events.
		To be able to share expertise.

(Source: Authors' analysis)

4.1 Health and well-being

As one of the basic human needs, remote workers recognize the ability to be mentally and physically healthy in their remote workplace. Three respondents highlighted team initiatives of running or going to the gym together with fellow members of organizations. Additionally, remote work is often related to the discourse among HR professionals about stress management, maintaining a healthy work-life balance, employee burnout, and similar. This theme came most frequently in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I felt worried about the virus and my family. I learned to cherish my organization more for allowing me to choose to work from home even in times when the management preferred us to be in the office. (RF)

4.2 Productivity

Productivity was one of the larger themes surrounding remote workers' needs. It involved the ability to choose a certain preferred location for remote work, maintain focus on the core work activities, work without external interruptions, make better decisions about personal costs, and safeguard sensitive work-related information.

To be able to maintain focus on the core work activity was often mentioned in relation to the fact that outside spaces often provide various services that the remote worker doesn't have to do on their own but can rather outsource like drinking coffee when working in a café or not caring for reception or Internet at a co-working space. The need to feel more productive from a chosen location and/or at a chosen time describes how the space infuses the notion of productivity in the members of the remote workspace.

In a single hour of working in the café next to my house, I deliver more than in my office. I get motivated by the chill and quiet atmosphere. In my office, I used to do all the practical and reception-related things, too. Now that is very simplified. (RJ)

The needs that one requires to be productive are tied to one's feeling of autonomy. Predominantly, this means that remote workers may prefer this type of work because they can choose the work area they like and develop relationships with other members if they like and when they like without interrupting the work of others. To be able to manage and safely keep

sensitive information was seen as a challenge for many respondents as they often keep this kind of information on their personal computers or use co-working spaces where members from many organizations work in the same space. One of the primary reasons why remote members of an organization like their working arrangement is their increased sense of control of their budget and cost structure because they can cut commuting.

My organization didn't necessarily provide us with training about safekeeping information or how to effectively work remotely. We kind of had to figure it out on our own... Still, I like that I get paid the same and my expenses have plummeted. (RA)

4.3 Social needs

When it comes to autonomy in maintaining social needs, members highlighted the need to be able to be transparent and honest in their work. Since their managers can't track their progress and whereabouts minute by minute, several interviewees mentioned that they need to feel free to be honest with their supervisors about where they work and if they work at a certain time. Even though they work from a distant location, remote members of organizations like the need to be in control of interactions with others so they can participate in group events and team-building sessions at their own pace and convenience. By nurturing their social needs, remote workers can curb the negative feelings of being left out, the fear of missing out on important events, and similar.

I live in a small town where I know almost everyone. So, when I enter the café, I feel as if half of my time is wasted on saying hi to everyone and small talk. In these situations, all I want is to open my laptop and finish the tasks. (RE)

Furthermore, some remote members of organizations mentioned the need to feel valued, noticed, and welcome at a workplace and to be energized by it. Although they aren't in the office, these feelings of belonging and meaningfulness from a job are as important to them.

Being a member of the digital nomad community was the main reason why I became one. I visit faraway places, travel, meet new people, and finish my work at the same time. (RH)

4.4 Confidence in technology and infrastructure

Remote work and work-from-home practices were challenging to members of organizations who weren't confident in their technological skills and capacities. This is why a respondent felt they weren't justifiably evaluated during the regular performance management evaluations.

I am slow when working from a distance because everything had to be done online during the peak of the pandemic. Half of the time I had to ask my children for help. Of course, my supervisor wasn't satisfied. (RC)

This type of working arrangement depends mostly on technology and sufficient ICT infrastructure between remote workers of the organization themselves and the organization itself. Related to competence, a few of the remote members of organizations pointed out the need to be able to solve issues without traditional requirements related to collocation and to be able to work without technical disturbances or any other interruptions. They suggested that managers should lay down the necessary infrastructure, and make sure remote workers can successfully complete the work before allowing remote work arrangements in the first place.

The first few weeks after my team started working remotely were chaotic. We didn't have the credentials to enter the information system, some members shared computers with their children, and we couldn't regularly get hold of a team member who had a horrible reception in his grandmother's village. (RI)

4.5 Networking

We found that the need to network with other stakeholders in the community is beneficial and preferable to remote members of organizations, too. A lot of business collaborations and partnerships depend on expanding the personal and professional network through attending business events, and conferences, and connecting on professional social media profiles. Subsequently, networking activities can be done under different conditions and capacities in the context of remote work.

The first thing that I proposed everyone to do when I started my remote business was that we all had to know each other well even though we were working from different locations of the world. This meant our true selves, our strengths, weaknesses, skills, and aspirations so that I know who I can rely on and for which activity. (RB)

Moreover, the nature of the work requires some members of remote organizations to host and welcome clients or business partners. This was especially the case with employees who use the services of co-working spaces. As a result, the need to have the chosen workplace be presentable was stressed.

