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Examining the Impact of Remote Work on Employee Productivity: Addressing the Challenges in China

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ABSTRACT: In China, the increasing prevalence of remote work has revolutionised the way employees execute their job responsibilities and engage with their organisations. However, it has also presented challenges that may affect employees' psychological well-being and workplace experiences, although it provides flexibility and supports organisational continuity. Considering this, the current study investigated the relationship between workplace anxiety and perceived meaningfulness of work among employees in the insurance sector of Guangdong Province. A qualitative, cross-sectional research design was used to provide a comprehensive picture of Chinese remote workers' experiences. 11 company executives with appropriate remote work experience were chosen for semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling. The researcher employed thematic analysis to analyse the data and identify important themes regarding workplace anxiety and perceived meaningfulness. The findings showed that social isolation and blurring of the lines between work and personal life were significant problems faced by remote workers. Additionally, workers' mental stress and occupational pressure were exacerbated by the expectation of continuous online availability. The study discovered that these encounters influenced how workers perceived the significance of their employment. Therefore, workers who felt that their employment was significant seemed to better handle workplace demands and maintain a reasonable work attitude. In conclusion, the results indicated a strong relationship between workplace anxiety and the meaningfulness of work in remote-working arrangements by demonstrating their mutual effects on well-being. This study helps acquire further insight into the psychological wellness of employees and provides data to assist organisations in creating an effective remote working environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the global shift toward remote work, which has fundamentally transformed organisational dynamics, most notably in China. In the past, conventional work environments have prioritised direct communication and hierarchical supervision. However, modern Chinese businesses have begun to adopt remote working to improve flexibility, reduce costs, and secure business continuity. This transformation has enabled the development of trust between employees and executives in maintaining productivity and morale. While there are many advantages associated with remote work, such as freedom and saving time on commuting, there have been some issues raised with remote work that may influence employees' productivity. The absence of face-to-face contact, communication problems, a lack of knowledge about expected performance, and a deficiency of social support are problems that can impact the psychological health of the remote

workers (Afota et al., 2024). Workplace anxiety is one of the many issues faced by remote workers in virtual work settings. Anxiety among workers occurs due to factors such as work-related pressure, uncertainty regarding work expectations, detachment from other colleagues at the workplace, and anxiety about the evaluation of their performance. These factors have an impact on an individual's ability to concentrate, to be motivated, to make decisions, and even how effectively one works (Yang & Long, 2024).

At the same time, major emphasis has been placed on the importance of meaningful work in determining the way the experiences of employees experience the workplace and how their psychological well-being is defined. Those workers who feel that their employment has value and is compatible with their values are anticipated to benefit from positive outcomes such as satisfaction, happiness, effectiveness, and a sense of purpose. The value of employment makes it possible for employees to identify the significance and worth of their jobs. Thus, it has the ability to impact how they react to stress at the workplace (Liu et al., 2024). These problems are particularly crucial in the insurance industry in Guangdong because the work-from-home (WFH) policy has changed the communication patterns of the workers as well as the level of supervision. The lack of physical interactions at the workplace, combined with the excessive use of technology for communication, can lead to workplace anxiety. It can also affect how employees perceive the meaning and significance of their work (Wu et al., 2022). It is essential to examine the connection between workplace anxiety and the meaningfulness of work, as these elements can have an impact on employees' productivity levels in the remote work environment.

2.BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The modern digital age has seen a drastic change in the role of the organisation, especially due to digital technological development that encourages remote working. This phenomenon has become extremely evident in the case of China, where organisations started utilising digital technology in their operational processes. Due to the rapid development of the internet, cloud computing solutions, and online communications, organisations have been able to embrace more flexible ways of working. The pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 has only expedited this process. The "52nd China Internet Development Statistics Report" showed that in June 2023, there were 507 million online office users in China, comprising 47.1% of all Internet users (Liu et al., 2024). This has resulted in the extensive adoption of digital technologies, which have made remote work an increasingly predominant aspect of the Chinese employment market. The trend of remote working has continued even after the period of the pandemic. Chinese companies have witnessed the various advantages that can be achieved through the use of flexible work models. Some of these benefits are lower operational costs, organisational flexibility, and an expanded pool of talent. Therefore, remote and hybrid work have been integrated as part of the workforce strategy for multiple industries (Shi et al., 2023). Insurance is one such industry that has been utilising digital platforms and remote communication systems to encourage employees' work and enhance customer service delivery. Employees are now required to perform intricate tasks, engage with clients, and interact with other employees with the help of digital tools (Khatatbeh et al., 2023).

