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Lived Experience of Geographically Dispersed Employees in the Absence of Shared-Air Organizational Interactions

Tommie Ann Saragas
Walden University

Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Tommie Ann Culver Saragas

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Review Committee
Dr. Marlon Sukal, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty
Dr. Debra Davenport, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty
Dr. Jane Coddington, University Reviewer, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

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Abstract

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by

Tommie Ann Culver Saragas

MS, Walden University, 2018

MED, Lindsey Wilson College, 2005

BA, Lindsey Wilson College, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Industrial and Organizational Psychology

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Abstract

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of employees choosing an off-site employment option increased annually. During COVID-19-related work-life modifications, many organizations worldwide were required to transition to a geographically dispersed, off-site workforce. While some individuals may enjoy the flexibility, convenience, and work-life balance of a geographically dispersed position, there is a need for organizations and employees to explore how workers perceive social support, experience feeling valued by and connected with leaders and team members and are impacted by technology and virtual interactions for those who work wholly off-site or at such a distance that face-to-face organizational interactions are not feasible. As both theory and method, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) guided the collection and analysis of interviews regarding the lived experiences of six geographically dispersed employees, allowing for a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences of those working in a remote environment without the opportunity for shared-air organizational interactions by highlighting subjective narratives. By considering the results of this study, including feelings of isolation and disconnection as well as the desire for communication, inclusion in decision and policy-making, organizational leaders and policy makers may better understand the off-site employee's experience. The exploration of the lived experiences of the study's participants may encourage the review of or implementation of strategies that could contribute to positive social change by influencing the perceived social support, feelings of being valued, sense of connection, and inclusion of the increasing number of geographically dispersed employees.

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Dedication

I dedicate my doctoral study to my children, grandchildren, family, and friends, who have been a constant source of encouragement, celebrated the positive, and forgiven the missteps. My son, Antony Takis "Ty" Saragas, daughter, Andromahi "Andi" Ellen Parks, son-in-law Tanner Parks, grandchildren-in-love, Elly and Nate Thomas, and granddaughter, Sawyer Elizabeth Parks, you are the lights of my life. I love you more than there is room to express. To my parents (by blood and by love), I am so grateful. Thank you for letting me find my way and being there when I needed to turn back and start again. To my sister Margaret and brother John, I remain in awe of you both. To my nieces, nephews, and all other family members, I thank you for your support and for letting me think I am the cool one when we all know that I most definitely am not.

To my precious friends who are my family, I cannot name you all, but you know who you are because you have held my hand on the best and worst days of my life. I celebrate this with you and thank you for your never-ending generosity of care. To my LWC family, I honor your service in creating opportunities for growth. To the participants who bravely and genuinely shared their experiences, thank you. To my Boys and Girls Club of Appalachia club members and my students of past, present, and future, follow your dreams. I promise it is worth it. I dedicate this effort to you all.

Finally, to my grandparents and other heavenly loves, I have wanted to make you proud my entire life. I dedicate this effort to your desire for education for all, your incredible sacrifices, work ethic, and the legacy of love you left behind.

Father God and Mother Earth, in gratitude, I dedicate this effort in your honor.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Employees working partially or wholly off-site, supported by technological connections, have grown into a large portion of the workforce in many organizations, with the number of employees choosing this remote employment option increasing annually (White, 2018). During the work-life modifications caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations were forced to adapt their practices to include an off-site workforce (Putra et al., 2020). Private and public sector organizations and employees have found themselves forced to meet the challenges of the essential and swift transition to remote work without the time to consider the potential impact on organizational climate, communication, connection, or wellbeing of employees (Prasad et al., 2020). Brazeau et al. (2020) offered that although the employees who were working off-site prior to COVID-19 did not experience a change in work location, they certainly experienced a change in the work environment and faced additional stressors which tested the extremes of work-life balance, mental health, and overall wellbeing.

In marked contrast to those who reside near the company's physical location, geographically dispersed employees are rarely, if ever, afforded opportunities for face-to-face or shared-air interactions with supervisors and coworkers. However, formal and informal interactions in the workplace are foundational to learning the social norms and culture of an organization, fostering connection among the team, and perceived social support. These interactions increase mood and influence performance (Holmes, 2015; Liu et al., 2011; Oshima & Asmub, 2018; Watanabe et al., 2016).

Researchers have begun to examine technology's role as an equivalent substitute for shared-air interaction with supervisors and coworkers. Lin & Kwantes (2014) focused on the informal interactions which occur throughout the workday outside of scheduled meetings and proposed that email, phone conversations, and private messages between employees assisted in offsetting the disconnection experienced in the absence of face-to-face interactions but were not equal in benefit. Perceived disconnection contributes to feelings of isolation, loneliness, diminished motivation, and fewer incidents of citizenship-related behaviors in employees (Wu et al., 2016; Zeng et al., 2020).

Previous researchers found remote work benefits to include increased job satisfaction due to flexibility, advanced autonomy, and fewer interruptions by colleagues (Fonnor & Roloff, 2010). While the transition in industry employment practices could provide the aforementioned advantages, there is a continued need to consider the potential impact and overall well-being of geographically dispersed employees (Charalampous et al., 2019). The adaptation to the various impacts of COVID-19 on the home–work environment, including children homeschooling, shared technology, and crowded workspaces, have undoubtedly altered the pre-COVID-19 work climate (Brazeau et al., 2020). Exploring employees' lived experiences among this population can offer a more in-depth understanding of their unique perspectives regarding perceived social support, connections with leadership and team members, and other issues related to the phenomenon.

Background of Study

Many organizations are increasing the number of geographically dispersed employees on staff (White, 2018). According to Global Workplace Analytics (2016), half of the employees in the United States could perform their roles remotely. Not only does the number of employees who are located off-site continue to increase annually, but the geographic distance from the actual organization increases, making face-to-face meetings impractical and cost prohibitive (White, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of individuals working off-site at a global level (Putra et al., 2020). While sectors of industry have been impacted differently, COVID-19 has transformed the way many work and live (Brazeau et al., 2020). Research surrounding the pre-COVID-19 phenomenon of remote work was focused heavily on effective leadership strategies (Connaughton & Daly, 2004). For example, White (2018), Bentley et al. (2016), and Chen and Hew (2015) explored the experience of employees who were part-time telework, remote, or virtual employees. However, the participants in their studies were not all at such a distance from the base location that physical presence or shared-air interactions with coworkers were prohibited.

Increased connection and deeper relationships are afforded from opportunities for social exchanges among team members (Cropanzo & Mitchell, 2006). Bentley et al. (2016) found that social support was a critical element in reducing psychological strain and increasing job satisfaction. Iplik et al. (2014) determined perceived social support had a mediating and moderating influence on the psychological stress and emotional exhaustion related to surface acting's necessary emotional labor strategies. Lee and

Madera (2019) defined surface acting as masking of an individual's genuine emotion to present feelings that are more organizationally acceptable, while deep acting requires the individual to change of the actual emotion to one that is or situationally appropriate. An example of such a labor strategy is a person who is grieving a loss of a loved one but smiles and acts happy in the workplace. An example of deep acting is one's use of previous experience or imagination to evoke similar emotions. These strategies aid in presenting an expected emotional state or to manipulate emotions to match those expected by clients and the organization (Iplik et al., 2014). The use of surface acting strategies contributed to lower organizational citizenship behaviors and decreased job satisfaction (Aziz et al., 2019). Biron and Boon (2013) offered that high quality relationships with their leaders and colleagues are required by employees who are high performers.

Problem Statement

Wu et al. (2016) found that employees who perceived disconnection or felt ostracized within the organization experienced reduced well-being including emotional exhaustion and psychological distress. These employees were less likely to be motivated to expel the effort to perform citizenship-related behaviors that result in extrinsic benefit to another individual, the collective team, or overall organization. Bentley et al. (2016) suggested that consistent opportunities for face-to-face interactions with colleagues would be necessary to mitigate isolation and disconnection often experienced by remote employees. The lack of interaction for those at a great distance or not afforded the time or resources to engage in shared-air meetings deserves investigation and deeper

understanding. Although the intent of technological support and managerial support is to assist the geographically dispersed worker in performing their role effectively, it is unclear if technology addresses the social, emotional, self-efficacy, and wellness aspects of the distance-based experience.

Chen and Hew (2015) reported that although organizations and workers often enjoy the flexibility of a virtual work environment, there is a need for further research surrounding the social exchange possible in a virtual community and the impact of remote work on personal and social factors that influence organizational connection such as trust, sharing, respect, and approval. There is a gap in the literature regarding exploring the lived experience of geographically dispersed employees, specifically surrounding social support perceptions, which includes connection and feeling valued by one's supervisor, team, and organization. Additionally, with each unique interpretation, it is impossible to exhaust the need for phenomenological study of lived experience for any given phenomenon (van Manen, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) qualitative study was to explore the lived experience and perceptions of social support in geographically dispersed employees in the absence of shared-air organizational interactions. The focus included connection with and feeling valued by coworkers while working remotely with technological support for communication and engagement. The goal was to increase understanding of how various employees experience and apply meaning to this growing phenomenon.

Research Question

The research question (RQ) was developed to explore the central idea of the research study while concurrently assisting in establishing the boundaries and the problem statement associated with the specific research. Further, RQ development informed the selection of research design (Burkholder et al., 2016).

The RQ for this study was: What are the lived experiences of geographically dispersed employees regarding social support, supervision and coaching, and connection in the absence of shared-air organizational interactions?

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study pulled concepts from various theories and ultimately deferred to the categories and themes that emerged from the research process. Social identity theory (SIT) and social exchange theory (SET) hold that organizational connection and systemic interactions motivate employees (Pinder, 2008; Van Dick et al., 2005). Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory considers the relationship between leaders and employees and how the connection is influenced by interactions and communications that are unique to the pair (Sheer, 2014). Guan et al. (2013) examined the relationship between LMX, team networks, and team identification in the work environment. The researchers offered higher levels of organizational identification could be achieved through strong team networks and positive, quality LMX. Loi et al. (2014) supported the influence of LMX on identification and included a correlation with job satisfaction. Quality LMX proves more difficult when the members of the workforce are

geographically dispersed, and the compromised LMX may contribute to a lack of advancement opportunities for remote employees (Chekwa, 2018).

Core self-evaluation theory holds that an individual's consideration of personal abilities and self-concept, along with the presence of an internal locus of control (ILC), contributes to the ability to perceive the connection between work and reward, regardless of the environment (Johnson et al., 2015). ILC refers to the degree to which individuals believe that they influence the events in their lives (Li, et al., 2020). The job demands-resources framework holds that organizational connection is a critical factor that influences employee retention and overall happiness (Huynh et al., 2014). Conservation of resource theory proposes that the lack of sufficient psychological and physical resources leads to increased amounts of stress within individuals attempting to cope with environmental stressors (Johnson et al., 2015). Nauman et al. (2019) identified emotional intelligence as a personal resource that can lessen the resource-depleting impact of surface acting's emotional labor strategy and, therefore, lessen the experienced levels of stress and emotional exhaustion associated with emotional labor. For this study, I relied on SET, SIT, LMX, core self-evaluation theory, job demands-resources framework, conservation of resource theory, and the idea of emotional intelligence to both frame the interview questions and as a starting point to analyze the data.

Nature of the Study

This research study was a qualitative design with an IPA approach to exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of the target population of geographically dispersed employees. The perspectives of others are assumed to be meaningful and useful to

reconstruct the past, understand the present, and anticipate the potential lived experiences involving the phenomena of interest. The IPA qualitative process examines and presents a description of the experience without suggesting causality (Cypress, 2018).

Definitions

The following key terms were used in the study.

Lived Experience: Lived experience refers to the reflective, subjective accounts of an individual or group regarding a specific phenomenon (van Manen, 2016) and the meaning given to said phenomenon and how the individual relates to it (Smith et al., 2009).

Geographically Dispersed Employee: For this study, the term geographically dispersed employee refers to an individual with no on-site presence or interactions in the same physical space with others from the employing organization (Landier et al., 2009).

Social Support: Social support refers to the existence and perceived availability of quality interpersonal helping relationships (Kuriakose et al., 2019; Merida-Lopez et al., 2019).

Shared-Air: For the purpose of this study, the term shared-air refers to two or more individuals in close proximity in the same physical environment, including organizational facilities, outdoor areas, or transportation systems (Landier, et al., 2009).

Supervision: For this study, the term supervision refers to the oversight of employees and work environment including professional and moral support, conflict management, performance improvement, and accountability of task completion and goal attainment (Min et al., 2020).

Coaching: Coaching refers to a unique, goal-focused relationship between two professionals who uses collaboration, reflection, teaching and skill development intervention strategies to foster professional and personal growth (Bozer & Jones, 2018).

Assumptions

For the study, I assumed that the research participants' information was true and reflected an accurate representation of their unique lived experiences. Selection criteria yielded individuals who had adequate experience with the phenomena that was studied. An additional assumption was that participants who voluntarily joined the study engaged with an attitude of openness during the interview process. Finally, although it was difficult, I assumed maintenance of objectivity regarding the interactions with participants and data analysis. Researcher objectivity must be noted as a potential limitation in qualitative research because the researcher is part of the study (Cope, 2014).

Scope and Delimitations

For this IPA study, I focused on those remote employees without the opportunity to interact in on-site, face-to-face, shared-air networking, or collaboration experiences due to geographic distance from their organizations or other barriers. I conducted detailed semistructured interviews with six participants. Smith et al. (2012) offered that a range of three to six participants is considered best practice for an IPA researcher to ensure meaningful and manageable data collection.

The participants were selected purposively based on the ability to offer insight into the topic of interest and identified via referral and snowball referrals from participants (Smith et al., 2012). The homogenous characteristics that were required were

employment as a dispersed employee, with no shared-air experiences with coworkers or leadership, for a minimum of 9 months with 6 months of previous on-site experience. The interviews could have been conducted in person. However, the determination of the interview process depended upon the demographics of the participants and COVID-19 interaction guidelines. Regardless of format, personal interviews can provide the researcher insight into the participants' perceptions, emotions, and experiences (Jentoft & Olson, 2019). My database consisted of interview transcripts from open, exploratory interviews from the exchanges of information.

Limitations of the Study

COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions limited the setting of interviews to a virtual platform. Video and audio connections were utilized; however, the ability to assess nonverbal communication was limited to only what was captured by the camera lens and hindered by not sharing the same physical space. Further, as the sole researcher, any element of my own biases or misunderstanding of the participants' stories constituted limitations and required reflexive examination. Careful consideration must be taken to capture and present the unique experiences of participants and the phenomena without researcher bias (Cope, 2014).

Significance of the Study

This research is relevant to the changing nature of organizational environments (Chen & Hew, 2015). The findings could prove immediately applicable to diverse organizations and settings. This study's results may provide vital insights into the experiences and perceptions of employees who do not have the opportunity to engage in

face-to-face interactions with coworkers or members of leadership (van Manen, 2016).

The findings add to the empirical literature and could potentially influence practice and

policy. The information afforded from the research could aid organizations in

understanding what methods, if any, foster feelings of social support, including

connection with and of being valued by the organization, team members, and leaders

(Chen & Hew, 2015). Further, the exploration could aid in understanding if those

cognitions or emotions are perceived as essential by the employee.

With the increasing geographically dispersed workforce, these insights could

inform practices from as early as the application, interviewing, and onboarding processes.

Wu et al. (2016) noted that attention to communication and accessibility could address

any perceptions of isolation that may exist and increase trust and citizenship behaviors. In

areas such as the online learning environment, this research could translate from a work

environment to student and faculty engagement, student and institutional identification,

and faculty and institutional connectivity. Not only is the global geographically dispersed

workforce growing, but online learning is the upward trend in higher education with a

steady increase every year for the last 14 years (Green, 2019).

Summary and Conclusion

Shifts within the work environment necessitate exploration of those changes'

personal, social, and organizational impact. As an increasing number of employees

perform their roles from off-site locations with limited to no shared-air interactions with

colleagues, it is vital to investigate the lived experience and perceptions of social support.

Korzynski (2013) proposed that social interaction is essential to a sense of belonging,

motivation, and job satisfaction. COVID-19 has further increased isolation (Putra et al., 2020). With interaction opportunities removed, it is vital to explore the perceived effects of isolation on mental health and their lived experiences as geographically dispersed employees, and the meaning given to them by each participant.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Technological advances allow organizations to offer employees the blended option of working partially remotely or employing individuals who work remotely full-time, regardless of their geographic proximity. While flexible working practices can benefit employees and organizations, identified challenges include employee engagement, perceived social support, and successful leadership of distance-based employees (Charalampous et al., 2019). With part-time remote work, employees may not have the recurrent opportunity for shared-air interactions with coworkers and supervisors, which have been shown to aid in feelings of connection and organizational identity (Ohima & Birte, 2018). For geographically dispersed workers without shared-air opportunities, or those isolated due to COVID-19 restrictions, developing team trust and shared goals among virtual teams can assist in creating an organizational climate of cohesion and engagement for the remote workforce (Brahm & Kunze, 2012). Birdie and Jain (2016) noted that trust further impacts remote employees' perceptions of the organizational climate and perceived equity in performance standards, conflict resolution, and appraisal and reward practices.

Previous research regarding remote employment focused mainly on the perspective and practice of leading remote employees. Steele and Plenty (2015) noted a lack of research examining how remote employees receive and perceive the communication efforts of individuals in leadership roles. To address this need for consideration, I sought to explore the lived experience of those geographically dispersed employees without opportunities for shared-air interactions and how they perceive social

support, leadership, and connection to and feeling valued by their supervisor and coworkers.

