



**Exploring post pandemic potential new ways of working experienced by
managers at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa**

By

Shalendra Hemraj Jaganath

931489043

**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Business Administration**

Graduate School of Business and Leadership

College of Law and Management Studies

Supervisor: Prof. Cecile Gerwel Proches

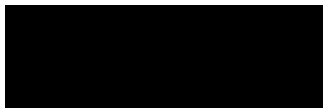
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my wife and two sons, my strength, courage, and inspiration came from you. I am deeply grateful to you for putting up with my absence and handling my stress over the past few years. I couldn't have done this without you.

To my MBA friends, thank you for making this journey enjoyable and fun. I am especially grateful to my lecturers for their skilful guidance.

Finally, I thank the Lord for giving me the opportunity, strength, and energy to complete this MBA journey.

Special thanks go to:

- Tongaat Hulett Sugar, my employer, for allowing me to pursue my studies.
- I am also thankful to the participants who took time from their schedules to assist with my research - it wouldn't have been possible without you.
- My MBA group members for working so well together and achieving excellent results in all our theory projects.
- Prof. Proches for her time and patience in guiding me.

ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed work practises globally, including sugar manufacturing plants. The COVID-19 virus has impacted negatively on both the economy and society, filtering into every part of human culture. The sugar industry in South Africa has been under financial pressure for more than a decade and its long-term sustainability has been under constant threat from cheap world sugar imports. It is within this context that all aspects of management must be analysed and optimised to ensure that organisations are operating as efficiently as possible. A literature survey was initially conducted to understand COVID-19 and its impact on business globally. This study has assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ways of working for managers, at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa. Primary data was collected by interviewing a sample of ten managers. The key objectives were to understand the current ways of working and the strategies that were implemented to deal with the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment post the pandemic; to explore the challenges experienced by managers post the pandemic; to explore any benefits in the ways of working experienced by managers post the pandemic and to provide recommendations to improve ways of working for managers post the pandemic. The study utilised a qualitative method of analysis serving to explore the impact of the pandemic on managers in a sugar manufacturing plant by means of structured interviews with middle managers. The data has demonstrated the negative impacts of the pandemic on the management teams, and the corrective action thereof and any positive benefits of the ways of working with continuation of good operational practices. The findings may be of benefit primarily to managers in the sugar industry, and also to managers in general. The findings could be a stepping stone to a more detailed study.

Keywords: COVID-19, Change management, Sugar industry, Ways of working

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The main objective of this case study was to explore the current ways of working of managers at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa and to discover if there are any positive outcomes from the changes implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The issues of social distancing, increased hygiene management, work isolation, working from home, work-life balance were explored in more detail through a qualitative interview with employees within the organisation.

A brief introduction of the sugar industry in South Africa follows to contextualize the size and significance of the sugar industry in South Africa. This is followed by the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, problem statement, significance of study, aim, research objectives, research questions, research approach, research methodology and study limitations.

1.2 The Size of the South African Sugar Industry

The South African sugar industry, valued at about R25 billion, is highly cost-competitive, consistently ranking among the top 25 out of around 120 sugar-producing countries globally. Spanning the provinces of Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, this industry positively impacts over a million lives and serves as a driver of economic growth and development. It plays a vital role in the national economy and operates primarily in rural areas. Over the years, the industry's economic significance has led to the establishment of entire towns, such as Tongaat in KwaZulu-Natal and Malelane in Mpumalanga, which thrive on sugarcane cultivation and sugar production (SASA, 2024).

The industry creates jobs in underdeveloped and rural regions where economic opportunities are scarce. It also invests in education, training, research, and technological innovation while supporting sustainable resource use and fostering enterprise development. Future opportunities for the sugar industry include expanding its contribution to South Africa through renewable energy initiatives. In KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, approximately 25,000 registered sugarcane growers cultivate sugarcane. The industry processes the crop through 12 sugar mills operated by six milling companies within these regions, producing an average of 2.2 million tons of sugar per season. Around 70% of the sugar produced is sold within the Southern African

Customs Union (SACU), while the rest is exported to markets in Africa, Asia, and the USA. Sugarcane is a vital crop for KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga, accounting for nearly half of the gross farming income from field crops in these provinces (SASA, 2024).