Despite the notable advantages, remote work has posed several difficulties that have attracted growing awareness from scholars and businesses. One of the main difficulties includes communication and cooperation. Lack of constant face-to-face contact can restrict opportunities for communication, instant feedback and exchange of knowledge. It becomes an essential issue, especially when considering China, as the organisational culture in the country traditionally emphasises interpersonal relations, teamwork and collective involvement. Hence, professional relationships and communication can become more difficult when employees do WFH (Xu et al., 2022). Further, the practice of working remotely has posed some problems associated with the management of the work-life boundary, employee engagement, and technological accessibility. It may become challenging for employees to divide their work-related tasks from their personal lives because there is no clear distinction between work and home surroundings. Also, a lack of interaction with other workers and managers may cause employees to feel less socially connected and a part of the organisation. Moreover, there is stress on employees due to concerns about performance appraisal and career development (Xie & Yang, 2025).

The consequences of these workplace challenges include anxiety, which has become a powerful issue. Workers who operate from home have hesitance relating to job requirements, communication, and organisational support. These may create anxiety at work, which may impact focus and decision-making. However, there has been an expansion in focus on some of the aspects that could assist workers in managing challenges at work. One such aspect includes the meaningfulness of work, where

individuals who consider their work meaningful and value-driven are better placed to sustain positive attitudes amidst the challenges at work (He et al., 2024). With the increasing popularity of remote working among organisations in China, researchers have become more attentive to the exploration of the experiences of remotely working employees. In the insurance industry, employees have to work under high pressure due to the presence of certain objectives, the requirements of customers, and the constant need for communication. In these conditions, workplace anxiety can affect the way employees perceive their role in the company, whereas the perception of the meaning of work done can influence the experience of the employees at work (Liu & Deng, 2024). Hence, the examination of the relationship between workplace anxiety and the meaningfulness of work is crucial from this perspective.

3.PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The objective of this research was to understand the connection between anxiety at work and meaning at work among insurance industry workers in the Guangdong region of China. As remote and flexible work practices were becoming dominant in Chinese organisations, there was a growing emphasis on the psychological experiences of workers in a digitally interconnected work environment. The research aimed to explore the role of anxiety in the workplace in determining how employees perceived the worth and importance of their work. It further analysed the role played by the meaningfulness of work in impacting how employees managed workplace stressors. This study focused on employees in the insurance industry since there had been influential technological changes and an expansion in remote working within the industry. This resulted in differences in traditional communication and collaboration styles in the workplace, leading to new work experiences affecting employee well-being and work outcomes. The objective of selecting a qualitative research design was to acquire deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of workers regarding the research subject. The study sought to explore the perceptions of workers in the insurance industry to gain more information on the relationship between workplace anxiety and the meaningfulness of work in modern working conditions. The findings of the study were expected to add to the knowledge of the experiences of workers in the context of digital connectivity in the workplace environment.

4.LITERATURE REVIEW

In the modern dynamic business world, flexible working is an innovative working strategy different from the traditional working model. It allows workers to manage their time and place of work. The emergence of the COVID-19 outbreak and the following lockdowns have made people unable to meet each other physically. This made flexible working a more popular trend, particularly WFH. Therefore, managers ought to offer remote working opportunities for employees to avoid infection with COVID-19 and run their businesses. Hence, using remote working as one of the work policies supported the recruitment of highly skilled employees in their organisations (Xu & Pan, 2022). The beneficial effects of remote work are highlighted in a strand of literature. While working within the office, workers have to comply with various policies and work under direct supervision. In this case, the reduced level of independence is generally negatively associated with job satisfaction. Meanwhile, while working remotely, employees can enjoy flexibility in time scheduling, a higher level of independence, less stress, minimal disturbance from other workers, and savings on travel expenses (Xu et al., 2022). On the other hand, He et al. (2024) argued that while remote work offers a plethora of advantages, it has also brought about several disadvantages, including the confusion of the lines between work and non-work. The absence of a distinct boundary between professional and unprofessional activities may cause hardships for employees in separating themselves from work duties. As a result, employees may suffer from stress, loneliness, emotional tiredness, and other health issues. Constant availability and working overtime may only exacerbate the situation. Such mental and physical factors may have a negative impact on employees' psychological well-being, motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction (He et al., 2024).