Literature Review Strategy

The purpose of the literature review was to explore past and present information about geographically dispersed employment, perceived social support, sense of connection, and feelings of being valued by an organization, leader, and coworkers, as well as researching the lived experience of a phenomenon. I collected literature related to these topics using the keywords *lived experience*, *social support, remote, virtual, telework, geographically dispersed work, organizational connection, job satisfaction, meaning making, leader-member exchange theory, leadership, coaching, supervision, nonverbal communication, human energy, appreciation in the workplace, feelings of being valued in the workplace, perceived favoritism, isolation, workplace well-being during COVID-19 pandemic, appraisal and approval, virtual communities in the workplace, organizational culture and climate, supervision, coaching, connectedness,* and *employee perceptions* in the databases EBSCOHost, ProQuest, Google Scholar, SocIndex, PsycArticles, Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, Education Source, as well as in Thoreau Multi-Database Search.

To aid in my search, the parameter of "peer-reviewed" was utilized to assist in ensuring that the resulting identified research was credible. Although I desired to locate sources within the timeframe of 2015-2021, I did not restrict my exploratory searches by date. I procured digital versions of relevant articles and books. Physical copies of books

were acquired when necessary. A connection to keywords or the concepts of focus for the study established relevance.

An additional search strategy that I implemented was the review of dissertations published between 2016 and 2021, which contained the keywords identified for the study. The works were viewed in the Walden University Library dissertation database.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the IPA study did not presume or predict a specific outcome but rather considered concepts and theories related to the exploration of the lived experience of geographically dispersed employees (Jabereen, 2015). This qualitative study considered concepts from various theories pertaining to the areas of interest but ultimately deferred to the categories and themes that emerged from the research process.

Theories that examine the role of interaction and influence on thought, emotion, and actions include social identity theory (SIT) and social exchange theory (SET). These theories purport that organizational connection and team member interactions impact employee motivation (Pinder, 2008; Van Dick et al., 2005). Guan et al. (2013) suggested that organizational identification levels are related to the strength of the relationships among team networks and leader-member exchange (LMX). Additionally, LMX has been found to influence overall job satisfaction (Loi et al., 2014). Gundlach et al. (2006) discussed the impact of individualistic team members on overall team performance. Haslam (2014) suggested that the application of SIT within organizations could propel

the team's effectiveness. He further noted that behaviors and communication among coworkers influenced SIT.

Key Concepts

Perceived Social Support

Bentley et al. (2016) outlined the distinction between perceived social support (PSS) and perceived organizational support and noted that both constructs influence essential outcomes in the workplace. Social support was the support the employee perceived from colleagues and those in leadership. Organizational support was the acknowledgment of the employee's contributions and the sense that their overall well-being was important to the organization. PSS is an essential job resource based on interpersonal relationships and has been found to influence myriad issues prevalent in organizations and the increasing geographically dispersed workforce (Merida-Lopez et al., 2019).

Iplik et al. (2014) posited that PSS in the workplace has a mitigating effect on employees' cognitive and emotional exhaustion by reducing the need for employees to create and present a forced emotional state or expected persona to be accepted. Merida-Lopez et al. (2019) reported a positive relationship between the presence of PSS and emotional-regulation ability noting that employees who were able to rely upon coworkers demonstrated greater flexibility when managing their own emotional states. Babin and Boles (1996) also presented the influence of social support on emotional exhaustion and stress. Similarly, they found a significant impact of support on employees' feelings of depersonalization and isolation in the workplace. Although not exclusive to remote

workers, employees working off-site are at a heightened risk for perceived isolation and loneliness due to a lack of availability for social interactions with colleagues (Marshall et al., 2007). Brazeau et al. (2020) called for leaders to examine the compounding factors of COVID-19, which are influencing the lives and work of remote employees, and consider strategies of social support that promote wellbeing.

It is presumptuous to attribute feelings of isolation and loneliness to all employees who lack PSS or singularly those who work remotely. Perceived isolation and feelings of loneliness occur in the proximate and distance-based employee populations (Connaughton & Daly, 2004). Benoit & DiTommaso, (2020) offered that the level of desire for social interaction and support is subjective and influenced by an individual's development and attachment. Bentley et al. (2016) shared multiple benefits of the lack of interaction experienced by teleworkers, including focusing on tasks with fewer interruptions and distractions. However, the researchers also noted that without PSS, isolation in the remote work environment could lead to myriad mental and physical health issues, including but not limited to burnout, depression, and chronic loneliness.

In the absence of PSS, many employees experience loneliness to such a degree that they choose to leave their roles and organizations. Conversely, PSS has been found by many researchers to lessen isolation, loneliness, burnout, and turnover intentions while increasing job satisfaction (Bentley et al., 2016; Biron & Boon, 2013; Kaymaz et al., 2014; Nohe & Sonntag, 2014; Zeng et al., 2020). Job satisfaction related to PSS involves increased engagement and the employee's resulting motivation to contribute to the

positive work environment through increased citizenship behaviors (Ladd & Henry, 2006; Othman & Nasurdin, 2013).

Recently, Kuriakose et al. (2019) discussed the importance and positive impact of PSS during a crisis and times of organizational or interpersonal conflict. Consistently, Syed et al. (2020) shared that PSS is critical during transitional structural change episodes. The researchers suggested that PSS significantly reduced the fear, anxiety, and conflict associated with change. The COVID-19 pandemic has further demonstrated the influence of PSS on employee's well-being and ability to process emotions and cognitions to make meaning of their overall experiences, and ability to cope with the increased stressors in their life-work environments (Brazeau et al., 2020; Milman et al., 2020; Prasad et al., 2020).

Shared-Air Interactions and Connections

Some geographically dispersed employees prefer less contact with coworkers (Fonner & Roloff, 2010). Prior to the added factors of COVID-19 (Putra (2020), the off-site environment was found to offer fewer interruptions, improved time management, and task focus for the off-site employee (Tremblay & Thomsin, 2012). However, interaction has a role in understanding the organization and learning to be a community member (Holmes, 2015). Charalampous et al. (2019) suggested that employees' well-being is markedly improved when opportunities for face-to-face or shared-air interactions occur, with a noticeable difference for remote workers who maintain a minimum number of hours working on-site.

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2006) suggested that social exchanges can help employees learn group norms and foster deeper connections between individuals. Connection includes a sense of belonging and an emotional attachment to the organizational mission and values, colleagues, job duties, clients, and outcomes (Huynh et al., 2014). The quality of interaction or social exchange in the workplace positively influences employee affect, productivity, and organizational identity (Liu et al., 2011). Cornelissen et al. (2007) presented the fluid nature of social and organizational identity. Stets and Burke (2000) posed that the strength of the connection determines the saliency of identification. When employees experience disconnection, citizenship-related behaviors and engagement diminish, contributing to further barriers to a connection (van Knippenberg, 2000; Wu et al., 2016).

Interactions in meetings account for only part of the equation. Informal face-to-face interactions with coworkers, including merely being in the same physical space without verbal exchange, have been found to improve employee mood and performance (Watanbe et al., 2016). Spreitzer et al. (2016) called for further discussion regarding the impact of human energy and seemingly insignificant actions in daily, routine work practices on workplace outcomes and the behaviors and experiences of the individuals involved. O'Dell (2015) held that the energetic field emitted from an individual influences not only the health of cognitive function, emotions, and behaviors of the individual but those of others in the environment as well. Nonverbal connections which are afforded or occur between colleagues in shared-air spaces include proximity of workspaces, glances, body movements, and other cues that influence connection and the

strength of social relationships (Oshima & Asmub, 2018). Darics (2020) discussed the crucial role of nonverbal behaviors in leadership interactions and creating connection in the workplace and expressed a need for further research to explore the experience of employees who interact in a virtual environment and how the lack of or limited nonverbal communication impacts issues such as leader-member exchange, conflict resolution, and miscommunication.

Supplementing the lack of interactions with virtual interactions has been suggested as a best practice to increase connection and communication among team members (Baker et al., 2006; Karis et al., 2016). However, Oshima and Asmub (2018) noted that, while virtual meetings provide communication and collaboration opportunities with remote team members, if the team members in the shared-air space join as a group, it can cause a greater sense of disconnect for the dispersed worker. The researchers reported that employees in the same physical environment often display body language that demonstrates connection through the placement of chairs, proximity of paperwork, and extended gazes with their co-present colleagues.

Understanding that a sense of connection contributes to corporate commitment (Jacobs, 2008), increased job satisfaction, productivity, citizenship behaviors, and employee well-being, Petterson (2016) suggested the creation of virtual spaces, perhaps via social media, to afford communication and social interaction outside of the work environment. This approach would allow employees to gain the whole person's view of their colleagues and guard against the depersonalization that contributes to disconnect, perceived isolation, and loneliness (Bagget et al., 2016). Burnes (2019) noted that Kurt

Lewin was among the first researchers to explore the interdependent nature of groups, the impact of the force of the group on member behavior, and the shaping of different social categories or in-groups and out-groups.

Loyd and Amoroso (2018) reported that outgroup members perceive favoritism toward increased advocacy and opportunities for members with in-group status. These perceptions threatened the out-group members' self-esteem, social identity, and sense of being valued by the organization. Further exploration of the geographically dispersed employee's experience of in-group or out-group status and how interactions might impact categorization is needed. Lin and Kwantes (2014) supported the idea that private interactions between coworkers are more important than formal shared-air meetings. These exchanges promote likability within the group, heightened trust levels, and more significant opportunities for inclusion in projects and decision making. Lin and Kwantes (2014) held that although these exchanges via phone, email, messaging, or video conversations may not be equal in impact to shared-air interactions, the benefits remained evident.

Feeling Valued

Organizational culture, climate, and leadership style aid in establishing an environment in which an employee feels valued. Baggett et al. (2016) noted that while employees respond favorably to tangible rewards and words of praise, there is also a desire to be appreciated for more than performance, talents, or task outcomes. The researchers discovered that workers wish to be seen and valued as a whole person, not solely defined by their work. Interestingly, the study revealed that leaders who

demonstrated caring behaviors that included offering employee recognition and support noted increased employee motivation, teamwork, loyalty to the organization, and performance. A leader's attempts at demonstrations of caring must be perceived and received by the employee to maintain the potential influence on retention, connection, and fostering an overall environment where employees feel valued.

Charalampous et al. (2019) found that remote workers often acknowledge that the afforded opportunity to work independently and off-site demonstrates that their organization, supervisor, and team members trust and value them. Inclusion in the corporate decision-making process is an organizational valuing behavior for geographically dispersed employees (Landier et al., 2009). However, the distance causes others to perceive that they are not as valued as the employees seen in the workplace each day. Further, there is a belief that opportunities for advancement and recognition occur more often for the efforts of their on-site counterparts (Zhang, 2016). While the results of their study demonstrated a statistically significant (P<.05) positive correlation between organizational rewards system, conflict resolution, and performance standards and the level of trust that is attainable within a team and organization, Birdie and Jain (2016) concluded that the correlation between trust and overall perceived organizational climate was not significant for the virtual workforce. However, trust is a foundational element for the cohesion and goal achievement of virtual teams (Brahm & Kunze, 2012).

White's (2018) study compared the preference for demonstrations of appreciation at the workplace between remote and site-based employees. Over 88,000 participants from both face-to-face and remote locations completed the Motivating by Appreciation

Inventory (MBAI). The data demonstrated that employees who served the organization

from a distance preferred quality time with colleagues and supervisors at a greater rate

than their on-site counterparts. Providing opportunities for genuine quality time with

team members and leaders can prove challenging due to geographic dispersion that

prohibits travel to the site. Without the benefit of interactions in shared-air meetings,

companies must rely on the use of technology such as video conferencing to foster

occasions for increased communication. Opportunities for nonverbal communication cues

strengthen the depth of connections and the quality time necessary to promote feelings of

being valued (Karis et al., 2006).

Site-Based Employees' Views of the Dispersed Worker

Geographically dispersed employees reported feeling ignored, judged, and

mistrusted by their corkers who work on location. In their absence, remote workers often

feel ganged up on and that their voices go unheard with no one on-site to advocate for the

opinions, priorities, or dispersed group input (Harvard Business Review, 2018). Further,

the lack of social interactions, formally and informally, can impact how the remote

employees are perceived by those who interact daily to form social and professional

connections, which leads to increased trust (Cui et al., 2018).

Landier et al. (2019) noted that geographically dispersed employees perceive or

experience that their on-site team members are treated with more inclusivity and are

given more input in planning, policy, and decision making, and are less likely to be

dismissed than remote employees. Bloom et al. (2015) found that, while remote

employees reported increased job satisfaction when they transitioned to working off-site,

their performance-related promotion rate declined. Implementing virtual meetings as a standard practice may provide a platform for remote employees to showcase their work or serve to lessen the assumptions of favoritism while increasing communication, respect, and trust by creating a platform to hear all voices. Virtual interactions can lower the frequency of misunderstandings and offer a bridge to collaboration (Karis et al., 2016).

Remote Leadership, Supervision, and Coaching

Biron and Boon (2013) found that high-performing employees require high-quality relationships with those in supervisory roles. It is essential for supervisors to encourage employees to share their unique perspectives, cultural views, and approaches to solve team or task-related problems (Kilduff & Brass, 2010). Nohe and Sonntag (2014) added that leadership style could help resolve team conflicts or create them. Effective conflict management requires genuine relationships and leaders to react with an informed, situation-specific response while considering the context, culture, and personalities involved (Min et al., 2020). Numerous researchers indicate that leaders who engage employees in meaningful exchanges and multiple interactions motivate greater productivity and foster increased job satisfaction, corporate commitment, citizenship behaviors, and retention among their workforce (Ellemers et al., 2004; Jacobs, 2008; Loi et al., 2014; Nohe & Sonntag, 2014; Yang, 2020).

Specific, individual personalities and preferences require various leadership, supervision, and coaching approaches. The addition of geographic dispersion creates increased challenges in identifying best practices in leadership. Zhang (2016) noted the increased importance of leadership roles for employees whose primary socialization

opportunities transpire within the work environment. The researcher identified those individuals with self-disclosure tendencies and middle-aged women as populations who demonstrate a propensity to rely heavily upon relationships with their supervisors for personal and professional support. Young et al. (2013) found that while women may prefer telecommuting at a higher rate than their male counterparts, women needed to maintain a strong relationship and perceived support from their supervisor to experience job satisfaction. Othamn and Nasurdin (2013) noted that supervisor support had more impact on employee engagement than connections with coworkers.

Beyond engagement, supervisory behaviors, including effective conflict management, cultivation of a team atmosphere, trustworthiness, consistent communication, and congruence significantly influence sustainable employee performance and retention (Min et al., 2020). Conversely, supervision that is sporadic, reactive, or crisis-based does not allow for genuine discussions regarding areas for growth, personal and professional goals, or accomplishments (Donahue-Mendoza, 2012). However, Müller and Kotte (2020) noted that employee supervision which is solely focused on goal attainment is restrictive. Min et al. (2020) reported that an employee's ability to openly share problems with a supervisor without fear of judgment or disrespect positively influenced performance and perceptions of equity within the workplace.

Min et al. (2020) found that the ability to implement effective, individual-based coaching strategies was a critical supervisory behavior. Coaching requires a collaborative relationship between the coach and coachee that is not focused exclusively on goal attainment, peak performance outcomes, or accountability but equally dedicated to

fostering learning opportunities, personal and professional development, and empowerment of the coachee (Bozer & Jones, 2018). Müller and Kotte (2020) suggested that the foundational elements of empowering the coachee included teaching the process of goal selection, strategic planning, implementation of action steps or objectives, self-regulation, and outcomes reflection. Bozer and Jones (2018) posed that perhaps the supervisor may not always be the correct person to serve as a coach due to the existing leader-follower dynamic with an employee. However, Donahue-Mendoza (2012) offered that those supervisors who are invested in fostering learning relationships like the coaching relationship requires can create an environment of trust and support while maximizing employee potential.

Additional issues to consider regarding supervision and coaching practices involve the hiring practices and onboarding process of new employees. Research outcomes provided by Holmes (2015) suggested that new employees benefit from heightened interactions with leaders and coworkers as they attempt to navigate expectations while learning the organizational norms, values, specialized terminology and technology, and social practices. Further, Hewett et al. (2017) reported that leadership support, hands-on application, and collaboration with coworkers improve learning while virtual opportunities did not provide the same improvement levels, which raises concerns for the effective coaching of geographically dispersed employees.

Previous studies of best practices in the leadership of remote employees focused on the leader's perspective and experiences, leaving a gap in the research of how leadership efforts are received by the distance-based employee (Connaughton & Daly,

2004). Charalampous et al. (2019) linked the overall well-being of remote employees to the effectiveness of the leadership strategies implemented. Prasad et al. (2020) suggested an increased responsibility for leaders to consider the quality of communication and practices to improve the well-being of remote employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leadership, supervision, coaching practices, and communication between employees and supervisors are fundamentally vital and need examination from the employee's perspective (Steele & Plenty, 2015).

Lived Experience and IPA

Wilson (2015) and Van Manen (2017, 2015) noted that individuals cannot be examined or understood separate from the worlds they live in and need the ability to express personal beliefs about their experiences. Even when people experience similar circumstances, it is natural for each person to assign personal meaning to the world's unique interaction at the time of experience or afterward. While not often considered as people live their daily lives, van Manen (2017) offered that the very act of considering the lived experience through research changes the weight given to events, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and interactions which were viewed previously as mundane. The reflection and narrative retelling assist with the facilitation of meaning making and interpretation of needs, actions, fulfillment, and experience (Bauer et al., 2019). Milman et al. (2020) suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a disruptive impact on meaning making and resulted in an inability for many to process events and regulate mental well-being. As individuals reflect, listening without bias or censorship to the

sharing of intimate details regarding thoughts, emotions, and experiences affords the researcher an uninhibited view into participants' lived experience (Farrugia, 2019).