The sugar industry plays a crucial role in creating jobs in rural and deeply rural areas, often in regions with limited economic opportunities. Employment spans both sugarcane fields and sugar mills, requiring a wide range of skills, from farm laborers to agricultural scientists. The industry also supports direct and indirect employment through various ancillary industries in regions where sugarcane is cultivated and processed. It provides approximately 65,000 direct jobs, accounting for over 11% of South Africa's agricultural workforce. Additionally, registered sugarcane growers supply raw cane to the mills, while indirect employment is estimated at around 270,000 jobs. Overall, the sugar industry supports the livelihoods of approximately one million people, or 2% of South Africa's population (SASA, 2024).

1.3 The Size of the Sugar Refinery in Durban, South Africa

The sugar refinery in Durban (Figure 1.1) is a stand-alone refinery that converts raw brown sugar into refined white sugar for one of the three dominant sugar millers in South Africa. It has the capacity to produce about 600,000 tons of white sugar of which majority is sold into South Africa's local market.

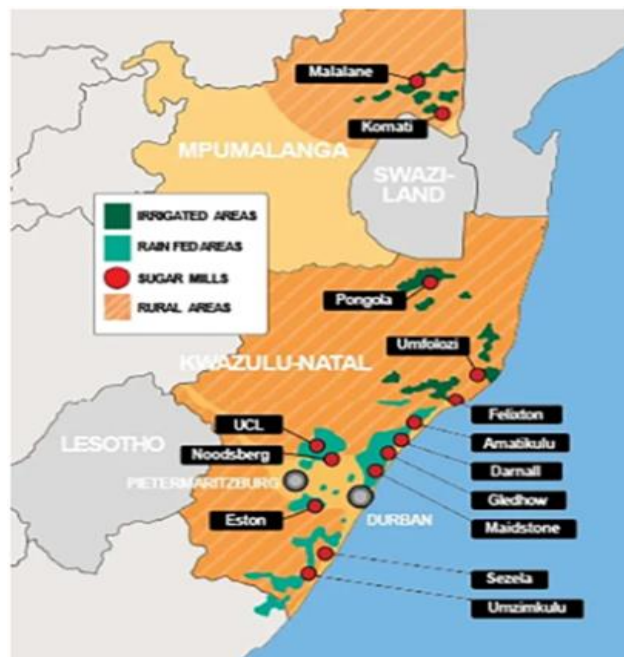


Figure 1.1: Geographic location of sugar mill operations (Source: SASA, 2024)

The sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa produces about 500,000 tons of refined white sugar per annum which is about a third of Southern Africa's sugar consumption. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact of the sugar refinery employees and this study explores the challenges and opportunities that have arisen from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on one of Southern Africa's largest sugar refining and packing plants.

1.4 Source of COVID-19

The source of the pandemic is known to be in a city called Wuhan in China. The virus began infecting people in Wuhan in December 2019, when people fell ill with flu like respiratory symptoms that did not desist within the standard flu recovery time and resulted in infected persons being hospitalised (Kaushik and Guleria, 2020).

The World Health Organisation was slow in its response to the onset of the virus and only declared the pandemic on 11 March 2020 which was three months after the detection of the virus in China. Within the period of three months, international travel from China resulted in international infections which grew exponentially resulting in serious illness and death globally (Kaushik and Guleria, 2020).

With the virus being novel and human beings having no immunity to the virus, it led to a rapid infection rate with varying degrees of symptoms (Chaplin, 2020). The virus is extremely contagious and is spread by droplets of moisture expelled when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The moisture droplets are carriers of the virus and once they enter another host, they begin to multiply resulting in a viral infection (Carmosino, 2020). The elderly and people who have underlying health issues are more susceptible to infection due to their weaker immune system (Maragakis, 2020).

COVID-19 symptoms range from simple flu like symptoms to severe respiratory symptoms where a person cannot breathe properly resulting in oxygen deprivation which can lead to death. Healthy people with mild symptoms normally recover within a few weeks (CDC, 2024).

Many governments were unprepared for a pandemic and found that their health management systems were unable to cope with the high volume of sick people requiring medical attention. In mitigation, governments were forced to implement large scale lockdowns to isolate the virus to those infected and to try and control the spread of the virus. Lockdowns were rules

implemented by the government where people were required to remain within their homes and could not leave for a predetermined period with exception given to obtain essentials like food and medication. This movement was initially controlled to one person per household. All social events were cancelled during lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus (Chaplin, 2020).