There have been many modifications in the insurance industry in China due to the advancement in the use of remote working practices. With the advent of digital technology and increased usage of online communication channels, insurance companies have been able to function while offering their employees more flexibility. Workers can interact with customers, process claims, and undertake administrative functions without having to be physically at their workplaces. Due to these advantages, remote work is a critical part of corporate strategies for the insurance industry in China (Liu & Deng, 2024). While the implementation of remote work is becoming increasingly prevalent in China's insurance industry, there have been numerous disadvantages associated with this trend. Pauch and Bera (2022) argued that the provision of insurance services involves a lot of networking, customer trust, and constant communication, which can become challenging to perform within the framework of remote work

arrangements. Lack of direct interaction may influence interpersonal relations with customers, thus complicating their trust and maintaining their loyalty. Remote work can also lead to communication problems, such as a lack of knowledge and coordination among team members. Moreover, employees may feel social isolation resulting from less contact with peers and supervisors. Regular use of digital communication media can cause virtual exhaustion and emotional depletion of employees (Pauch & Bera, 2022). In this context, Wu et al. (2022) stated that one of the major obstacles encountered by Chinese workers in the insurance industry was the process of adjusting to virtual working conditions. The results illustrated that workers had to manage significant client interactions with the help of digital tools while seeking to execute strict performance goals. This formed an obstacle to in-person communication and led to a lack of the potential to build trusting relationships with the clients as well as coordination with co-workers (Wu et al., 2022).

Social Exchange Theory (SET), proposed by Homans (1958), claims that social behaviour is characterised by an exchange process wherein people aim at maximising their gains while minimising their losses. The theory assumes that people's interactions are motivated by rational calculations of gains and losses. People tend to interact and build relationships where they believe their profits outweigh the losses incurred. Moreover, the theory states that positive exchanges build trust and reciprocity, hence long-lasting relationships. Therefore, social relationships are considered dynamic exchanges where people always consider their gains and change their behaviour accordingly (Homans, 1958). SET theory is appropriate for the current research as it provides insight into how work experience, organisational support, and interpersonal relations influence the feelings of workplace anxiety and the meaningfulness of work among remote workers. In a previous study, Kavalam and Mathew (2025) used SET to state that distant and hybrid workers' involvement is influenced by their perceptions of organisational support and social connectivity. Researchers claimed that when workers feel valued and supported by their employers, they would be more likely to act in a satisfactory way while on their duties. Due to the substantial correlation between workers' job experiences and their levels of workplace anxiety and their perceptions of the significance of their employment, the results established the impact of remote work on employee productivity. Reduced workplace anxiety and improved perceptions of the value and purpose of work may result from workers acquiring sufficient assistance and retaining excellent social interactions. In contrast, employees may have elevated anxiety levels and a reduced feeling of purpose in their job when they lack enough aid and have complicated interactions with coworkers (Kavalam & Mathew, 2025).

5.RESEARCH QUESTION

- What is the relationship between workplace anxiety and the perceived meaningfulness of work among employees in the insurance sector in Guangdong Province?

6.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

The research adopted a qualitative and cross-sectional design to identify the effect of workplace anxiety on the meaningfulness of work among insurance industry employees in Guangdong Province, China. A qualitative research design was considered suitable for use in the current study, as it allowed an in-depth investigation of employees' perspectives regarding workplace anxiety at work and the degree to which they found their work meaningful. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with participants working in the insurance industry at one point to gather the required information. Participants for the interview selection were identified based on a purposive sampling method. The study chose participants who have knowledge and experience regarding remote work environments and issues associated with employee welfare. This study examined how workplace anxiety affects employee perception of the meaningfulness of work from the collected responses from the participants. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis with the help of inductive coding to define the recurring themes from the participants' responses.