There are a variety of qualitative research approaches applicable to a broad range of studies. However, like this study, if the researcher intends to explore the lived experience of research participants, IPA is preferred (Alase, 2017). Aagaard (2017) acknowledged that IPA, while relatively new, has proved to be a successful method. Smith and Osborn (2015) shared that IPA is an attempt by the researcher to make sense of participants' worldviews and attempts to make sense of their worlds with a keen commitment to each individual's experience before offering the broader interpretations. Dedication to the genuine narrative of participants is a foundational component of IPA.

Summary and Conclusion

The literature demonstrates a relationship between performance, affect, perceived social support, personalization of employees, the connection among coworkers and supervisors, and a greater understanding of the organizational environment to formal and informal interactions in the workplace (Holmes, 2015; Liu et al., 2011; Oshima & Asmub, 2018; Watanabe et al., 2016). Baker et al. (2006), Karis et al. (2016), and Petterson (2016) suggested the use of virtual platforms can provide opportunities for remote employees to participate in meetings, team projects, professional development and training, supervision, and coaching exchanges as well more informal interactions with colleagues. Further research is needed to determine if those interactions are as impactful if supplemented through technological support (Lin & Kwantes, 2014) and if geographically dispersed employees experience the proposed benefits.

The focus of previous research regarding practices and experiences related to remote employment has primarily been for and from the leader's perspective. Steele & Plenty (2015) noted the research gap regarding the employee's perspective regarding communication and leadership. Although Fonnor and Roloff (2010) studied the benefits of telework and found that numerous remote employees reported increased job satisfaction, the researchers identified the need for replication and further study of the factors which mediate the complex remote work experience. COVID-19 has introduced increased complexity and challenges to the remote work environment (Putra et al., 2020), which will require study and exploration of the meaning given to the experiences for years to come. Due to its unique focus, there is an inability to exhaust the need to explore the lived experience of a phenomenon (van, Manen, 2015). Many researchers agree that IPA is an appropriate and useful methodology for exploring complex topics and when the researcher is seeking to examine how individuals make sense of their life experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Smith et al., 2012).

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this IPA qualitative study was to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of employees who work in a geographically dispersed environment which prohibits shared-air interactions with leaders or coworkers at their organizations. I explored participants' perceptions and experiences of social support and being valued by the organization, leadership, and coworkers.

Research Design and Rationale

The rationale of utilizing an IPA approach to the study was centered on a desire to explore the participants' perceptions of, involvement in, and meaning given to the lived world of geographically dispersed employment. IPA affords the ability via subjective narratives to consider the experiences and interpretations of specific phenomena (Smith et al., 2012). Through first-person reflections of real-world exposure to the proposed study topic, I gained a better understanding of the engagement, misconceptions, and meaning given to the lived experience (Ryan, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

Smith et al. (2012) discussed that the IPA researcher explores, describes, and interprets the meaning ascribed by participants to their experiences. For the study, I served as the sole data collector and interpreter. Therefore, it was my responsibility to recruit and vet participants to ensure alignment with the study's criteria and create open-ended questions for use in the semistructured interview process which explored the identified phenomenon. Further, it was essential that I considered the myriad ethical issues, including informed consent, assent, data management, potential researcher bias,

personal boundaries and right to privacy of participants, and the concerns regarding

relationship building during the interview process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

I safeguarded the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, as well as their

sense of safety during the interview process. Audio recordings and all study-related

documentation were secured in a locked location when not under review. The random

assignment of an identification number aided in ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

It was critical to monitor my personal and cultural biases throughout the process. The

qualitative method of bracketing and a social justice perspective within the ethical

foundation aided in the mitigation of researcher bias (Morgan & Park, 2018). Smith et al.

(2012) noted that an IPA researcher assumes a sense of neutrality and open-mindedness

and must use reflective practices and a cyclical approach to bracketing.

Expressions of bias or prejudice were acknowledged and suspended throughout

the study, including during the creation of questions and engagement in the interview

process. Following the interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework, I received

feedback on the interview questions and protocols to ensure alignment with the research

question, limit bias and skewing, and increase the ability to facilitate inquiry-based

conversations (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). I piloted the questions with several volunteers.

This process afforded direct feedback on the questions and process. Additionally, it

provided an opportunity to test recording equipment and transcription approaches as well

as practice interviewing skills. I also requested a few volunteers who share similar

characteristics of the population under study, as well as a few colleagues, to act as if they

were a participant and to share their feedback via google forms. Their insight was used to

refine for alignment, ease of comprehension, and flow. The questions focused on the experience and knowledge of the participants without narrowing the options for response (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The questions and protocol were further reviewed for any ethical concerns by my dissertation Chair, committee members, and the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

As with many qualitative approaches, this IPA research study required purposeful sampling to ensure that the participants could provide context-rich accounts within the specific occupational experience (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). An IPA study's essential criterion is that the participant denotes a contextual perspective rather than a particular population. For the research, the homogenous characteristic or relationship to the phenomenon which was required was employment as a geographically dispersed employee, with no shared-air experiences with coworkers or leadership, for a minimum of 9 months. An additional parameter included a minimum of 6 months or more of proximate or on-site work experience. Following approval from Walden University's IRB (# 08-27-21-0585550) on August 27, 2021, the participant pool was achieved via external referral or snowball sampling, which is a referral from other participants (Smith et al., 2012). Once identified, participant candidates agreed to the interview process with a willingness and desire to share their stories and perspectives (Creswell, 2013).

The population size for the study was six participants. IPA studies are focused on the detailed exploration of a particular experience and the examination the meaning

attributed to said experience by individuals. Many practiced IPA researchers utilize a sample size of between three and six participants. This range is considered appropriate to afford ample development of meaningful points of differences and similarities among participants (Smith et al., 2012).

Instrumentation

Research conducted from a phenomenological approach requires the researcher to interact with participants and is, therefore, the principal instrument used to gather data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The use of in-depth interviewing affords access to individuals' motives, perceptions, experiences, and emotions and offers the ability to explore their perspectives and subjective realities (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The use of semistructured interviews provides the ability to remain in alignment with the proposed research questions while allowing personal narrative material (van Manen, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I served as the sole researcher for the study. Thus, it was my responsibility to recruit the participants and collect the data through engagement in the interview process. Before the recruitment of participants, the study was vetted and approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB) of Walden University and my Chair and committee. Once approved, I contacted via email the departments of human resources at several organizations that had employees who aligned with the general focus criteria of geographically dispersed. I provided the focus and criteria of my study and requested information distribution via organizational email and digital announcement boards. Additionally, I posted on social

media platforms and emailed openly available professional listservs to recruit potential

participants by requesting volunteers to participate in a study regarding the

geographically dispersed work experience. The additional parameters of nine months in

the dispersed work environment with at least six months of previous on-site experience

were used to filter for inclusion. Identification of one or more participants provides the

opportunity to implement snowball sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Those who volunteered to participate were evaluated to assess alignment with the

inclusion criteria of the study and availability for the interview process. Following the

establishment of viability based upon criteria, potential participants received informed

consent documentation for review and signature. The informed consent covered the entire

process, protocol, and anticipated procedures, including purpose, voluntary participation,

confidentiality, right to privacy, anonymity, freedom to withdraw, the use of audio and or

video recording devices to capture the interview sessions, use of technology for

interviews, and an explanation of how the data will be compiled and analyzed, and how

the data will be saved and eventually disposed of. After review, discussion, and consent,

each participant signed the informed consent document and was given a copy for their

record. The original copy will be held for 7 years in a locked location in my home in both

an electronic and hard copy for security purposes.

Semistructured interviews were used to engage participants with a sense of focus

on the topic of study while allowing individual responses and latitude to explore how

they experience their world (Brinkman, 2013; Evans, 2018). It was the intent to conduct

interviews in a shared-air environment when possible. However, the use of technology

via the Google Meet platform was used for all interviews. The use of technology afforded a broader geographical pool for potential participants. Participants were offered a choice of a shared-air or virtual interview experience. However, virtual interactions were elected due to COVID-19 safety protocols at the time of the interviews.

If a shared-air interview had been possible, steps would have been taken to adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols which were recommended by the CDC at the time of the interviews. These protocols included but were not limited to maintaining social distancing of 6 feet between participant and researcher, the use of personal protection equipment (PPE) such as face coverings, and provision of prepackaged, single-serving beverages (CDC, 2021). I planned to place tape on the floor to mark the proper distance of the chairs to ensure safety was maintained throughout the interview. I would have provided disposable face coverings and bottled water for participants.

At the outset of each interview, each participant and I reviewed the informed consent documentation. Care was taken to highlight the purpose of the study, intent to audio record interviews, right to privacy, confidentiality, and ability to withdraw prior to data analysis or publication. Although care was taken to ensure confidentiality via randomly assigned identification numbers, interviews were recorded to allow greater accuracy, multiple reviews, and comparison to transcription (Maxwell, 2013). Interview recordings will be retained for a period of five years after the conclusion and publication of the study. Recordings were not stored on the hard drive of a computer but rather on a removable drive which was secured under lock with the informed consent, notes, and all related documents.

Data Analysis Plan

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that unlike quantitative data analysis which determines reliability by examining the generalizability and consistency of the data collected, reliability of qualitative data analysis is centered on the consistency and dependability of the data collection process used by the researcher. The interview must follow the same guidelines for each participant. Using recorded and transcribed interviews, coupled with a review of the transcription against the recorded sessions, can grant extra protection from the error of misinterpretation or false report of a narrative (Terrell, 2012). The use of field notes offers additional context and detailed observations during the conversations (Phillippi & Lauderale, 2018). IPA requires a painstaking examination of each person's detailed account of the lived experience followed by inductive and interpretive analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, the transcripts were reviewed a minimum of five times to increase familiarity with the information. After the initial reading, I immediately reread the transcript while listening to the recorded interview and made notes. I then paused for at least one hour between each additional review. Throughout each reading of the data, initial observations, interpretations, connections, and contrasts were noted. The perpetual comparison analysis aided in the detection of patterns and themes as well as similarities and differences which existed between participants (Patton, 2015). Manual and electronic coding strategies were implemented to group the data into categories to identify patterns and explore the meaning given to the proposed phenomenon of interest (Saldana, 2016). Crowther et al.

(2017) presented the value of crafting stories from the data to gain a deeper

understanding. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that thematic analysis must be deliberate

and rigorous.

While all information shared by participants is of value and to be reviewed, the

IPA data analysis process seeks to discover trends and thematic content related to the

research question (Shinebourne, 2011). For manual coding, Smith and Sparkes (2016)

suggested beginning the organization of interviews by simply coding similar terms and

short phrases which align directly to the research question. Shinebourne (2011) offered a

five-stage process that includes comprehensive reading, theme identification, note taking,

categorization of text, and establishing a narrative for each of the interviews. I followed

the process outlined by Shinebourne to code the data collected. The data was organized

into recurring words, phrases, ideas, and categories to identify themes. The recurring

words, phrases, ideas, and categories were written in the reaction notes as the researcher

listened to the audio recordings of each interview. Following the fifth review, the words

were copied onto index cards to afford increased visualization and the ability to arrange

in groupings. The index cards were safeguarded in keeping with the detailed data safety

precautions.

Beyond a researcher's personal review of the data, Creswell and Poth (2017)

noted that there are various software programs available as useful qualitative tools for

reviewing memos and codes while identifying themes within the data. It is a common and

best practice among qualitative researchers to use computer software programs to aid in

the organization and interpretation of collected data and recorded interviews (Leedy &

Ormrod, 2019). Many verified secure computer software options are available to researchers for a nominal fee.

For the study, Transcribe was used as the tool for the secure transcription of audio recorded participant interviews to written text. This software program provided the transcription of clearly recorded audio files as well as the use of a voice typing tool for faster dictation (Transcribe, 2020). Following transcription, I reviewed the transcript while listening to the audio recording of the interview to ensure accuracy. For data analysis, hand coding and ATLAS.ti 9 (2020) computer software was used for the examination and coding of both text and audio files. I attended a webinar training to understand the program interface and the steps involved in creating and implementing an analysis project with the program. This program aligned with the data analysis process needed for an IPA qualitative study by affording the ability to explore the material in a meaningful manner. The text documents of the transcribed interviews were uploaded into the software for systematic coding, which included the creation of word clouds, word frequency tables, and other visualizations of the data, which assisted in linking the data into categories and themes (ATLAS.ti, 2020). Yin (2016) reported that analysis software such as ATLAS.ti 9 increases the capability to categorize, analyze, and decipher qualitative data by systematically coding and arranging it into categories. Both the manual coding and software analysis were compared and considered to assist in the overall exploration and presentation of the data to explore major and minor themes related to the research question.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Ravtich and Carl (2016) suggested that many researchers prefer using the term "trustworthiness" as an alternative to the term "validity" when presenting a qualitative study. Both terms address the quality and rigor of research. Rigor is to be considered from the outset of a study (Cypress, 2017). Leavy (2014) noted that establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research requires detailing the entire research process through a lens of honesty and integrity. Yin (2016) reported that trustworthiness must be supported by the design of a study and addressed from the research's outset. In the study of participants' lived experiences, the researcher must take care to ensure that the data collected, as well as the subsequent interpretations and findings, are true to the authentic experiences of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

When using IPA, four principles can assist in establishing the quality of the research. Smith et al. (2012) outlined Yardley's four principles: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Sensitivity to context is essential in the IPA data collection and analysis and can be demonstrated by empathic exchanges with participants and an interview process that promotes comfortability with sharing experiences without pressure to censor the meaning given to those experiences. It is imperative that the researcher present the voices of the participants and not interpretations of those voices (Smith et al., 2012). This dedication to attentiveness and detail lends to the commitment and rigor of the study as well. Smith et al. (2012) noted that IPA researchers must be serious about the work and the way it is conducted. The participant criteria, interview questions related to the research question,

audio recording of interviews, transcribing and coding practices, and member checking strategies were in place to ensure thoroughness. The study was written carefully and transparently, with each phase and action described in detail. Reviews by the Walden University committee members, peer readers, and myself offered feedback to increase coherence. Readers also assisted with objectivity. It is my hope that the study proves important and offers insight into the experiences of a portion of the workforce that is rapidly increasing.

Additionally, Ravtich and Carl (2016) noted four trustworthiness elements that must be established when conducting qualitative research. First posited by Lincoln and Guba (1985), these fundamental components include credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

Credibility

Credibility is an expression of confidence in the truth of the findings from a research study. Credibility demonstrates the plausibility of the information derived from the original data provided by the participants and that the interpretations of said data are a genuine reflection of the views and experiences of those interviewed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Strategies that help to attain credibility include prolonged engagement, sustained observation, and member check (Carter et al., 2014; Kostjens & Moser, 2018). Birt et al. (2016) posited that member checking is an undervalued process that demonstrates a pivotal role in ensuring data and results' credibility. Korbluh (2015) called for researchers to adhere to concrete strategies to ensure the member check process's success.

Transferability

The goal of qualitative research is not the generalizability of specific truths. Instead, it is an exploration and description of a context-bound experience which affords a greater understanding of the meaning given to the experience and the transferability or applicability of facets of the study to other contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Meaning-making processes are influenced by various factors including an individual's previous experiences, beliefs and values, worldview, coping skills, decision-making skills, spirituality, and can be situational (Geard et al., 2020). Kostjens and Moser (2018) noted that transferability requires the researcher to detail the behavior and experiences of participants and the context to create a deeper understanding and increase meaningfulness to the reader.

Dependability

Dependability notes the stability and consistency of the research findings. Additionally, dependability reflects participant agreeance that the study offers an accurate reflection and interpretation of the provided data (Krostjens & Moser, 2018). Further, when the collected data answer the research questions, dependability is supported (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used recording equipment and took field notes during the interview process to ensure accurate capture of the participants' experiences.

Confirmability

Ravitch and Carl (2016) likened confirmability to objectivity. However, they qualified researchers who engage in qualitative study do not seek objectivity, but rather supportable data, while acknowledging biases and aiming for open-minded neutrality.

The interview notes and recordings and reviewing findings with participants can help assure that findings are a telling of the experiences of the research participants and not the opinion, biases, or subjective experience of the researcher. My personal experiences as a geographically dispersed employee and leading a team of twenty-seven such employees were and are very different than those of the participants in the study. Shared-air opportunities were the normal and frequent practice prior to COVID-19 restrictions and have returned within the CDC (2021) guidelines for safety at the workplace.

Ethical Procedures

Before engagement with participants or data collection, a study must be approved by the IRB to ensure ethicality and to safeguard the psychological and physical safety of participants. Farrugia (2019) detailed the phenomenological qualitative researcher's immense responsibility and held that due to the very nature of the close interactions with and intimate details offered by participants, the researcher must rely on ethical practices throughout the research process. Three specific areas of ethical focus which a researcher must address include informed consent, assessment of risks and benefits, and subjects' selection (Terrell, 2016). Smith et al. (2012) detailed that in IPA, informed consent must address voluntary research participation and expected process and the possible use of extractions from an interview in published reports. The guaranteed anonymity of participants is essential, as is the ability to withdraw before data analysis or publication.

The protection of data is imperative to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Interviews that were held on a technological platform were conducted in a password-protected virtual space to prohibit entry from anyone other than the participant

and me. Audio recordings of the exchange were captured on a cassette recorder which was locked in a filing cabinet when not in use. Participants were assigned a random number which was connected to their interviews, recordings, and transcripts to aid with anonymity. I was the only one with knowledge of participant identity. All notes, journals, or other study documents were maintained in a locked cabinet in my residence. Any electronic data was held under password protection. A secondary copy of electronic files was stored on an external drive which was always locked in a secure cabinet when not in use (Lewis, 2015).