Leaving a good impression is imperative for our business. We strive to have our future suppliers or business partners think they can take their business to new lengths if they work with us and to see us as serious people when they check out the great location we work from. (RG)

Most of the remote members of organizations agreed that networking doesn't look a lot different than working in the office. They see the main difference in the profession itself and the opportunities that are offered by certain locations.

I have no trouble meeting new people from the industry. I go to conferences and go to industry events as much as I did when I was working full-time in my office. However, some of my colleagues who moved abroad complained they couldn't as the industry there wasn't that developed, and they were constrained to online networking. (RD)

4.6 Knowledge sharing

The need for knowledge exchange, which often relates to one's curiosity and taps into the intrinsic willingness to give and receive help, revolves around sharing as well as receiving knowledge for personal or business-oriented purposes. Through their working arrangements, remote workers strive to receive feedback, directions, or input from colleagues, upgrade skills and knowledge from colleagues and events, and share expertise. During an interview, a respondent was asked about what boosted their motivation:

My mindset is centered around the mantra that if you want to know something, there is always a way to learn it. I am motivated by the fact that there is always something that I have yet to understand. And the best thing is that you can always ask someone. (RK)

5. DISCUSSION

As remote work slowly starts becoming ubiquitous in contemporary workspaces, organizations' SHRM is tasked with managing a diverse, geographically dispersed workforce. In this research, we brought to light 24 needs of remote members of organizations who are working in the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia. The identification of these needs represents a basis for improving current HR practices and developing solutions. Past studies on member needs in contemporary workplaces have explored the member needs of coworking spaces (Rådman et al., 2023), the needs of managers based on an experimental manager training program (Jungert et al., 2022), career satisfaction needs of hotel frontline employees (Lee, 2016), and similar. Yet their findings aren't entirely applicable to remote

workers as a newly widespread category of members of the organization, who oftentimes aren't even full-time employed. Furthermore, the identified needs and six major categories refer to published literature on SDT, member needs, and remote work.

To illustrate, the needs from the categories of health and well-being (Raghuram et al., 2001), productivity (Ferreira et al., 2021), social needs (Barrero et al., 2021), and confidence in technology and infrastructure (Ferreira et al., 2021) can be connected to some of the highest occurring reasons for opting for remote work, which are already present in the current public and academic discourse. The identified remote member needs combine the preferences and motives for becoming a remote worker with intrinsic psychological needs which characterize a member's mental growth, integrity, and satisfaction when said needs are satisfied.

As with most research endeavors, this one doesn't come free of its own set of limitations. At the same time, these limitations act as avenues for new research in this direction. For one, studies can employ additional methodologies like observations of how remote members of organizations spend their days or analyzing internal documentation like employee satisfaction surveys, emails, and similar. Additionally, more interviews can be conducted with remote members of organizations and other research can factor in different research contexts and regions to test the comparability of the findings. Finally, future research can explore tensions within and between individual remote members' needs.

4. CONCLUSION

Remote work has proven to be the right strategy for organizations that tend to boost internal flexibility and workforce mobility, while at the same time reducing costs and allowing full-time employees, gig workers, freelancers, and digital nomads to save on travel costs and enjoy a more balanced work-life experience (Ferreira et al., 2021). Before an organization adopts remote work practices, they may make sure that their members have access to suitable technology (Jeske, 2021) and other facilitating conditions to make sure they feel safe, productive, and socially connected.

The objective of this study was to identify and explore the needs of remote members of modern organizations and afterward structure these needs through the lens of the self-determination theory. 24 members' needs for the remote workplace were defined and grouped into six overarching categories. It was found that members of remote workplaces mostly look for and value the needs for maintaining their health and well-being, a remote workplace that enables them to be productive, social needs, the need for confidence in technology and infrastructure, networking needs, and needs for knowledge sharing. The research tries to make a contribution to the literature on remote work by highlighting the importance of member needs of remote workers, which can help employees of HR departments improve retention, satisfaction, and engagement among this specific segment of the workforce.

This study's implications are mostly aimed at managers and employees in HR departments in organizations that enable remote work as a standard working arrangement. These stakeholders are often called upon to tackle the challenges of remote work practices, including team communication, control over the technology (the workforce may use personally owned technology), team cohesion, and similar. By considering the identified needs of remote members of the organizations, HR managers can understand their remote members better, what drives them, what motivates them, and which aspirations they nurture. When HR acts as a bridge between the top management and this specific category of employees, organizations can potentially benefit from lower turnover rates and at the same time higher retention rates, and increased job satisfaction and workers' engagement. Making sure the identified needs are satisfied or exceeded, in the long run, can open new avenues that result in sustainable organizational growth and higher returns on human capital investment.

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