In this study, data saturation was used to ensure the credibility of the outcomes since data collection continued until no more themes emerged. Triangulation involved comparing the results from various participants in order to improve the reliability of the results. Peer debriefing involved consultations with academic supervisors to lessen bias and improve the interpretive accuracy of the results. Member checking also entailed sharing the initial results with some selected participants to validate the interpretation of the results.

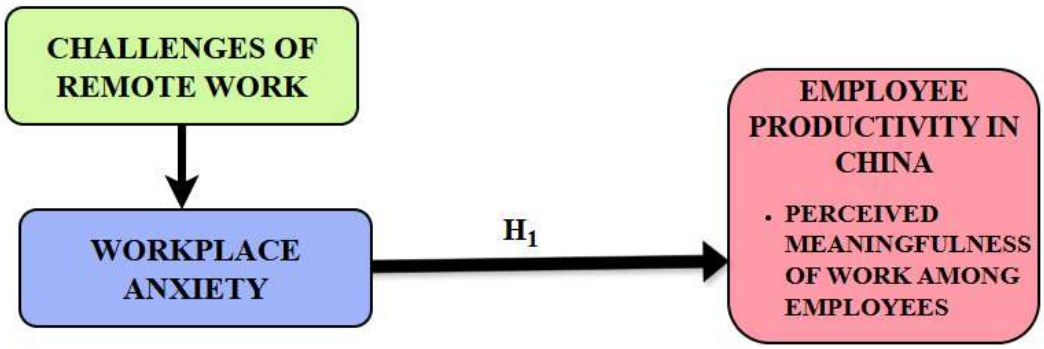
6.2 Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was used in this study to ensure that the recruited participants had enough understanding and experience concerning workplace conditions in the insurance industry in Guangdong, China. Initially, the researcher planned to select between 10 and 15 participants who would offer information regarding workplace anxiety and the meaningfulness of the job. Overall, 13 participants who qualified for participation in the study were identified. Out of these, 11 participants took part in the semi-structured interviews. Therefore, the final sample size in this study was 11 participants.

6.3 Data and Measurement

The research entailed the use of primary qualitative data gathered from the insurance industry in Guangdong Province, China. The data were gathered via semi-structured interviews. Workplace anxiety was studied in terms of several work-related psychological stressors described by the participants. The researcher examined perceived meaningfulness in terms of the significance, importance, and personal satisfaction that the participants achieved through their work roles. The interview questions encouraged the respondents to evaluate the connection between anxiety in the workplace and the importance of their work in their working experiences. The answers were recorded in audio format, transcribed, and coded for thematic analysis. This procedure allowed the researcher to notice common patterns related to the research subject.

7.CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



8.RESULT

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative research methodology involves conducting research investigations for the purpose of exploring the various experiences, views, and behaviours of people. The method specifically emphasises acquiring an understanding of the way people perceive and understand certain situations, rather than focusing on numerical analysis. While conducting the research, it is common practice to collect information through interviews and open-ended questions. With the help of this, the researcher gets the option to gain in-depth insights about the thoughts and opinions of the people under study. This particular research method was particularly appropriate for the study of organisational problems that have psychological components.

The researcher selected the qualitative research design to understand the connection between workplace anxiety and the perception of meaningfulness of work by workers in the insurance industry in Guangdong Province. The utilisation of a qualitative research design helped to comprehend the experiences and views held by the workers who were dealing with workplace anxiety as well as to understand their perceptions regarding the meaningfulness of their work. The selected research design allowed the exploration of whether the perception of work as being meaningful permits employees to better manage challenges and stress at work.