Summary

The study used IPA to explore the lived experiences of geographically dispersed employees and their absence of shared-air organizational interactions. The intent was to obtain a greater understanding of the perceived social support and sense of being valued from dispersed workers' perspectives. Purposeful sampling methods were used. Inclusion criteria included employment as a geographically dispersed employee with no shared-air organizational interactions for a minimum of nine months as well as at least six months of on-site work prior. Semistructured interviews were used to afford focus, as well as individual narrative exploration. Issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations were addressed to ensure the quality of research and the research process.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this IPA qualitative study was to explore the lived experience of geographically dispersed employees in the absence of shared-air organizational interactions. The research question for this study addressed the lived experiences of geographically dispersed employees regarding social support, feeling valued, supervision and coaching, and connection in the absence of shared-air organizational interactions. In this chapter, the findings of the study are summarized. The research setting, participant demographics, data collection, and analysis methods are described. Further, the processes used to address evidence of trustworthiness are detailed. Finally, the results of the study including categories and themes which emerged to address the research question are presented in the conclusion.

Setting

The various geographic settings included the states of Kentucky, North Carolina, Texas, and Utah. For consistency and due to COVID-19 safety protocols, each participant and I connected via technology using the Google Meet software platform for a video semistructured interview session. The participants and I joined the session from a location which was uniquely convenient, comfortable, and private. All involved confirmed that no other individuals beyond the participant and researcher were present in any of the physical environments to ensure confidentiality and freedom of expression. Headphones were not required for privacy but were worn by two participants to assist with volume. Five of the participants joined from their home environments. One participant elected to join from the empty office of a local church due to activities which

prevented privacy and a distraction-free environment at home. I joined from both residential and office settings which were distraction free and otherwise uninhabited. I did not manipulate or influence the environments which were chosen by and unique to each participant. There were no personal or organizational conditions which could have influenced the participants during the research sessions.

Demographics

Six geographically dispersed employees ($N = 6$) who met the criteria for participation, expressed availability, and signed the informed consent form were selected for the study. Each participant reviewed and signed the informed consent form and participated in a screening conversation via email to ensure compatibility with research participant criteria. Participant screening provided confirmation of personal availability, current remote employment without access to shared-air interactions with coworkers for a period of at least 9 months, and previous on-site employment for a minimum of 6 months. Additionally, any questions or concerns from the potential participant were addressed during the screening conversation. This population represented a diverse group of employees who had experienced a geographically dispersed work environment without the opportunity for organizational shared-air interactions.

I obtained demographic information from each participant and received verification of the accuracy of the information. As demonstrated in Table 1, the population of this study included five participants who identified as female and one participant who identified as male. Three of the participants resided in Kentucky, one in North Carolina, one in Texas, and one in Utah. Participants were between the ages of 29

and 57 years old, with a mean age of 46.6 years old and a median age of 47 years old. One participant identified as Latino and five as White. The educational level varied; one participant had an associate degree, two had a bachelor's degree, one had a master's degree, and two had doctorate degrees. All participants were gainfully employed in occupations such as case manager, faculty member, mental health therapist, software development manager, family support specialist, and attorney advisor. Their organizations ranged from less than 100 to over 1000 employees. To maintain confidentiality, a random number was assigned and used to identify each participant.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics (*N=*6)*

Demographic group	*N*	%
Gender		
Male	1	16.7
Female	5	83.3
Age at interview		
20-30 years	1	16.7
31-40 years	1	16.7
41-50 years	2	33.3
51-60 years	2	33.3
Race/ethnicity		
White	5	83.3
Hispanic/Latinx	1	16.7
State of residence		
Kentucky	3	50.0
North Carolina	1	16.7
Texas	1	16.7
Utah	1	16.7
Highest level of education		
Associate degree	1	16.7
Bachelor's degree	2	33.3
Graduate degree	1	16.7
Doctorate degree	2	33.3
Number of employees in organization		
Less than 100	1	16.7
101-250	1	16.7
251-500	1	16.7
501-1000	1	16.7
More than 1000	2	33.3

Data Collection

Data collection began after receiving approval from Walden University's IRB on August 27, 2021. The approved social media post outlining the study and criteria for inclusion was used and potential participants contacted the researcher via email to express interest in the research. Conversation via email or telephone provided the ability to assess and ensure that the six met all inclusion criteria of being employed as a dispersed employee, with no shared-air experiences with coworkers or leadership, for a minimum of nine months with six months of previous on-site experience. After the screening, the participants reviewed the informed consent document, and the researcher answered any questions. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, each participant agreed to a date and time for an interview. The semistructured interviews commenced on September 1, 2021, and concluded on September 10, 2021.

The sample size of six participants was at the upper end of the three to six range used by many practiced IPA researchers. Six participants afford the development of meaningful points of similarities and differences among the population studied (Smith et al., 2012). Data saturation is not exclusive to or only dependent upon the number of individuals interviewed but includes the depth and the richness of the data obtained (Saunders et al., 2018). The information from the six interviews was sufficient to answer the research question guiding the study and offered an opportunity to explore each experience in a meaningful way.

Each participant responded to open-ended semistructured interview questions (Appendix A) and any follow-up questions which resulted from individual responses. An

hour was allotted for each interview. However, based on the length of responses and any organic areas of discussion, the sessions ranged from 49 to 81 minutes. At the outset of each session, the researcher greeted the participant, and both attendees checked the functionality of the audio and video equipment. During confirmation of volume and image clarity, the researcher engaged in rapport-building conversation to assist in comfortability and connection. Prior to research-related questions, the researcher reviewed the informed consent document and offered any clarifications needed. Each participant displayed varying degrees of nervousness at the outset of the session, but all appeared to settle quickly into the exchange. Each of the six participants appeared to enjoy sharing their experience and to do so without hesitation or evident censorship. All involved demonstrated an honest openness and offered information beyond the semistructured questions posed by the researcher.

With participants' consent, all interviews were audio recorded using a digital voice recorder. Upon completion of each interview, I uploaded the recording to a password-protected computer and labeled the file with the number assigned to each participant to protect the interviewee's identity. The digital voice recorder remained in a locked cabinet in my home office when not in use. I listened to the session recording multiple times to increase familiarity and transcribed each transcript within 24 hours of the interview. After a short break from the material, I repeated the comparison of the transcript to the original audio file for accuracy. The transcripts were labeled with the corresponding assigned number and saved to a password-protected computer. For further

safety and backup of data, the transcripts were transferred to an external drive which remained secured in a locked cabinet in my home office when not in use.

The member checking process was explained during the initial informed consent conversation and at the close of each interview session. Following the completion of transcription, each participant received a copy of the transcript of the corresponding session via email. The participants were asked to confirm that the transcript reflected the entirety of the exchange and an accurate account of the information shared or to report any errors detected. All participants responded in a timely manner, with no edits required.

Data Analysis

In this segment of Chapter 4, I illustrate the process utilized for the identification of codes, themes, and participants' points of view from the interview transcripts. The IPA analytic process aims to explore particular and shared experiences while moving from the descriptive to the interpretative to gain a deeper understanding of a participant's point of view and meaning given to a specific context or experience (Smith et al., 2009). With a commitment to a rigorous and deliberate approach to thematic analysis, I used the five-step framework outlined by Shinebourne (2011) noted in chapter three for the analysis of the data collected from the participant interviews.

At the outset of the analysis, I achieved data familiarization by repeatedly listening to the audio files, reviewing my notes, and via transcription, summarization, and comprehensive reading of the transcripts. I transcribed the audio files of the participants' interviews into Microsoft Word documents and made notes throughout the process. Following participant approval via member checking, I analyzed the data and created

codes and categories to enable theme identification using three different processes. I

coded each interview using the Track Changes feature in Microsoft Word. I then coded

my notes and the transcripts by hand. For thoroughness, I uploaded the documents into

the ATLAS.ti qualitative software analysis tool to further code, organize, and analyze the

data to present each unique narrative and representation of the experiences of

geographically dispersed employees.

Emerging themes and subthemes representing the core lived experiences of

participants include seven distinct categories: perceived social support, feeling valued,

leadership, supervision and coaching, communication, sense of connection, COVID-19

impact, and work-life balance. The categories, themes, and subthemes represent

experience-related meaning-making which was shared and are detailed in Table 2. Each

participant's narrative and meaning given to nonconforming data must be explored and

included in the analysis. The discrepant data are identified as variations within themes or

as additional subthemes.

Table 2

Relationship of Data Analysis Categories to Themes and Subthemes

Categories	Themes	Subthemes
Perceived social support	Theme 1: Personal and professional relationships	Subtheme 1a: Isolation Subtheme 1b: Perception of off-site and on-site employees
Feeling valued	Theme 2: Strategies	Subtheme 2a: On-site versus off-site Subtheme 2b: Depersonalization and invisibility Subtheme 2c: Feeling taken for granted
Leadership, supervision, and coaching	Theme 3: Employee-initiated Theme 4: Exclusion from decision and policy making Theme 5: Performance evaluation	Subtheme 3a: Delayed feedback Subtheme 5a: Promotion
Communication	Theme 6: Technology	Subtheme 6a: Interactions Subtheme 6b: Nonverbal communication
Sense of connection	Theme 7: Processing with coworkers Theme 8: Onboarding practices	Subtheme 7a: Energy and visual cues
COVID-19 impact	Theme 9: Adjustment Theme 10: Perpetual transition in policies and practices	Subtheme 9a: Shift in perceptions Subtheme 10a: Uncertainty
Work–life balance	Theme 11: Working environment preference	Subtheme 11a: Flexibility, convenience, and comfortability Subtheme 11b: Monetary and time savings Subtheme 11c: Productivity and workload

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

As the sole researcher, I was responsible for all aspects of the study, including planning, screening the eligibility of participants, facilitating interviews, transcribing recordings of the interviews, analyzing data, and reporting the findings. Each interview included time for rapport building prior to research-related questioning to establish a warm, non-judgmental environment to encourage freedom and openness in response. Once the interview was in document form, I repeated the comparison of the manuscript to the recording multiple times to ensure accuracy. Prolonged engagement and member

checking strategies were employed to ensure the data collection and results were a genuine reflection of the experiences of participants.

Transferability

I incorporated direct quotes from participants to aid in an accurate, thick description of perceptions, feelings, behaviors, and meaning given to those experiences. Additionally, the use of participants' quotes provides additional verification of the accuracy of the data collected while affording the readers the opportunity to make their own connections and applications. Although the findings of this study relate to the lived experiences of geographically dispersed employees without the opportunity for organizational shared-air interactions, other researchers should be able to relate or replicate the study with similar participants and environments (Cope, 2014).

Dependability

The data collected in this study supported dependability as it was directly related to and answered the research question (Ravitch & Carl. 2016). The use of audio recording equipment, field notes, careful transcription, and verification by participants ensured the accurate capture of the lived experiences.

Confirmability

I presented the lived experiences as detailed by the participants without the incorporation of my opinions, experiences, preconceptions, or assumptions I may have held prior to the exploration. Using semistructured interviews, careful analysis of transcripts, and the inclusion of thick descriptions and participant quotes, I aimed for

open-minded neutrality throughout the study and presentation of findings (Ravitch &

Carl, 2016).

Results

In this section, I address the categories, themes, and subthemes that emerged

during the data analysis phase of this study which illuminate the essence of the lived

experience of geographically dispersed employees in the absence of shared-air

organizational interactions. Major themes and subthemes in seven categories emerged

during the data analysis process. The study findings are organized by emerging themes

nested within larger categories. Prior to my discussion of themes and subthemes for each

category, I present a table of the category with sample responses demonstrated via direct

quotes from the transcripts of participant interviews.

Category 1: Perceived Social Support Themes and Subthemes

The first category was about perceived social support. This category had one core

theme (Theme 1) and two subthemes (Subthemes 1a and 1b). See Table 3 for an

overview of the category and themes.

Table 3

Category1: Perceived Social Support: Related Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses

Theme/subthemes	Sample responses
Theme 1: Personal and professional relationships	• I think it's important to be able to reach out to people when you are struggling, whether it's personally or professionally. (P2) • I felt social support from the entire office when I was on-site. We had multiple leaders we could rely on and had access to. Just talking and interactions were frequent. Without it you kind of feel alone. (P3)
Subtheme 1a: Isolation	• It's nice to have somebody to kind of bounce things off. You do lose that in a remote setting because you don't, you know, while you can instant message somebody, it isn't the same as just talking over a cubby to say, oh, this is what just happened to me. (P5) • The relationships have decreased because you're not seeing people, you're not going out to lunch with them. I do feel like the social relationships have been diminishing and therefore kind of less social support. (P6)
Subtheme 1b: Perception of off-site and on-site employees	• I think I felt pretty much like I was an equal. (P2) • They get to encounter each other's company on a daily basis. I don't really communicate with the people that's in the office unless I need something scanned in. So, I just think they have a little bit more of a relationship than the people who don't work in the office. (P4)

Theme 1: Personal and Professional Relationships

The participants described social support as having a genuine connection with supervisors and or peers who inquire and offer support regarding work and personal issues. Social support included the acknowledgment of frustrations and challenges as well as offering feedback or solutions which may improve the work experience. Further, social support was perceived as emotional availability demonstrated by offering a safe outlet to decompress after a stressful work-related experience or personal struggle.

All six of the participants reported that social support was important. Five of the six participants, or 83%, noted a decline or absence of perceived social support as a geographically dispersed employee. Participant 3 noted, "I felt social support from the entire office when I was on-site. We had multiple leaders we could rely on and had

access to. Just talking and interactions were frequent, and without it, you kind of feel alone".

Subtheme 1a: Isolation. A sense of isolation was shared by 83% of participants as they discussed feeling alone, siloed, and in a bubble in their geographically dispersed working environment. Participant 3 said, "I feel like I don't exist. I don't feel like I am part of the company". When considering the impact of the absence of shared-air organizational interactions, 100% of the participants reported a decrease in their personal relationships with colleagues and supervisors. They all voiced missing the interactions. Participant 4 noted that the inability to go down the hall and talk to someone face-to-face was one of the downsides of being at home. However, Participant 2 discussed the benefits of being proactive by reaching out to others to create a text message group with coworkers to decrease feelings of isolation.

Subtheme 1b: Perception of Off-Site and On-Site Employees. The participants shared varied experiences with their perceptions and the perceptions of others regarding employees who are working physically on-site at an organizational location versus those who are geographically dispersed without the ability to share the same physical space or in shared-air with a colleague. Two of the six participants, or 67%, felt there was no to minimal difference in the professional side of social support for those on-site. All six participants felt the personal side of social support was heightened by being on-site due to the ability to interact with others in the daily office routines, the proximity of shared cubicles or hallways, and time for discussing things other than work-related information. When discussing the perceptions of offsite workers which they believe are held by those

on-site, which may impact social support, 50% felt that on-site workers held feelings of

jealousy and bitterness toward dispersed workers. Participant 1 noted that offsite workers

are often seen as less important or less productive.

Category 2: Feeling Valued Themes and Subthemes

The second category was about feeling valued. This category had one core theme

(Theme 2), and three subthemes (Subthemes 2a, 2b, and 2c). See Table 4 for an overview

of the category and themes.

Table 4

Category 2: Feeling Valued: Related Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses

Theme/subthemes	Sample responses
Theme 2: Strategies	• It is kind of like being picked for kickball when you're kids, you know, you are in, you're chosen, you're valued. So, I feel valued when I'm included on projects. (P1) • I do feel valued. I think they really tried to just communicate how much they value, everybody. And focusing on how, you know, even though we're apart right now, we're still a part of a big, larger team together. (P2) • There are times where the company will tell me that I'm valuable. Like, here's some CEUs for example. Yeah, we'll pay for them, like that type of thing. Then you see value. Or when I am included in meetings or given more opportunities to earn more money, I think that helps. (P3)
Subtheme 2a: On-site versus off-site	• On-site, the supervisors would bring things when they came, and we would have lunches together. I've missed that kind of thing, but she still is good. Our supervisors are good about mailing things to us. (P5) • We have conversations about potential opportunities for me and I can feel and see that I am valued. But those times I think are getting less and less as my time remotely is extending. (P3)
Subtheme 2b: Depersonalization and invisibility	• You can turn your camera on but there's too many people. You're just a massive, sea of people. So that has been difficult to still feel like you're valued, and you're seen for your input or your decisions or your contributions, because it's just so big. (P5) • When you're on virtual meetings there is only an icon that stands for the person. (P4)
Subtheme 2c: Feeling taken for granted	• They think we should be satisfied with working from home and that they can put just about anything on us that we should feel privileged that we are working from home. (P4) • One thing I think that is lacking in this environment is the other part of feeling valued and that's feeling supported by recognizing that you're busy and working hard. (P6)

Theme 2: Strategies

All six participants agreed that having a feeling of being valued was of greater importance than the rate of pay, the possibility of a promotion, or the ability to choose an on-site or offsite work environment. The strategies which aided in encouraging a sense of being valued included verbal or written praise or acknowledgment of efforts, inclusion in important meetings or projects, and tangible tokens of appreciation. Participants 1 and 2 agreed that inclusion and being asked for input increased their sense of value. Participants 3, 4, 5, and 6 offered examples of tangible strategies such as donuts in the breakroom, small gifts, paid professional development opportunities to encourage the growth of skill or knowledge, and being chosen for a competitively pursued position. Only 50% of the group perceived the organization's offering them the choice and ability to work from home as adding to their feelings of being valued.

Subtheme 2a: On-Site versus Off-Site. Participant 2 offered, "From the President down to the people in charge of my program, I think everybody still tries to create a sense of community. It can be more challenging when you're not able to be in a face-to-face environment". Participant 5 acknowledged she had missed being on-site when supervisors would bring things or have lunches together but felt no decrease in being valued because the supervisors had started mailing things to the homes of dispersed employees. In fact, the extra effort required to mail items caused an increase in her value response.