1.5 Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the manufacturing sector in South Africa, leading to substantial declines in production and necessitating the adoption of new managerial approaches to navigate the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. The sugar industry, like many others, faced significant disruptions during the pandemic, leading to a notable decline in productivity. The refinery which operates at the final stage of the sugar processing cycle, plays a critical role in transforming raw brown sugar into refined white sugar for consumer use. The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted refinery operations causing a reduction in production capacity.

This downturn compelled the refinery to adapt, by developing NWW to remain agile and resilient. Cornelis and Febriansyah (2023, pp. 40) define New Ways of Working (NWW) as “a flexible form of human resources practices to enhance organizational agility in a highly unpredictable and complex environment through how, when, and where employees work”. NWW is a highly researchable topic due to its transformative impact on workplaces, driven by technological advancements, the post-pandemic shift to flexible work models, and its implications for employee well-being and organizational performance. It offers diverse opportunities for exploration across industries, cultural contexts, and sustainability practices, while raising critical policy and ethical considerations. Additionally, its evolving nature and long-term effects provide a rich ground for academic inquiry into the future of work.

There is a shortage of research focusing on how managers within specific industries, such as sugar refineries in Durban, have adjusted their work practices post pandemic. Understanding these adaptations is crucial for formulating strategies that enhance managerial effectiveness and organizational performance in the post pandemic era.

1.6 Significance of the Study

NWW are effectively the changes in work behaviour by employees post the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the changes could be positive or negative and need to be explored to understand the impact on business performance.

The study will benefit stakeholders, viz. the business organisation and the employees. From an organisational perspective, the business will gain insight into the impact of the changes made to working conditions post the COVID-19 pandemic and will benefit from recommendations made by employees. The employees will gain a sense of inclusion when interviewed and when recommendations are recognised.

1.7 Aim

The aim of this research study is to explore the NWW experienced by managers post-pandemic at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa.

1.8 Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study are to:

- Objective 1: To understand the NWW for managers post-pandemic at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa
- Objective 2: To explore the challenges experienced by managers post-pandemic in their NWW at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa.
- Objective 3: To understand the benefits experienced by managers post-pandemic in their NWW at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa.
- Objective 4: To provide recommendations to improve ways of working for managers post the COVID-19 pandemic at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa

1.9 Research Questions

While developing the problem statement, the following are the key questions that this research aims to answer in the study to be conducted:

- Question 1: What are the NWW of managers post pandemic at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa?
- Question 2: What are the challenges experienced by managers post-pandemic in their NWW at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa?
- Question 3: What are the benefits experienced by managers post-pandemic in their NWW at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa?
- Question 4: Are there any recommendations with regards to improving the NWW?

1.10 Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was selected to explore the impact of the pandemic on 10 participants at the selected organisation. Firstly, a literature review was conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on industry with emphasis on changes implemented in the workplace to cope with the management of the pandemic. The changes implemented became known as NWW which was further explored and helped in developing a theoretical framework to guide the study.

1.11 Research Methodology

Microsoft Teams was selected and used to conduct virtual interviews with the added benefit of software generated transcripts of the interviews for reference. The interview questions were developed to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of COVID-19 and the changes that occurred in the organisation. The interview questions were also designed to match the research questions to ensure that they were relevant and accurate. A qualitative statistician helped with this process. After collecting the interviews, they were typed up using MS Word. The typed data was checked for accuracy and then analyzed using a software program called NVIVO 20. Codes were created, and participants' responses were grouped under these codes.

To better understand the data, techniques like Word Clouds, Cluster Analysis, Tree Maps, and Word Trees were used to find patterns, frequencies, and similarities. This helped identify main themes and subthemes. The main themes were directly related to the interview and research questions, while the subthemes were based on what participants' responses revealed. These findings were double-checked with another round of analysis using the same methods. Finally, hierarchy charts were made to show the size and importance of the themes.

1.12 Limitations

The findings of this study are specific to the refinery and cannot be applied outside this industry or company, as each organization has its own distinct culture, management approach, and strategic priorities. Further to this, differences in how companies operate, the rules they follow, and the markets they serve make it difficult to compare them or apply the same conclusions elsewhere.

1.13 Conclusion

This is the first chapter of the research study, and has introduced the background to the study, its objectives and key questions. The aim of the study is to explore the management and behaviour changes that occurred in the refinery post COVID-19 and to recommend improvements, if any, from the research study outcome. The study is important for the refinery as there are over 300 employees on site who were impacted by the pandemic and there has been no post COVID-19 evaluation of the situation. This study will form the baseline for future studies re the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the refinery in Durban, South Africa. A literature review on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on industry follows in the next Chapter.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

A literature review has been conducted on pre-COVID-19 work practises, the impact of COVID-19 on businesses and emerging work practices post COVID-19 and is presented in this chapter. The emerging work practises post the pandemic relates to the NWW. Further to this, literature reviews were conducted on organisation change models, namely Lewin's change management model and Kotter's 8 step change model to explore change management.