8.1 Thematic Coding

Theme 1: Remote Work Environment and Associated Challenges

Remote working has become a prevailing mode of employment in China due to digitalisation and the increasing adoption of flexible work arrangements. The participants mentioned that remote working offered them more independence when

managing both work-related tasks and personal issues. Remote working was also seen as an integral part of modern work life since they could continue with their job functions without commuting. Despite the flexibility and reduction in the need to commute that were offered by the concept of remote working, there were different problems which were recognised by the participants that influenced their working environment and psychological state. Among the common problems mentioned by the participants was communication and collaboration between the employees. It was observed that a lack of face-to-face communication sometimes resulted in miscommunication and a shortage of timely feedback. Due to virtual communication, the potential for conducting impromptu discussions on various issues related to work was not possible. Another problem that occurred was one of balancing the boundaries between work and life issues. According to the participants, it became hard to draw a line between the obligations and personal requirements due to the flexible nature of the job, which allowed performing the duties from any place and at any time. The participants noted that their working hours became extended due to the flexible nature of the job.

Another major concern which was raised by the participants was that of performance and accountability. Due to the shortage of direct interaction with the manager, it was difficult for some participants to comprehend what was expected of them from a performance perspective. Employees also felt pressure to demonstrate their productivity by being available all the time through online platforms. Workplace anxiety became one of the main consequences of these problems. The respondents said that while attempting to manage work tasks remotely, they felt anxious, stressed, and uncertain. Communication problems, lack of social contact, and high performance pressure were often associated with increased anxiety. Some of the participants reported that these factors had adverse effects on their self-confidence and emotional state. Moreover, it was revealed that workplace anxiety affected employees' perception of the meaning and importance of their work. The participants who had higher stress levels found it challenging to maintain positive perceptions of their work and their responsibilities. Stress and anxiety made them feel less satisfied and less emotionally attached to their work. On the other hand, employees who still discovered meaning in their work seemed able to manage workplace difficulties and adapt to working remotely. Their sense of purpose helped them remain motivated amid poor communication, high pressure on performance, and contemporary conditions of work. Therefore, the remote work setting not only brought about practical difficulties but also had an effect on employees' workplace anxiety and perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work.

9.DISCUSSION

The results indicated that workers' views of meaningful work in remote work environments were significantly associated with workplace anxiety. Workers who felt more anxious at work typically complained that they had a more challenging time seeing the worth and importance of their job. This finding corroborates a previous study, which showed that high levels of emotional pressure and reduced perceptions of belongingness among remote employees contributed to lower levels of meaningful work. The results of the study also indicated that the psychological stress that comes with remote working impacts employees' emotional attachment to their jobs and makes them less engaged in the workplace environment (Afota et al., 2024). Moreover, it was evident from the results that employees who perceived their work as meaningful were better equipped to manage the difficulties of their work environment and overcome anxiety. It provided further evidence for the assertion that the experience of having meaningful work is a critical psychological resource that leads to positive outcomes at work. These findings resonate with the outcomes of another previous study, which found that employees who witnessed value and meaning in their work experienced better psychological well-being and engagement irrespective of the pressures at work (Shi et al., 2023). Nonetheless, the current study results are contradictory to those obtained by an existing study, which recommended that the well-being of workers is affected by organisational practices and the nature of the jobs, rather than perceptions of the employees regarding their work (Xie & Yang, 2025). However, in the current study, it was revealed that perceptions of workers regarding the importance and meaning of their duties have relevance to their anxiety incidents at the workplace. Hence, it can be deduced that meaningful work is not only essential for a workplace but is also a contributing factor to psychological issues in remote workplaces.

10.CONCLUSION

The current research examined the connection between workplace anxiety and the meaningfulness of work perceived by employees working in the insurance industry in Guangdong Province with regard to remote work. The results revealed that remote work encounters multiple challenges which affect employees psychologically, such as communication problems, social

isolation, work-life balance issues, and stress associated with regular technological connectedness. These factors were discovered to lead to workplace anxiety and influence employees' perceptions about their work. In addition, the results emphasised the relationship between anxiety at the workplace and the significance of work. Workers who suffered from anxiety at the workplace found it challenging to retain positive views concerning the value of their jobs and the significance of doing them. On the other hand, workers who viewed their work as meaningful seemed to cope well with workplace stress and the challenges of remote work. In conclusion, the research findings suggested that the consequences of remote working extend beyond the concerns of performance and operations. Psychological experiences of employees are vital in explaining the ways in which employees view their work and how they deal with workplace difficulties. Hence, it can be concluded that, apart from technicalities, organisations need to focus more on the issues of employee welfare and reduction of workplace anxieties, among others.

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