Four of the six, or 67%, experienced a decrease in feeling valued since transitioning to dispersed employment. Participant 1 suggested that "a lot of meetings are

scheduled during lunch. I think my time was more honored when I was in the office. It is

different virtual. It is easier I think to be forgotten about". A complete lack of feeling

valued was reported by 33% of the participants. One suggested that this lack was enough

to create the desire to look for alternate employment. According to Participant 3, "We

have conversations about potential opportunities for me, and I can feel and see that I am

valued. But those times are getting less and less as my time remotely is extending".

Subtheme 2b: Depersonalization and Invisibility. Depersonalization and a

perceived sense of invisibility were concerns raised by 67% of the geographically

dispersed participants and were noted to detract from feelings of being valued.

Participants 4 and 1 discussed the use of generic, computer-generated icons instead of

photographs of employees during virtual meetings, which did not include video. In

contrast, Participant 5 offered, "You can turn your camera on but there's too many

people. You're just a massive sea of people. It's been difficult to still feel like you're

valued and seen for your input, decisions, or contributions because it's just so big".

Participant 3 echoed the feeling of depersonalization which follows receiving an email

addressing specific productivity but with her name in parentheses which demonstrates a

mass email and being blind copied instead a personal communication.

Subtheme 2c: Feeling Taken for Granted. Participant 6 felt valued when

offered verbal praise for a job well done and conversely felt taken for granted when her

efforts went unnoticed. She stated, "One thing I think that is lacking in this environment

is the other part of feeling valued, and that's feeling supported by recognizing that you're

busy and working hard". Eighty-three percent of the participants mentioned feeling taken

for granted as a dispersed employee. Participant 3 shared that it would impact her longevity in her current position and offered, "I don't know if I want to give them any more of me. I think when I lose, do they care, you know, am I valuable to them? That's when I just quit it. Like why, what's the point"? Participants 3, 4, and 6 indicated that they often are given extra work that others did not want to complete. They perceived the work to be accompanied with an expectation that they should be satisfied with working from home and do whatever is asked of them without complaint.

Category 3: Leadership, Supervision, and Coaching Themes and Subthemes

The third category was about the role of leadership in participants' experiences. This category had three themes (Themes 3, 4, and 5), and two subthemes (Subthemes 3a and 5a). See Table 5 for an overview of the category and themes.

Table 5

Category 3: Leadership, Supervision and Coaching: Related Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses

Theme/subthemes	Sample responses
Theme 3: Employee-initiated	• It's something that I need to seek out, but there are people that I know I can go to. There has to be more intentionality now behind it than there was in the past. (P2) • Supervision has been minimal. I've had to reach out if I need supervision or if I have a question. If I was in the office, it would be different. I need to text, but I don't know if they're busy or in a session. You don't know when you can have that support. On-site, I would have daily contact just going for coffee. I haven't talked to my supervisor much in a very long time. (P3)
Subtheme 3a: Delayed feedback	• I can't reach out and grab somebody electronically like I can in the office. If I try the cellphone, he can ignore me. I can try them on Zoom. He doesn't pick up. I can try them on teams. He won't answer. I can send him an email. I could send him a text and you know, if you don't want me to contact you, then I can't. (P1) • I'll reach out, send an email, make a phone call, text, whatever it is, and it's so delayed. So, I'm just like, well, that thought pass. I don't need help anymore. I already either problem solved, or it doesn't matter now. I think that's probably the biggest difference on-site. (P3)
Theme 4: Exclusion from decision and policy making	• The people there that for the most part were the decision makers weren't remote. They're mostly in the office centralized. At the location where all the gold is, if you will, the servers or the customer, the mail, or whatever. (P1) • I do think it's difficult for them to take feedback sometimes. And so, it would be nice to see feedback taken more into consideration when decisions are made. But at the same time, I understand that that's a challenging thing to do with a large organization. (P2) • I've just kind of felt excluded and I'm like well this is my opinion of what I think is going on. (P5)
Theme 5: Performance evaluation	• We had to be evaluated at least once a year during our residencies. And that has kind of gone away, yeah. (P2) • I think that my manager probably put less importance on it. I mean I think generally he doesn't care so much if there's much discussion about it unless we want to, but I feel like that even increased in this virtual environment. (P6)
Subtheme 5a: Promotion	• I don't feel like there's as much advancement for dispersed workers. I definitely think my on-site coworkers have been offered a few more opportunities. (P3) • I actually have earned a promotion. (P4)

Theme 3: Employee-Initiated

Although there were myriad experiences with and perceptions of supervision, leadership, and coaching, the one aspect which was true for 100% of the geographically dispersed employees was an increased requirement of self or employee-initiated communication. Participant 2's experience with leadership remained positive and she found the sense of autonomy with the knowledge that support is available if needed to be a benefit of the remote working environment. Participants 4 and 5 echoed affirming experiences and the ability to email, call, or text their supervisors at any time. Participant 5 perceived an increase in her relationship and contact with her supervisor as a dispersed employee with video contact supplementing the missed opportunities for engagement in a face-to-face environment. Conversely, Participant 3 said, "I haven't talked to my supervisor much in a very long time". The experience with supervision and inability to receive timely feedback were reported as a source of frustration. "It's been minimal. I've had to reach out if I need supervision or if I have a question. If I was in the office, it would be different. I need to text, but I don't know if they're busy".

Subtheme 3a: Delayed Feedback. Marked delays in feedback which impeded their ability to perform their job duties effectively and efficiently while simultaneously creating feelings of disconnect, anger, and frustration were experienced by 50% of the participants. The delay was attributed specifically to being in a dispersed working environment. Participant 5 detailed issues with missing or receiving delayed information from trainings, presentations, and meetings. "If you can only call in and listen, you're just getting delayed information or half of the presentation. You either can't or it's hard to ask

questions, and it feels like you're interrupting". Participants 1 and 3 focused on not receiving answers to questions asked and the distinct difference in the availability of feedback or coaching on-site.

Participant 1: I can't reach out and grab somebody electronically like I can in the office. If I try the cellphone, he can ignore me. I can try them on Zoom. He doesn't pick up. I can try them on teams. He won't answer. I can send him an email. I could send him a text and you know, if you don't want me to contact you, then I can't. Whereas with him or someone in my office, I can get in touch with right away or I can go find him, right? If I'm needing somebody, then I can be in his office when he comes back from lunch. And so no, it's not as easy to run down someone and that's a real problem on our side. We have to get approvals to make changes for one customer and then from managers and from the technical folks and running people down. There is frustration in my current position that we talked about a lot.

P3: And I'll reach out, send an email, make a phone call, text, whatever it is, and it's so delayed. So, I'm just like, well, that thought pass. I don't need help anymore. I already either problem solved, or it doesn't matter now. I think that's probably the biggest difference on-site. I could go get that response because I saw that someone was not busy. I could get feedback in that moment, but now I don't. I can text as fast as I can, but I think the response time is easy to ignore. I don't think she purposely does it. I think it's easy to ignore.

Theme 4: Exclusion from Decision and Policy Making

All participants noted they expected a decline in their personal engagement with their on-site supervisor and coworkers; however, for 83% of the participants, there were experiences and perceptions that they were being excluded. Various examples of perceived exclusion included meetings, important information, networking, team building activities, and fewer opportunities to advance or earn extra money as compared to their on-site counterparts. Sixty-seven percent felt excluded from the decision and policy-making processes. Participant 5 noted a shift in her sense of contribution to policy development since she had transitioned to an offsite environment. "I've just kind of felt excluded, and I'm like, well, this is my opinion of what it is going on". "Participant 1 suggested, "The people there that for the most part were the decision makers weren't remote. They're mostly in the office centralized. At the location where the gold is, if you will, the servers or the customer, the mail, or whatever". Participant 2 displayed empathetic understanding for her organization's leadership team but echoed a desire to be part of the decision-making process from her offsite environment. "It would be nice to see feedback taken more into consideration when decisions are made. But at the same time, I understand that that's a challenging thing to do with a large organization".

Theme 5: Performance Evaluation

Evaluation of performance via formal annual review practices decreased or was eliminated for 83% of the study participants following their transition to a geographically dispersed working environment. Participant 2 noted the practice was abandoned completely. Participant 6 reported that it was treated with disregard and with no

discussion of outcomes afforded. In contrast, the requirement for detailed daily documentation, attendance records, and requests for bulleted lists of objectives increased for 67% of study participants. Participants 1 and 6 voiced experiencing frustration and less autonomy related to the implementation of requirements of quantifying efforts which were previously assumed when they were on-site employees.

Subtheme 5a: Promotion. While Participant 4 reported earning a promotion as a dispersed employee, 50% of the participants felt their opportunities for advancement or for dispersed workers in general were diminished. Participants 1 and 3 suggested that employees based on-site received preferential treatment and more opportunities.

Participant 3: I don't feel like there's as much advancement for dispersed workers. I definitely think my on-site coworkers have been offered a few more opportunities. I've been working for the company longer than almost all of them there and I know one that got offered an opportunity to be in charge of all of the interns. That opportunity never even came across that it could have been me too.

Participant 5 expressed hope for equal consideration and comfort in the knowledge that her supervisor was aware of what she had accomplished prior to working from home. "She still sees it and tracks it. And so, if there's an opportunity in the future or promotion, all that work will still be able to carry forward for the future".

Category 4: Communication Themes and Subthemes

The fourth category centered around communication. This category had one core theme (Theme 6), and two subthemes (Subthemes 6a and 6b). See Table 6 for an overview of the category and themes.

Table 6

Category 4: Communication: Related Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses

Theme/subthemes	Sample responses
Theme 6: Technology	• People in on-site group sound a little more muffled and the laptop could only be so close to capture everyone. I think there was a lot more conversation happening in the group of people that were there versus including all of us joining virtually. Someone can make a side comment but by the time you ask what was said, you missed the moment. (P3)
	• We've had technical difficulties. We've had problems with Zoom. It seems to always happen when we have a big staff meeting. If it's one-on-one, it's not so much of an issue because we can always switch to cell phones if we need or there's all different options that you can do on the spur of the moment. Zoom does offer you to call in and then you can also do the link when it works. Most all of our staff meetings are on video so we can see one another, when it works. (P5)
	• Our agency has started using MS Teams. It has been a kind of difficult program for a lot of people to learn to use. Every time you set up a meeting, there's people I can't see or hear. The agency also limited some access and so people are trying to do presentations on there and there's always technical issues. That has not been ideal. I would say the individual communications have been fine and easy. The group communications trying to do group meetings or group presentations, because of the platform that they chose and how they kind of hindered it, it is not excellent. (P6)
Subtheme 6a: Interactions	• I don't do any video meetings, hardly at all, at my work. Almost none. Most will use a Microsoft tool, called Teams. So, each person will have an icon that can put like a character actor if they want to or attach a photograph of themselves. A lot of people do that. I do consider myself a people person. I do miss that interaction, but I'll have to admit, there are some folks that you just don't want to run into and so, you know, that's not been all bad. There are some folks that you want to stop by more than others when you're in the office because some are just time wasters. (P1)
	• In the office, we have a waiting area, and we would walk past each other and have those interactions. I know numerous times where I'd see my co-worker's door open, and I would just go and sit in office and kind of have a chat. Now I have to text, and I don't know if they are busy. (P3)
	• We don't have the opportunity to do face to face, but we have had some virtual things. It's difficult. It's like pulling teeth to get people to come together, to turn cameras on, and want to interact. (P5)
Subtheme 6b: Nonverbal communication	• I like to be able to go talk to the people in person, read their body language. When you're virtual or when your remote, you have to make an effort to what was just before a, an eye glance, or a nod. (P1)
	• : One other thing that I have experienced is on these group phone calls or group video calls, it is a lot easier to accidentally interrupt other people too. We are often cutting each other off because I feel like in person you can better read when someone is done talking versus on these group phone calls or meetings, you're trying to jump in. And there's a lot of people getting cut off and then offended or frustrated. So, I think that in addition to the verbal cues of what people mean missing the nonverbal cues is increasing the communication difficulties. (P6)

Theme 1 Technology

The study participants reported using multiple technological platforms and modes of communication within their organizations. All participants reported that access to technology is essential and foundational to the ability to work offsite but reported difficulties with installing, learning, and or using program software, including Zoom, SKYPE, Google Meeting, and Microsoft Teams. Participant 5 said, "We've had technical difficulties. We've had problems with Zoom. It seems to always happen when we have a big staff meeting. If it's one-on-one, we can always switch to phones on the spur of the moment".

Issues with a lack of equipment, faulty equipment, delayed technical support, loss of internet, or poor phone connection were noted by 87% of the participants. Beyond equipment and connectivity issues, 50% of participants experienced frustration and noted that technology often adds to confusion, miscommunication, and misinterpretations which are not as common in face-to-face interactions. Although there were concerns presented, 100% considered it to be the critical bridge to their colleagues, supervisors, organizations, and clients.

Table 7 is a display of the percentage of participants engaging with each technology. Email and phone as well as text and instant messaging were the methods used by 100% of the participant population and their organizations. A variety of software platforms that included a live video option for virtual meetings were used by 67%. In contrast, Participants 1 and 4 did not have access to video connection, or their

organizations elected not to use the medium for virtual meetings. They were divided in their desire to add video as an option in the future.

Table 7

Modes of Technology Used for Communication within Participants' Organizations

Platform/software/mode of technology	Reported difficulty or connectivity issues	Percentage of participants using the technology
Email		100
Phone	Yes	100
Text messaging (phone)		100
Instant messaging/chat (within email or software)		100
SKYPE	Yes	33
Zoom	Yes	33
Google Meeting	Yes	33
Google Hangout		33
Microsoft Teams	Yes	50
Microsoft Teams (No Video)	Yes	33
RingCentral (generic number for employee privacy)		17
Soft phones (headset connected to on-site office phone)		17

Participant 1: Electronic communication, as far back as email getting started, has always been what I would consider a challenge or something to be managed or guarded. It's very easy to give the wrong message or to say something that can be received incorrectly. We will have these group management messages where we're trying to talk about big, important things and then someone else brings up some other big, important thing and everyone gets confused. And, you know, I think, in those circumstances, if we were in the office, we could go and have a quick meeting and get to the bottom of it, but instead it's just never ending confusing instant messages.

Participant 3: Some people in the virtual meeting sound a little more muffled, and the laptop could only be so close to capture everyone. I think there was a lot more conversation happening in the group of people that were there on-site versus including all of us joining virtually. Someone can make a side comment but by the time you ask what was said, you missed the moment. So, I definitely think we're missing pieces.

Participant 6: Our agency has started using MS Teams. It has been a kind of difficult program for a lot of people to learn to use. Every time you set up a meeting, there's people I can't see or hear. The agency also limited some access and so people are trying to do presentations on there and there's always technical issues. That has not been ideal. I would say the individual communications have been fine and easy. The group communications trying to do group meetings or group presentations, because of the platform that they chose and how they kind of hindered it, it is not excellent.

Subtheme 6a: Interactions. The absence of shared-air or face-to-face interactions with colleagues was a factor that was mentioned as impactful by 100% of the study's geographically dispersed employees. Interactions of consequence were not reserved to meetings or formal connections but included the daily, routine office activities of walking to the lobby, waiting area, or restroom, getting coffee, and seeing one another in the elevator, break room, or parking lot. Participant 3 said, "In the office, we would walk past each other and have those interactions. I'd see my co-worker's door open, and I'd just go have a chat. Now, I have to text, and I don't know if they're busy".

Participant 1 offered, "I do consider myself a people person. I do miss that daily interaction".

For 67% of the participants, although they shared a longing for a certain level of face-to-face interactions, there was also a sense of relief in the dispersed environment. Gratitude was voiced for the relief of not being involved in office drama or having to engage in distracting non-work-related conversations. Participant 4 noted, "It really doesn't matter to me, but I probably would prefer just over the phone. I just prefer to stay at home and get more stuff done that way". Participant 1 added, "I'll have to admit, there are some that you just don't want to run into and so that's not been all bad. There are times you want or need folks to stop by but others can be time wasters".

Using various technologies can provide opportunities for interactions to supplement the missed shared-air connections. However, there are often challenges encountered with participation or communication. Participant 5 noted, "We don't have the opportunity to do face-to-face, but we have had some virtual things. It's difficult. It's like pulling teeth to get people to come together, to turn cameras on, and want to interact".

> Participant 6: Some of the people that I work with communicate very differently. It is worsened by the virtual environment where they're trying to interpret what the other is saying via Instant Message or email and they're misinterpreting a lot. It has been getting worse. I think as more and more time has been spent away from each other it's building on this miscommunication. I think that when we were in the office where you could discuss things more easily, there was less miscommunication.

Subtheme 6b: Nonverbal Communication. For 100% of the participants, technology does not replace or duplicate the experience of shared-air interactions when considering the benefit of nonverbal communication. Participant 4 noted, "When we are in Microsoft Teams meetings there is no video, only an icon. We don't get to see anyone. I think it would help to see how people are, but I also like not having to be on camera." Supplementing with video offered a greater sense of connection and understanding for 87% of participants, but it did not offer a complete solution.

> Participant 6: One other thing that I have experienced is on these group phone calls or group video calls, it is a lot easier to accidentally interrupt other people too. We are often cutting each other off because I feel like in person, you can better read when someone is done talking, versus on these group phone calls or meetings, you're trying to jump in. And there's a lot of people getting cut off and then offended or frustrated. So, I think that in addition to the verbal cues of what people mean missing the nonverbal cues is increasing the communication difficulties.

Category 5: Sense of Connection Themes and Subthemes

The fifth category details participants' sense of connection with others in their organization. This category had two themes (Themes 7 and 8), and one subtheme (7a). See Table 8 for an overview of the category and themes.

Table 8

Category 5: Sense of Connection: Related Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses

Theme/subthemes	Sample responses
Theme 7: Processing with coworkers	• Working remotely is in large part, what you make of it. I think you can be as connected or as disconnected as you want to be. It's a different kind of connection obviously because you can't hug and touch people over Zoom, but I think it's really become important for us to continue to have those connections with each other and to make sure that we're staying in touch with each other. (P2) • If you need to vent about a certain experience or you just have a question in general, I think that you have that peer-to-peer support. You do lose a little bit of that when you're not face to face. (P5) • I enjoy social interactions, but I'm not a huge extrovert. But I like personal interactions. I enjoy sitting down in a meeting with people and talking things through. Just connecting also controls burnout because you have that give and take. You kind of lose that a little bit. (P6)
Subtheme 7a: Energy and visual cues	• I think that phone calls and Zoom meetings definitely have more of a personal aspect as opposed to just texting or emailing. (P2) • I get left out in the meetings that I join. It's just it because they're on site and the energy is in the room it just comes to their mind afterward to ask my opinion. It's not a purposeful thing. (P3) • It's a little bit harder to have conversations when you're not just with others and hearing talk among the office workers. It's harder to give your opinion or to process how you really feel. (P5)
Theme 8: Onboarding practices	• There's a lot of new employees and I have no idea who they are because I've never been able to meet them. I think that's a big impact of not being able to be in the same room together. I'm not able to connect with people that I don't know or that I don't know as well. And so that kind of fosters the sense, at least for me, of disconnection. Sometimes I feel like I'm not as connected as I used to be. (P2) • There have been a lot of new people in the company, and they don't know me. I haven't been given a chance to get to know them. We get emails, you know, company-wide and you see who's cc'd and you're like, who's that name? Who's that person? You know? I wish I knew them. I wish we kind of could talk and like grow with each other. (P3)

Theme 7: Processing with Coworkers

Experiencing a sense of connection was important to 100% of the study's population. Connection was defined and experienced largely as an ability to process thoughts, feelings, work events, and questions with coworkers. Working remotely without opportunities for shared-air organizational interactions diminished feelings of connection for 83% of participants. Participant 2 placed responsibility on the individual employee for seeking out opportunities and pathways to increase connections but acknowledged that it was more difficult to create those connections with new employees from a distance.

> Participant 2: Working remotely is in large part, what you make of it. I think you can be as connected or as disconnected as you want to be. It's a different kind of connection obviously because you can't hug and touch people over Zoom, but I think it's really become important for us to continue to have those connections with each other and to make sure that we're staying in touch with each other. Our team has grown tremendously over the past few years. I don't know them because I've never been able to meet them. I think that's a big impact of us not being able to be in the same room together. I'm not able to connect easily with people that I don't know, or that I don't know as well. And so, that kind of fosters the sense, at least for me, of disconnection. Sometimes not feeling like I'm as connected as I used to be.

Further, Participant 3 said, "I miss that connection because I want to have those relationships with people that are growing in the field because I've been feeling kind of

lost". Participants 5 and 6 shared similar feelings related to the desire and need to process experiences or questions with coworkers. Participant 5 said, 'If you need to vent or you just have a question, it is so important that you have that peer-to-peer support and connection. You do lose a little bit of that when you're not face-to-face". Participant 6 echoed, "I like personal interactions. I enjoy sitting down in a meeting with people and talking things through. Just connecting also controls burnout because you have that give and take. You kind of lose that a little bit".

Subtheme 7a: Energy and Visual Cues. Participant 4's sense of connection was impacted by the inability to see others in the same space completing the same tasks. "I miss just being able to go down the hallway and see someone else doing the same thing that I'm doing. Even if we don't talk, it just helps". Although not experienced as an equal influence of shared-air interactions, a sense of personal connection was heightened by the energy of a phone call with a colleague and via the energy and visual cues of video interactions for 50% of participants. Participant 2 noted, "I think that phone calls and Zoom meetings definitely have more of a personal aspect as opposed to just texting or emailing".

A paradoxical experience was true for the other 50% of those interviewed. "I get left out in meetings that I join virtually. It's just because they're on site and the energy is in the room it just comes to their mind afterward to ask my opinion. It's not a purposeful thing", shared Participant 3. While Participant 5 suggested, "It's a little bit harder to have conversations when you're not just with others and hearing talk among the office workers. It's harder to feel a part, give your opinion, or process how you really feel".

Theme 8: Onboarding Practices

Over half of the group discussed a longing to connect with newly hired employees. For 67% of participants, the inability to do so contributed to feelings of disconnection. A lack of introductions or time for familiarizing left 33% feeling uneasy and unable to foster relationships with their new team members. Participant 4 added, "The biggest part of my job is training the new workers, and it's different now. It is more difficult not being able to go down the hall to see how people do things differently and talk it out".

> Participant 3: There have been a lot of new people in the company, and they don't know me. I haven't been given a chance to get to know them. We get emails, you know, company-wide and you see who's cc'd and you're like, who's that name? Who's that person? You know? I wish I knew them. I wish we kind of could talk and like grow with each other.

Category 6: COVID-19 Impact Themes and Subthemes

Experiences with how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted participants' experiences was the sixth category. This category had two themes (Themes 9 and 10) and two subthemes (Subthemes 9a and 10a). See Table 9 for an overview of the category and themes.

Table 9

Category 6: COVID-19 Impact: Related Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses

Theme/subthemes	Sample responses
Theme 9: Adjustment	• We sent over 33,000 home in three weeks as an organization. It was huge. From a technical perspective and IT perspective, we were on call 16 hours a day working through needs and access ideas for these people. There was a real steep learning curve. They didn't know what a VPN was. They didn't know what a service provider was. They didn't understand the IP address. There are so many things they didn't know. They never had to before. COVID and the pandemic has really brought a lot of people up to a certain knowledge level. (P1) • There wasn't too much of an adjustment that needed to happen organizationally, but we haven't been able to be with our students for coming on two years. That's a big letdown, not being able to see students that I've worked with graduate. It's not just the impact it has on the organizational connection but with the population that you serve. (P2) • I think the overall experience of shifting to working remotely has been good but there have definitely been moments of frustration and annoyance. During work, I need to possibly run away from my children, or I have to go to another room. Then the video will glitch or if I'm on my phone sometimes I have to turn off my phone Wi-Fi to get a signal. (P3)
Subtheme 9a: Shift in perceptions	• I am thankful I can be at home with my kids and still work with daycare closed due to COVID. I work in mental health, so I think it's made my work more marketable with telehealth. (P3) • We've opened up opportunities to have stress relief and work life balance that we never have before. So, the pandemic has been good for that, you know, to be able to increase that because we needed it before. I think it just brought it to the surface that everybody needed it prior to the pandemic. I hope that doesn't change. I hope those things continue. (P5)
Theme 10: Perpetual transition in policies and practices	• They were never going to bring everybody back at once. They were going to go from leadership down. So, you know, upper leadership, we're going to go in first and then they're going to stagger it, but it has changed because everything changes. The world's changing. And so, we were tentatively supposed to come back I think last spring and then that changed. And then they were going to do it in September. Then this month, we were supposed to return to work. And now that's changed again and now the vaccines have pushed it. So, they want to try to make it's not mandatory but if you don't get a vaccine you can't return to the office without certain stipulations. So now that's all changing too. So yeah, it's been a continual transition. (P5) • The agency is scrambling to figure out ways to manage this new world. I feel like my job is now filled with little bits of annoying ever-changing data keeping, which I don't like. (P6)
Subtheme 10a: Uncertainty	• Early on, I had some concern and was uneasy that they may realize that if we can all work from home that this job could be outsourced. (P1) • I literally haven't been back to my office. I don't know what my desk looks like. I imagine it is covered in dust. We have had a return-to-work date more times than I can count. (P5) • Everybody's weary. It feels like there's a constant feeling of uncertainty and there's more hostility in some ways. (P6)

Theme 9: Adjustment

The COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing at the time of the participant interviews. The interviews were conducted virtually to respect COVID-19 interaction protocols and safety restrictions. The pandemic-related impact on the personal and professional lives of participants was infinite. For 100% of the group, the central experiences which were identified within the work environment were rapid adjustment, uncertainty, and a perpetual state of transition. The sudden onset and rapid response required left 67% of participants feeling scattered, frustrated, fearful, or stressed. Participant 5 shared, "When they shut us down, our offices were just closed. We were told you have a week to get your things and go home for now. That was over a year and a half ago".

More time to transition was experienced by 33% of participants. However, even when more time for transition to a geographically dispersed working environment was afforded, heightened emotions, as well as logistical and technical challenges, remained.

Participant 1: We sent over 33,000 home in three weeks as an organization. It was huge. From a technical perspective and IT perspective, we were on call 16 hours a day working through needs and access ideas for these people. There was a real steep learning curve. They didn't know what a VPN was. They didn't know what a service provider was. They didn't understand the IP address. There are so many things they didn't know. They never had to before. COVID and the pandemic has really brought a lot of people up to a certain knowledge level.

P3: I think the overall experience of shifting to working remotely has been good but there have definitely been moments of frustration and annoyance. During

work, I need to possibly run away from my children, or I have to go to another

room. Then the video will glitch or if I'm on my phone sometimes I have to turn

off my phone Wi-Fi to get a signal.

For many years prior to the onset of the pandemic, Participant 2 was working

from a dispersed location. Neither the transition of location nor technology posed

concerns. However, the required elimination of quarterly opportunities for shared-air

interactions with colleagues and students was impactful.

Participant 2: There wasn't too much of an adjustment that needed to happen

organizationally, but we haven't been able to be with our students for coming on

two years. That's a big letdown, not being able to see students that I've worked

with graduate. It's not just the impact it has on the organizational connection but

with the population that you serve.

Subtheme 9a: Shift in Perception. Not all experiences regarding the pandemic

were negative. Consensus about shifts in perceptions, perceived benefits, and potential

long-term, positive outcomes existed among 100% of the study participants. Participant 1

said, "People who always worked from the office are certainly a lot more empathetic now

of the work from home or remote employee. Customers are also more empathetic and

appreciate that I am online trying help them". Participant 3 expressed gratitude from a

parental perspective saying, "I am thankful I can be at home with my kids and still work

with daycare closed due to COVID". While Participant 4 noted, "Even though the

workload has increased, the new COVID policies really benefit people".

Participants 5 and 6 presented positive changes resulting from their organizations'

pandemic response which offered personal and professional benefits.

Participant 5: We've opened up opportunities to have stress relief and work-life

balance that we never have before. So, the pandemic has been good for that, you

know, to be able to increase that because we needed it before. I think it just

brought it to the surface that everybody needed it prior to the pandemic. I hope

that doesn't change. I hope those things continue.

Participant 6: Pre-COVID, we had a lot more tasks that had to be done in the

office because the agency had not figured out another way. COVID and the full-

time telework have forced them. It's been very interesting because they've made a

lot of progress in pushing things virtual. It is very nice that we have the option at

least.

Theme 10: Perpetual Transition in Policies and Practices

Leaving the on-site environment due to COVID-19 was the beginning of a

perceived perpetual transition for 87% of participants. "The agency is scrambling to

figure out ways to manage this new world. I feel like my job is now filled with little bits

of annoying ever-changing data keeping, which I don't like", noted Participant 6. While

Participant 5 shared, "We have upended our lives. We have transitioned things and

shown that we're still being productive working from home, and some staff want to stay

that way. That's been a difficult transition for people".

Participant 3: It has caused slight stress due to the demand for meeting more

clients. So, a little more work in that sense has definitely been present. But in my

personal life, with balancing working full-time, being a mom, and daycare closes

or possible COVID test, you have to get your child tested. Not everywhere tests a

three-year-old, you know? That type of thing has been way more of a stressor to

figure out. My children are definitely my priority, but I need to work. I can't just

have the school closed every other day.

Participant 5: They were never going to bring everybody back at once. They were

going to go from leadership down. So, you know, upper leadership, we're going to

go in first, and then they're going to stagger it, but it has changed because

everything changes. The world's changing. And so, we were tentatively supposed

to come back, I think last spring, and then that changed. And then they were going

to do it in September. Then this month, we were supposed to return to work. And

now that's changed again, and now the vaccines have pushed it. So, they want to

try to make it not mandatory, but if you don't get a vaccine, you can't return to the

office without certain stipulations. So now that's all changing too. So yeah, it's

been a continual transition.

Subtheme 10a: Uncertainty. Emotions that were experienced by participants

which were related to the uncertainty of the pandemic and its impact were expressed as

fear, frustration, hostility, loneliness, and weariness. Participant 6 said, "Everybody's

weary. It feels like there's a constant feeling of uncertainty, and there's more hostility in

some ways". "Early on, I had some concern and was uneasy that they may realize we can

all work from home and then make some changes as an organization. I was afraid that my

job could be outsourced," shared Participant 1.

Each of the participants expressed uncertainty regarding the ongoing timeline of the pandemic and its impact on their personal life, working environment, or shared-air interaction opportunities. Participant 5 reported, "I literally haven't been back to my office. I don't know what my desk looks like. I imagine it is covered in dust. We have had a return-to-work date more times than I can count".

Participant 3: I miss connecting in person. I think that's how COVID has affected me the most, just in the want to have relationships and connections. It's challenging. How do you build those? Distancing. How do you build those through a screen? How do you build those through just your voice?

Category 7: Work-Life Balance Themes and Subthemes

The seventh category was about work-life balance. This category had one core theme (Theme 11) and three subthemes (Subthemes 11a, 11b, and 11c). See Table 10 for an overview of the category and themes.

Table 10

Category 7: Work-Life Balance: Related Themes/Subthemes and Sample Responses

Theme/subthemes	Sample responses
Theme 11: Working environment preference	• I'm going to prefer a blend. I like some of the benefits of working remote, but also need in person, personal human interaction. (P1) • I'll continue to work remotely. I think that's where I've really found that I can have a better work-life balance. (P2) • They actually did offer us the choice, and I chose to stay home. If I had to go back, I would. I wouldn't leave my job over it. (P4) • I feel like we're going to lose people because you have more opportunities now to work from home than ever. For the company not to recognize that, to say we are definitely going back, and we don't have a choice in that will cause problems when it does finally happen. I have mixed feelings. I love the company and I don't want to leave, but I do like working from home. (P5)
Subtheme 11a: Flexibility, convenience, and comfortability	• I really enjoy the flexibility of being able to work wherever I have an internet connection. I think that's one of the big pluses about being a remote employee. (P2) • I feel more comfortable in my home environment. I set up a workstation, and I get more done. I don't like having to get out in bad weather either. (P4) • I feel at home, and I do feel like I can see a difference in just the goals that I've set for myself. I have done better working from home. (P5)
Subtheme 11b: Monetary and time savings	• I think the company is looking at saving money on office space. Well, they call it hoteling. I think what you basically have is three people sharing a single office. And so you have that it Mondays and Tuesday afternoons and all day Fridays. And then you'll come in Tuesdays and Thursdays, and somebody else will have it just Wednesday afternoons. I will just basically be set up with a desk, a docking station, large monitors, and a phone. (P1) • I commute 45 minutes to the office. I'm not having wear and tear on my car. I don't have to buy clothes. I don't have to pack lunches. There are all kinds of things that are savings. (P5) • The most positive is the time savings. Less worry about getting ready in the morning. I don't have to worry about gathering food items. It's all right here. I live 30 minutes from the office, so that saved an hour of commuting time, and having that hour plus in my days is incredibly helpful. Especially with two young children and having to coordinate their daycare and school stuff. (P6)
Subtheme 11c: Productivity and workload	• I am not trying to toot my own horn, but I have proven myself to be reliable and to do what needs to be done. (P3) • We have more to do now that we are remote, but I get more done in this environment. There are no distractions with office drama, so that's been nice. (P4) • I am more productive at home. It is much easier to avoid all the distractions that happen in the office. (P5)

Theme 11: Working Environment Preference

If given the choice, 100% of the participants would choose to remain in a geographically dispersed working environment. Participant 4 noted that she would return to the on-site setting if it were the only option but prefers to work at home full-time. Participant 3's organization gave their workforce the choice to return on-site a few months prior to the research interview. Although she was the most vocal about feeling disconnected and missing opportunities, Participant 2 said, "I want more interaction, but it's my choice to stay at home".

The other 63% voiced a desire for a hybrid or blended experience that would allow the flexibility of working remotely yet afford opportunities for shared-air interactions. Participant 6 suggested, "A hybrid experience would be a best-case scenario". Participant 1 offered, "I'm going prefer a blend. I like some of the benefits of working remote, but also need in person, personal human interaction. I'll probably work two or three days a week from the office, given the opportunity". Participants 2 and 5 echoed the desire for a hybrid experience.

> Participant 2: I think I'll continue to work remotely. I think that's where I've really
> found that I can have a better work life balance. Because that's important to me.
> So, that flexibility piece, it's huge. I like being able to work wherever I have an
> internet connection. I also enjoy the opportunity to participate in residencies
> where I can go to a site for a few days and connect with coworkers and students.
> P5: I feel like we're going to lose people because you have more opportunities
> now to work from home than ever. For the company not to recognize that, to say

we are definitely going back, and we don't have a choice in that will cause

problems when it does finally happen. I have mixed feelings. I love the company

and I don't want to leave, but I do like working from home.

Subtheme 11a: Flexibility, Convenience, and Comfortability. All participants

perceived flexibility, convenience, and comfortability among the positive aspects of

working remotely. Flexibility was mentioned by 87% as the most important aspect of

their experiences.

Participant 1: The opportunity to work from home is kind of pulled the veil back

on what it means to be an at home worker and the different challenges or

opportunities. There's some who may say that they enjoy the greater flexibility of

working from home, and to them, that is more important than the opportunity for

shared-air exchanges. It's really unique to the person, of course.

Participants 3 and 6 were both grateful for the convenience of being able to work

a full-time position and remain at home with their children. Participants 4 and 5 felt more

comfortable and productive in their home environments. "I set up a workstation, and I get

more done. I don't like having to get out in bad weather either", reported Participant 4.

Similarly, Participant 5 shared, "I feel at home, and I do feel like I can see a difference in

just the goals that I've set for myself. I have done better working from home".

Subtheme 11b: Monetary and Time Savings. As a working parent, Participant 6

experienced the time savings as the greatest benefit of a dispersed working environment.

Participant 6: The most positive is the time savings. Less worry about getting

ready in the morning. I don't have to worry about gathering food items. It's all

right here. I live 30 minutes from the office, so that saved an hour of commuting time, and having that hour plus in my days is incredibly helpful. Especially with two young children and having to coordinate their daycare and school stuff.

Her experience was echoed by Participants 1 and 5; however, they both added the additional element of money savings. Participant 5 said, "I commute 45 minutes to the office. I'm not having wear and tear on my car. I don't have to buy clothes. I don't have to pack lunches. There are all kinds of things that are savings".

Participant 1: There is time gained back and money saved from not having to commute. There's a savings in my paycheck because I'm at a lower payroll tax in the town that I live in versus where the office is located. I probably don't have to buy as many clothes as quickly. And the ability to be home at five o'clock, you can sleep in a little bit more, and get pretty much a full hour lunch.

Not only were the savings for the individual employees noted, but Participant 1 discussed the potential organizational savings which could be achieved with a hybrid workforce alternating use of a shared office space or "hoteling" cubicles.

Participant 1: I think the company is looking at saving money on office space. Well, they call it hoteling. I think what you basically have is three people sharing a single office. And so you have that it Mondays and Tuesday afternoons and all day Fridays. And then you'll come in Tuesdays and Thursdays, and somebody else will have it just Wednesday afternoons. I will just basically be set up with a desk, a docking station, large monitors, and a phone.

Subtheme 11c: Productivity and Workload. Although an increased workload was evident for 33%, reporting a greater rate of productivity was consistent among 100% of the study's participants. Half of the group attributed their better performance to the lack of distractions. Participant 3 said, "I am not trying to toot my own horn, but I have proven myself to be reliable and to do what needs to be done. I keep my numbers up". Participant 4 suggested, "We have more to do now that we are remote, but I get more done in this environment. There are no distractions with office drama, so that's been nice".

Participant 1 offered, "I was on call all of the time to provide assistance or problem solve, so there really isn't a difference in workload for me, but I feel like I get more done here without the distractions".

Participant 5: I am more productive at home. It is so much easier to avoid all the distractions that happen in the office. You know, there are people who love to come by and visit in your office. That's fine sometimes, but some bother you regardless of how busy you are.

One challenge related to workload and productivity experienced by 87% of participants was the ability to set boundaries. Parameters on when work at home ends and home life begins required concerted effort and discipline. The convenience of being able to work on tasks such as checking emails or creating a report at any time of the day or night had to be measured by the individual's need for balance, wellness, sleep, and family time. Children in the environment during the workday posed an additional challenge for 33%. The solutions offered by the participants focused on setting intentions and the

environment. They discussed the need for a designated work area within the home and engaging in timed breaks. Dressing professionally for virtual meetings served as behavioral and visual cues of focus and aided in their experiences of feeling productive.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I presented how the study was conducted by exploring the lived experiences of geographically dispersed employees who do not have the opportunity for shared-air organizational interactions. The overarching research question guided the study and focused on the aspects of the lived experiences of geographically dispersed employees, such as perceived social support, feeling valued, supervision and coaching, and connection in the absence of shared-air opportunities. For this study, the only source of data collection was interviews with participants. The experiences were described by the six geographically dispersed participants during semistructured interviews which were conducted virtually, including video via the Google Meet platform.

During data collection and analysis, seven categories, 11 themes, and 15 subthemes emerged relating to the research question and the lived experiences of the participants. The categories included (a) perceived social support, (b) feeling valued, (c) leadership, supervision, and coaching, (d) communication, (e) sense of connection, (f) COVID-19 impact, and (g) work-life balance.

The interpretation of the findings, limitations of this study, and recommendations for further research will be presented in Chapter 5. Additionally, implications for positive social change will be offered. Lastly, the conclusions of the study will be addressed.
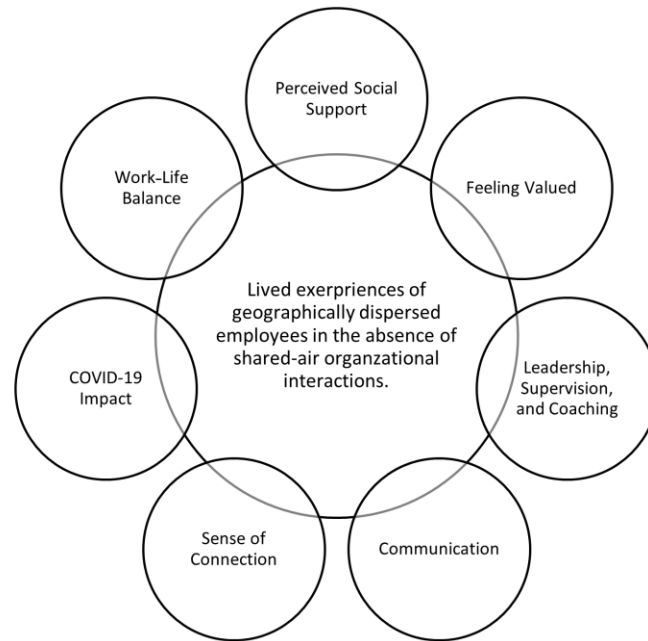
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of social support in geographically dispersed employees in the absence of shared-air organizational interactions. The exploration included exploration of their experiences with supervision and coaching, a sense of connection with and feeling valued by their organization, leaders, and coworkers while working remotely with technological support for communication and engagement. The IPA approach was employed to explore, collect, and analyze data to gain a deeper and comprehensive understanding of the essence of the participants' lived experiences and what meaning they made of the growing phenomenon of working in a geographically dispersed environment. Consistent with the IPA methodological framework, I sought to describe and offer interpretations of the data while presenting a detailed and accurate reflection of the participants' stories.

Each participant shared their experiences, perceptions, and feelings related to their roles as an employee working in an off-site environment. Consideration of their narratives offered an opportunity to develop statements of meaning to communicate their realities. From the analysis of the semistructured interview data, I identified seven categories, 11 themes, and 15 related subthemes. Figure 1 demonstrates the emergent categories which encapsulate the essence of the participants' lived experiences.

Figure 1

Categories Identified During the Analysis of Geographically Dispersed Participant Interviews

The figure shows eight circles arranged around a central circle. The central circle reads: "Lived exerpriences of geographically dispersed employees in the absence of shared-air organzational interactions." The surrounding circles, starting from the top and moving clockwise, read: "Perceived Social Support," "Feeling Valued," "Leadership, Supervision, and Coaching," "Communication," "Sense of Connection," "COVID-19 Impact," "Work-Life Balance."

Key findings of this phenomenological study suggested that the respondents perceived a decrease in their work-related personal and professional relationships and in being valued as employees. Additionally, myriad challenges with technology and communication, along with heightened feelings of disconnect, isolation, and depersonalization were perceived while working off-site. Further, a sense of uncertainty and fatigue related to the perpetual adjustment to COVID-19's impact on safety protocols, work environment, policies, and practices was pronounced for all respondents. However, all six participants considered the perceived benefits of convenience, flexibility, savings of time and money, and a greater work-life balance that were afforded from working off-site were worth having to cope with the numerous challenges.

While all subjects preferred to remain in their roles as geographically dispersed employees, four of the six voiced a desire for a hybrid or blended working environment to increase their organizational shared-air interactions and work-related relationships. In the remaining sections, I present my interpretations of the findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, reflexivity, and a conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

In alignment with the purpose of the study and the research question, the literature review was centered around the exploration of peer-reviewed information related to geographically dispersed employment, social support, supervision and coaching, and sense of connection and feeling valued, shared-air interactions, related keywords, and previous research of lived experiences of a phenomenon. Studying an individual's experience as it is subjectively lived offers an opportunity to develop new meanings and appreciations, which can offer a greater understanding of the experience (Laverty, 2003). As an IPA researcher, I did not presume or predict specific outcomes but considered the concepts and theories related to the study's focus (Jabereen, 2015) and deferred to the categories and themes that emerged from the data collected. Following semistructured participant interviews, data analysis resulted in the identification of seven categories, 11 themes, and 15 subthemes (see Table 2 in Chapter 4). The findings were compared with the related peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Analysis of the respondents' narratives led to my interpretation that the findings

supported the central tenets of SIT and SET theories which hold that organizational

connection, communication, and team member interactions impact employee motivation

(Pinder, 2008; Van Dick et al., 2005). The entire population of participants noted missing

the opportunities for interactions with their colleagues and supervisors, issues with

communication, and experiencing a decreased sense of organizational connection. Four

of the six participants perceived these factors to have an influence on their motivation and

satisfaction within their roles in a geographically dispersed environment, whereas two

subjects supported the central concept of CSE theory regarding their self-concept,

perceived abilities, and internal locus of control mitigating their need for external or

environmental sources of motivation or connection (Johnson et al., 2015). However, all

participants aligned with the job-demand resources framework, which purports that

organizational connection is a pivotal influence on overall happiness and willingness to

remain in a role or with a company (Huynh et al., 2014).

The findings also supported the LMX tenets that the strength of the relationships

among team networks and the perceived quality of the leader-member exchanges

influence organizational identification and overall job satisfaction (Guan et al., 2013; Loi

et al., 2014). Additionally, the participants' lived experiences confirmed that quality

exchanges between employees and members of leadership proved to be more difficult

when the workforce was geographically dispersed. Four of the six subjects reported a

decline in LMX compared to their experiences working on-site. Further, they perceived

and experienced that the compromised LMX contributed to an exclusion from the decision-making process, feelings of isolation and disconnection, and fewer advancement opportunities than were available to on-site employees (Chekwa, 2018).

Category 1: Perceived Social Support

Personal and Professional Relationships

Confirming the previous literature, I found that for each of the participants, perceived social support was viewed as essential and contributed not only their work experience but to their overall sense of wellbeing. For the respondents, the term meant experiencing a genuine connection with others within the organization who demonstrate care and interest in professional and personal issues. It included the acknowledgment of frustrations, offering of feedback, and troubleshooting areas of challenge. Beyond a focus on work-related concerns, it was explained as emotional availability demonstrated by offering a safe outlet to decompress after stress or struggle. The meaning the participants attributed to social support aligns with the literature. It echoes findings from previous studies that addressed its mitigating effect on stress (Iplik et al., 2014) and demonstrated a positive relationship between the presence of perceived social support and emotional regulation (Merida-Lopez et al., 2019).

Through exploration of their lived experiences regarding social support, an area of disconfirmation was identified. The literature suggested that employees perceive social support from leadership and coworkers (Bentley et al., 2016; Merida-Lopez et al., 2019). Although this study's participants all voiced a desire for such an experience, five of the six noted that when they had perceived social support, it was most often from a peer.

Babin and Boles (1996) found that social support had a significant impact on employees' feelings of isolation. Further, due to a lack of availability for social interactions with colleagues, geographically dispersed employees are at a heightened risk for perceived isolation and loneliness (Marshall et al., 2007). The entire subject group experienced a decrease in their personal relationships with peers and supervisors following a transition to an off-site environment. Each of the six attributed an absence of shared-air interactions to the decline in relationships. A decrease in perceived social support and feelings of isolation were experienced by 83% of the study's participants. They shared that they felt alone, siloed, and in a bubble in their geographically dispersed working environment.

Connaughton and Daly (2004) found feelings of isolation and loneliness occur in the proximate and distance-based employee populations. However, confirming previous literature regarding perceived advantage (Loyd & Amoroso, 2018), all six participants perceived on-site workers at an advantage to have increased levels of social support due to their proximity to others and engagement opportunities. Additionally, 50% of the respondents felt that perceptions existed of both off-site and on-site workers that prevented better relationships between the two populations, including on-site workers' feelings of superiority, jealousy, bitterness, and dismissiveness toward remote employees.

Category 2: Feeling Valued

Strategies

For 100% of the study's participants, feeling valued in the workplace was more essential than their rate of pay, the possibility of a promotion, or the ability to choose an

on-site or off-site work environment. However, 67% of respondents reported a marked decrease in feeling valued following a transition to dispersed employment, with 33% of that group experiencing no feelings of being valued. Feeling valued was perceived as being so important, one subject felt its absence was enough to consider alternate employment. Bagget et al. (2016) offered that any demonstration of caring must be acknowledged by the employee to maintain the potential influence on retention, connection, and fostering an overall environment where employees feel valued. Confirming the literature, the participants voiced a need to feel valued as a whole person and to be shown that they are valued beyond the offering of tangible gifts or words of praise. The strategies that were perceived to foster a sense of being valued included verbal or written praise, tangible tokens of appreciation or acknowledgment of efforts, but the participants also desired inclusion in important meetings or projects, asked for an opinion, and a consideration of their personal lives.

Contrary to the literature suggesting that remote workers often acknowledge that the afforded opportunity to work off-site demonstrates that their organization, supervisor, and team members value them (Charalampous et al., 2019), only 50% of the participants perceived the organization's offering an opportunity to work from home as adding to their feelings of being valued. The 50% that did not perceive it as such noted that with the growing number of employees working from home pre-COVID-19 and currently due to the pandemic, it is no longer seen as a reward. In fact, they offered that their organizations take them for granted, rationalizing that the extra work or disregard for their time should be overlooked since they are allowed to work remotely.

Two of the respondents reported that their supervisors had mailed items to their homes or created opportunities for virtual connections that had made them feel valued. Karis et al. (2006) suggested that the use of technology for increased communication promoted feelings of being valued in the absence of shared-air interactions. In contrast, 67 % of the geographically dispersed participants perceived a sense of depersonalization and invisibility related to the use of virtual communications that detracted from their feelings of being valued. Receiving computer-generated emails, attending virtual meetings as an icon instead of a personal photograph or on video, large numbers of employees on the screen without identifying information, and being required to mute the microphone were all experienced as depersonalizing and devaluing.

Category 3: Leadership, Supervision, and Coaching

Employee-Initiated

The findings of this study confirm and extend the knowledge regarding leadership, supervision, and coaching by offering the perceptions and experiences of geographically dispersed employees, which was identified as a gap in the literature. The six respondents shared the belief that supervision practices and communication between employees and supervisors are fundamentally vital and influenced their overall experience as a remote employee (Charalampous et al., 2019; Steele & Plenty, 2015; Yang, 2020). Prasad et al. (2020) called for leaders to consider the quality of communication and practices to improve the well-being of remote employees, noting a heightened responsibility to do so due to COVID-19's impact on personal and professional experiences.

While the experiences of participants varied regarding their perceived quality of relationships and levels of communication with their supervisors, 100% noted an increased requirement of self or employee-initiated communication as an off-site employee. Their feelings about this development were divided. Two participants appreciated the sense of autonomy offered by being off-site. One participant noted a need for consistent support but felt comfortable contacting a supervisor when needed. The final three participants experienced consistent issues with delayed feedback and feelings of frustration from an inability to connect with supervisors or being required to initiate the contact.

Four of the six participants shared the perception that a lack of immediate availability of a supervisor was among the major transitions and obstacles of moving to remote work. They felt their relationships with supervisors had been stronger when they were on-site. Three subjects experienced that the ability to discuss personal issues with a supervisor was easier or more common in a face-to-face environment. As a remote employee, the fear of interrupting or bothering one's supervisor was consistent for 50% of subjects and prevented them from reaching out at times, even when they felt that they needed help. This supports the previous literature regarding the need for leaders to develop an environment in which employees experience an ability to express themselves freely without hesitation or fear (Min et al., 2020).

The lack of supervisor-initiated contact was perceived by one respondent to negatively impact the relationship, as well as the employee's overall well-being. She had not heard from her supervisor in more than three months, and in that time, she had given

birth, taken leave, and returned to work for multiple weeks. Only when her supervisor contacted her regarding a work issue did she recall that she had been expecting a child and then inquired about her health and the baby. Conversely, although self-initiated, one participant perceived an increase in her contact and relationship with her supervisor with virtual contact, supplementing the missed opportunities for engagement on-site.

Exclusion from Decision and Policy Making

Five of the six participants perceived that they were consistently excluded from organizational practices, events, or opportunities for input which was attributed to being dispersed employees. The exclusion from decision and policy making processes was the area of most concern and emotion for 67% of participants. As off-site workers, they experienced a decline in or cessation of their inclusion in critical conversations focused on organizational decisions or policy development to which they had previously, when on-site, been asked to contribute. The participants who experienced this issue felt that their supervisors excluding them from meetings or conversations which were related to their own positions or central to organizational mission, vision, or strategic planning was disrespectful, dismissive, and devaluing of expertise or experience. Anger, frustration, and fear of job loss were emotions the respondents attributed to the perceived lack of contribution in decision making and policy development. These feelings and perceptions confirm Müller and Kotte's (2020) research regarding the restrictive nature of supervision solely focused on employee performance and the essential empowering benefits of teaching and including employees in the strategic planning process.

Feeling excluded was mentioned in multiple aspects of their experiences as remote employees. Examples offered by 83% were failure to receive critical information, fewer invitations to meetings, and a diminished ability to engage, share thoughts, ask questions, or understand presentations in virtual meetings. For 33% of subjects, networking functions and team-building activities were areas of perceived exclusion as a dispersed employee. The lived experiences of the participants support the findings in previous literature which suggested that employees who are engaged by leaders in meaningful exchanges and multiple interactions while encouraged to share their perspectives have increased job satisfaction, motivation, corporate commitment, and desire to remain in their organizations (Ellemers et al., 2004; Jacobs, 2008; Loi et al., 2014; Nohe & Sonntag, 2014; Yang, 2020).

Performance Evaluation

The findings of the study further confirmed the previous literature, which addressed the ineffectiveness of sporadic supervision in fostering collaborative coaching relationships, a genuine conversation regarding an employee's areas for growth, or vital coaching opportunities (Bozer & Jones, 2018; Donahue-Mendoza, 2012; Min et al., 2020). Following a transition to a geographically dispersed working environment and in contrast to their previous on-site experiences, formal performance evaluation practices decreased in frequency or were eliminated for 83% of participants. The participants whose supervisors granted or required the opportunity for a review found the experience treated with disregard by their supervisors and lacking in individualized feedback or discussion. Only one subject found the experience of the coaching relationship and

performance evaluation process to remain consistent whether working on-site or dispersed.

Although they were not afforded consistent feedback or detailed evaluation, 67% experienced a demand to provide documentation that was not previously required while working on-site, including detailed daily documentation, attendance records, and bulleted lists of objectives. While increasing the workload of 67% of participants, these requirements added to feelings of loss of autonomy, frustration, and disconnection for 33% of the group studied. Further, the on-site workers were perceived to have the advantage of being exempt from such reporting, which added to the sense of frustration experienced by those working off-site.

An additional perceived advantage for on-site counterparts experienced by 50% of subjects centered around opportunities for advancement, increased earnings, and promotion. They expressed a belief that proximate workers were given preferential treatment by members of leadership because of the opportunities to engage in daily conversations and be in the same space. One felt that the years of employment and experience were overlooked in favor of a less qualified coworker who worked on-site. Although the requirements of the role were amenable to either working environment, she perceived that she was never considered an option as a dispersed employee. In contrast, two of the six participants trusted that their supervisors acknowledged their abilities regardless of location and that they received equal opportunities for advancement. The lived experiences of the study's participants confirm previous findings that geographically dispersed employees perceive or experience that their on-site team

members are treated with more inclusivity and given more input in planning, policy, and decision making than remote counterparts (Landier et al., 2019).

Category 4: Communication

Technology

The findings of this study extended, confirmed, and, in some experiences, disconfirmed the previous literature regarding the use of technology to facilitate effective communication opportunities for the geographically dispersed workforce. For increased communication, supplementing the lack of shared-air interactions with virtual exchanges was suggested as a best practice (Baker et al., 2006; Karis et al., 2016) which was consistent with the consensus of the group that technology is essential for communication. However, challenges were abundant. Difficulties with installing, learning, and or using program software including Zoom, SKYPE, Google Meeting, and Microsoft Teams existed for 100% of subjects. Additionally, issues with a lack of equipment, faulty equipment, delayed technical support, loss of internet, or poor phone connection were noted by 87% of the participants. Further, 50% of participants experienced frustration with virtual communication and felt the use of technology added to confusion, miscommunication, and misinterpretations, disconfirming previous findings which held virtual interactions can lower the frequency of misunderstandings (Karis et al., 2016).

There were concerns and frustrations voiced about interruptions, mixed messages, confusion of topic, and missed information. The lived experiences of participants with on-site counterparts confirmed the findings of a previous study regarding on-site team

members joining virtual meetings as a group influencing a greater sense of disconnect for the dispersed worker (Oshima & Asmub, 2018). One respondent who often encountered this meeting dynamic perceived ongoing conversations between members in the shared-air setting which those joining virtually were neither able to hear nor take part. Another participant found such meetings to be plagued with constant interruptions and misunderstandings due to the inability of virtual members to receive the nonverbal cues that those in the shared-air setting were exchanging during their interactions. This experience supported Daric's (2020) call for further research regarding the how the lack of or limited nonverbal communication influences issues such as miscommunication for virtual workers.

Communication in formal meetings was not the only interactions the participants were missing. The group noted missing communication opportunities afforded by informal interactions of a shared-air office setting, including walking to the lobby or restroom, getting coffee, and interacting in the elevator, break room, or parking lot. The absence of these interactions as an off-site employee was a cause of concern for 100% of the participants. Although not always successful, technology and virtual interactions were used by 87% of the participants to communicate and connect with colleagues outside of meetings. Their reports confirmed previous literature, which suggested that informal communications were relevant to the employee's experience and that technology can offer opportunities to connect beyond formal exchanges (Bagget et al., 2016; Petterson, 2016). Interestingly, 67% also held a sense of relief that the lack of daily communication prevented them from being distracted by others or pulled into office drama which

supports the previous study of varying desire for contact with on-site workers (Fonnor & Roloff, 2010).

The absence of shared-air interactions, including nonverbal cues, influenced communication and the lived experiences of 100% of the study's geographically dispersed population. Although there were concerns presented, all subjects considered technology to be the critical bridge to their colleagues, supervisors, organizations, and clients confirming Lin and Kwantes' (2014) findings that while virtual exchanges may not be equal to shared-air interactions, the benefits are evident.

Category 5: Sense of Connection

Processing with Coworkers

A sense of connection with colleagues was important to 100% of the participant group. The findings which emerged from the exploration of the participants' lived experiences confirmed previous literature, which found that a sense of connection and overall well-being are impacted when opportunities for shared-air interactions are absent (Charalampous et al., 2019). The lack of opportunities for shared-air organizational interactions diminished feelings of connection for 83% of participants. They perceived connection as an ability to process thoughts, feelings, work events, and questions with coworkers. One participant suggested that it was the individual employee's responsibility and choice to create opportunities for connection using virtual interactions. As discussed in the interpretations of findings regarding communication and confirming previous literature, supplementing the lack of shared-air interactions with virtual options can increase communication and a sense of connection (Karis et al., 2016, Lin & Kwantes,

2014) but can conversely increase feelings of disconnect for remote workers (Oshima & Asmub, 2018). For the subjects, only 50% of the group reported a sense of personal connection was improved by the energy of a phone call with a colleague or the energy and visual cues of video interactions.

For 83% of the off-site respondents, there was a perception of being a burden, interrupting, or complete inability to connect to others for the desired processing of challenges, difficult situations, or clients or to share positive experiences. The disconnection attributed to feelings of depression, burnout, fatigue, loneliness, depersonalization, and isolation confirms the research of Baggett et al. (2016). Further, their experiences had been wholly different when they were working in an on-site environment. The participants reported a greater sense of connection had accompanied the ability to feel the energy in a shared-air space and to see and interact with other coworkers in the daily routine of office activities, confirming previous findings (Darics, 2020; O'Dell, 2015; Sprietzer et al., 2016; Watanbe et al., 2016).

Onboarding Practices

The findings of the study extended the previous literature regarding the importance and complexity of onboarding practices. Focused on the newly hired employees, Holmes (2015) suggested a benefit from heightened interactions with leaders and coworkers while learning the organizational norms, culture, and climate. However, the exploration of the lived experiences of the geographically dispersed participants offered a greater understanding of the current workforce's desire to engage with the newly hired team members and the possible benefits of affording opportunities for those

exchanges. Previous literature suggested the value of social exchanges in fostering deeper connections among individuals (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2006), which was confirmed by 67% of the participants' experiences with lack of access to new hires. They discussed a longing to connect with newly hired employees and feeling unknown to them as an off-site employee. A lack of introductions or time for familiarizing left 33% feeling uneasy and unable to foster relationships with their new team members.

Category 6: COVID-19 Impact

Adjustment

The findings of this study confirmed and extended the previous literature related to COVID-19. The pandemic was ongoing at the time of the participant interviews, and resulting safety protocols caused the interview setting to be virtual. COVID-19's impact and disruption were not fully processed or easily articulated by the participants. The swift and marked adjustments required within their personal and professional lives were still ongoing and concerning to 87% of the participants, thus confirming the findings of Milman et al. (2020), which noted the pandemic's disruptive impact on meaning making and an inability to process events. For 100% of the study's population, the central work-related experiences identified were rapid adjustment, uncertainty, and a perpetual state of transition. The sudden or rapid response required left 67% of participants feeling scattered, frustrated, fearful, or stressed when their organizations gave little to no time to leave their on-site workspaces. Although they perceived their organizations to handle the transition well and more time to transition off-site was afforded to 33% of participants, they still experienced heightened emotions as well as logistical and technical challenges.

Conversely, 100% the participants shared that the pandemic had provided opportunities to consider personal and professional things differently and that the adjustments required could offer long-term, personal, and professional, positive outcomes. Potential organizational benefits were also noted by the respondents. Shifts in perceptions included empathy or a newfound understanding and respect for those who work in a geographically dispersed environment. Additionally, there was a sense of gratitude for the ability to remain employed and for those with children to be able to work at home since the daycares were closed due to COVID-19. Organizational strategies implemented to address the emotional/mental health of employees, to equip employees with the equipment and access needed to complete their duties, and the strides made to create processes to complete tasks virtually were appreciated. However, participants noted that the attention to employee stress and the streamlining of organizational processes were needed long before the onset of COVID-19 and held hope that they would continue when the pandemic was over. The participants' experiences confirmed the need to examine factors of COVID-19 influencing off-site employees and to consider the implementation of strategies of social support that promote wellbeing (Brazeau et al., 2020).

Perpetual Transition in Policies and Practices

In confirmation of previous studies of the influence of COVID-19 on employee's well-being and ability to process and cope with the increased stressors in their life-work environments (Brazeau et al., 2020; Milman et al., 2020; Prasad et al.), 87% of participants perceived a perpetual state of transition since the outset of the pandemic.

They noted increased stress and a constant state of uncertainty regarding personal and professional issues such as changing job requirements, practices, or policies, unknown return to on-site location dates, adapting the home to a workspace, increased workload, and balancing life and work within COVID-19-related restrictions. Participants shared that they experienced feelings of fear, frustration, hostility, loneliness, and weariness. Uncertainty regarding the ongoing timeline of the pandemic and its impact on personal life, work environment, and shared-air interaction opportunities was expressed by 100% of the participants.

Category 7: Work-Life Balance

Working Environment Preference

For 100% of the study's population, it was preferential to continue working in a geographically dispersed environment, with 67% noting a greater sense of work-life balance. The inability to work from home would cause two of the participants to seek other employment. Five of the six subjects voiced a desire for a hybrid or blended experience which would provide opportunities to be on-site and felt it would offer the best of both experiences. The reason for this preference was not related to the work or access to equipment but a longing for shared-air interactions with members of their organizations. This finding confirmed the suggestion of Charalampous et al. (2019) that opportunities for shared-air interactions offer a noticeable difference for remote workers who maintained a minimum number of hours working on-site.

The perceived flexibility was viewed as the most important aspect of their experiences by 87% of the group. Convenience and comfortability were also perceived as

pivotal features of working in an off-site environment. The positive aspects that were experienced by the participants included relief from inclement weather issues as well as time and monetary savings related to childcare, morning routine, food costs or preparation, commuting, and professional attire. One participant voiced earning more money due to the lower tax rate of the city in which he lived and worked off-site versus the city where his on-site office was located.

Lastly, although 33% of subjects experienced an increased workload, the overall findings confirmed the previous literature, which noted the benefits of an off-site environment included fewer distractions and interruptions, improved time management, and task focus (Bentley et al., 2016; Tremblay & Thomsin, 2012). Higher productivity was consistent among 100% of the study's participants, with 50% attributing their improved performance to the lack of distractions that normally occur in the on-site environment. However, children in the off-site environment during the workday posed challenges for the participants who were parents of young ones. Further, 87% of participants shared that they had experienced issues with setting boundaries between work and life with considerations for the need for balance, wellness, sleep, and family time. They suggested solutions including the creation of a designated work area, engaging in regular breaks, and dressing professionally for virtual meetings to serve as behavioral and visual cues for focus and feeling productive.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation identified for the study was related to COVID-19 restrictions on the interview setting. The recommended safety precautions required that a virtual

environment was necessary. While there was no indication that the content shared by participants was compromised by the setting, I must acknowledge an inability to comprehensively assess nonverbal communication. The video image was restricted to a portion of the participants' anatomy, which limited observation of physical cues. The second limitation was any unintended bias from the researcher as the sole individual responsible for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The examination of any such incident is addressed in the reflexivity section of this Chapter.

Recommendations For Future Research

Recommendations for further research were based on the results of this study and informed by the limitations and comprehensive literature review. These recommendations could be considered for the study of related topics or similar methodological approaches. The recommendations were centered on considerations for future researchers to further explore the lived experiences of members of the growing geographically dispersed workforce who lack the opportunity for shared-air organizational interactions. Further research is needed on the organizational and individual experiences of COVID-19 and its impact on leadership practices, organizational policies and practices, and the overall wellbeing of employees regardless of the environment. Additionally, future research could offer a greater understanding of off-site employees' experiences by studying the workspace preference of employees who transitioned to an off-site location at the outset of the pandemic. I suggest and support Darics (2020) call for further exploration of those who experience the whole or majority of their interactions in a virtual environment. Additionally, informed by the findings of this exploration, additional research is needed

to explore the perceptions of those employees who have never worked on-site as compared to those who have experienced both environments.

Recommendations For Future Practice

Recommendations for future practice were based on the results of this study and informed by the comprehensive literature review. The lived experiences shared by the participants were simultaneously unique and similar. Many themes emerged to support the need for the implementation of practices that may serve to mediate the lack of perceived social support, feeling valued, sense of connection, and inclusion by off-site employees. Like each participant, each employee's preferences require consideration to ensure the practices align with the needs. However, recommendations related to the findings include supervisor-initiated communication, utilization of various technologies with the incorporation of video, photos, and the inclusion of identifying information for participants in virtual meetings. An additional recommendation involves practices that create opportunities for geographically dispersed employees to provide input, offer feedback, and ask questions as part of the organizational decision-making and policy-making practices. The final recommendation for future practice is the creation of pathways for off-site employees to participate in the onboarding of new employees and relationship-building activities to foster a stronger sense of connection and lessen feelings of invisibility or isolation.

Social Implications

In a society that has transitioned and continues to transition to an increasingly virtual experience for employees, the social change implications of exploring the lived

experiences of those working off-site are numerous. The results of this study reveal the

perceived and experienced impact of remote employment in the absence of shared-air

interactions and could be used to review current policies and guide the development of

social change strategies to increase the perceived social support, feelings of being valued,

sense of connection, and inclusion of the increasing number of geographically dispersed

employees. Further, employees and supervisors could gain a deeper understanding of the

challenges and pivotal role of various technologies in increasing communication and

mitigating perceptions and feelings of invisibility and disconnect. Additionally, the study

may serve to encourage social change strategies for involving geographically dispersed

employees in decision and policy-making practices, as well as the onboarding of new

employees, to potentially assist in the sense of cohesion within the organization. Lastly,

the exploration of the lived experiences of these geographically dispersed employees may

offer a greater understanding of similar phenomena, including those engaged in an online

learning environment.

Reflexivity

As the sole researcher, introspection and awareness of personal and cultural biases

were continuously required. Throughout the research process, there is no step immune

from reflexive consideration. During the literature review, I attempted to find previous

studies that offered an expansive representation of the key concepts. Additionally, during

the creation of interview questions, I considered the wording carefully and relied upon

my chair and committee to further assist in ensuring that the questions lacked any leading

language that might influence the participants' responses. During the semi-structured

interviews, I aimed to remain authentic to create an environment of trust and openness while simultaneously limiting any bias through word or nonverbal cues. During data analysis and interpretation as an IPA researcher, the goal was to offer an accurate reflection of the participants' experiences. Member checking and audio recordings of the interviews assisted in limiting my personal feelings, perceptions, preferences, or experiences from skewing the narratives.

Conclusion

The geographically dispersed workforce was growing steadily prior to the pandemic's required transition of much of the workforce to off-site locations. This study allowed for a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences of those working in a remote environment without the opportunity for shared-air organizational interactions. By considering the results of this study, organizational leaders and policy makers may better understand the off-site employee experience. The exploration of the lived experiences of the study's participants may encourage the review of or implementation of strategies that could contribute to positive social change and influence the perceived social support, feelings of being valued, sense of connection, and inclusion of the increasing number of geographically dispersed employees.

This study offers findings that should contribute to the identified gap of knowledge regarding the dispersed employees' perceptions of social support and experience with leadership, coaching and supervision and provide a deeper understanding of the employees' perceptions and preferences. Additionally, findings illuminate the need for further research regarding strategies for effective communication and the use of

various technologies for virtual interactions. Lastly, the findings revealed the influence of COVID-19 on the personal and professional experiences of participants. Recommendations for future research include extending the study of lived experience to a population without on-site work experience, examining the impact of COVID-19 on organizations, individuals, and post-pandemic work environment preference, and further exploration of the those who experience organizational interactions exclusively in a virtual environment.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol and Questions

1. Greeting and introductions.

2. Informed consent review

3. Interview Questions

4. Open discussion and participant questions

5. Close

Semistructured Interview Questions

1. How long and in what capacity have you worked in a geographically dispersed environment?

2. Have you always worked in an offsite role with this organization?

    Follow Up:

        If yes: Throughout your career history?

        If no: How long did you work in an on-site environment?

3. What is your experience with virtual or other technological interactions?

4. What does the idea of social support in the workplace mean to you?

    Follow Up:

    How and from whom do you perceive or experience social support within your organization?

    Is social support important to you? Why or why not?

5. How does the inability to have shared-air or face-to-face interactions with colleagues influence your experience?

6. How do you feel that you and your role are perceived by on-site coworkers?

7. Do you experience or perceive any differences in the engagement of on-site versus geographically dispersed employees?

Follow up:

If yes: Can you explain the differences?

8. How do you feel valued by your organization and colleagues?

9. What is your experience and perception of distance-based leadership?

10. As a dispersed employee without face-to-face interactions with your supervisor, what is your experience with the supervision process?

11. How is the coaching relationship fostered and coaching strategies implemented?

12. From your perception, do the leadership, supervision, and coaching practices for on-site workers mirror your experiences?

Follow Up:

If no: How do they differ?

13. How, if at all, has your work experience as a geographically dispersed employee changed due to COVID-19?

14. Is there anything you would like to add that you see as meaningful to your experience as a geographically dispersed employee?