2.2 Pre-COVID-19 Work Practices

Traditional work practices and structures refer to conventional ways in which work has historically been organized and executed within organizations. These practices have dominated various industries and workplaces before modern shifts toward flexible, digital, or remote work models.

Ekstedt (2009), makes reference to the space dimension and time dimension in traditional work practices. The space dimension is defined as the office space and the time dimension is defined as the working day. In traditional work practices, employees generally work in offices or on-site, and their working day is managed by set working hours. Working hours are typically from eight' o clock in the morning to four' o clock in afternoon. The time and space dimensions are linked in that the time regulated at work is spend in the workspace. Stability in traditional organisations is achieved by formalizing rules that regulate the time and space dimension of employees. Some of the key characteristics of traditional work practices and structures are a hierarchical organizational structure and fixed working hours and office-based work (Ekstedt, 2009).

2.2.1 Hierarchy

Hierarchical groups are typically identified by common responsibilities, focus and compensation. Positions in the organisation are important in defining values and expectations of employees. Traditional organisations use top-down management style where there are typically three tiers, namely, strategic level, mid-level management and operational level. There is a clear chain of command and decision making is normally at the top, and authority

flows from the top to the bottom. The lines of responsibility are clearly defined, and each employee understands the reporting structure and their roles and responsibilities (Horton, McClelland and Griffin, 2014).

2.2.2 Fixed work hours

Fixed work hours have been a cornerstone of traditional work practices and structures, often characterized by a standard 40-hour work week in Europe. However, this norm is not universal, with some organizations demanding significantly more from their employees, leading to potential health and family pressures (Blagoev et al., 2018).

While fixed work hours bring predictability, they can also create challenges for maintaining work-life balance, especially when shifts or odd hours interfere with family and personal time (Arlinghaus et al., 2019). These kinds of schedules can negatively impact family relationships and personal health, leading to things like higher substance use and unhealthy eating habits (Hamieh et al., 2022).

2.2.3 Office-based work

Physical presence in the workplace fosters collaboration and knowledge sharing. Appel-Meulenbroek (2010) discusses how co-presence in shared spaces can lead to more frequent and efficient knowledge exchanges, emphasizing the role of workplace facilities in facilitating these interactions. In traditional work practice, employees physically work in offices or buildings where Appel-Meulenbroek (2010) posits that the workplace encourages collaboration and knowledge sharing. Physical presence allows for employees to interact personally and more frequently. Physical presence at workplaces also exposes employees to environmental stressors which can affect productivity (Vischer, 2007).

2.3 Impact of COVID-19 on Work

The outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in rapid changes in business practices where organisations had to adapt quickly to novel government regulations to stop the spread of the virus. Governments also implemented several measures including national lockdowns, border closures and quarantines. Failure to adapt has resulted in the demise of many business globally (Amankwah-Amoah et al, 2021).

2.3.1 Impact of the lockdown during the pandemic

2.3.1.1 Isolation and social distancing

As cases in South African quickly increased, the Government acted fast and announced a strict lockdown on 23 March 2020 to start on 26 March 2020, for three weeks. At that time, there were 554 confirmed cases and no deaths. The lockdown, later extended to 30 April 2020 and was one of the strictest in Africa. Shops, restaurants, and non-essential businesses were closed. People were only allowed to leave their homes for groceries or medical needs. Social gatherings, outdoor activities, sports, and dog-walking were banned, along with the sale of alcohol and cigarettes (Stiegler and Bouchard, 2020).

The middle class largely followed the lockdown rules, staying home and working remotely thanks to internet access. Many families enjoyed spending time together. Food parcels were distributed to the poorest communities, but it wasn't enough for everyone. Despite efforts from various groups and individuals to provide and deliver food, many people still struggled (Stiegler and Bouchard, 2020).

2.3.1.2 Unemployment

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a sharp rise in unemployment worldwide, and South Africa was no different. Studies estimate that between 2.2 and 2.8 million adults in the country lost their jobs between February and April 2020 due to the lockdown and the halt of economic activity. This job loss greatly impacted people's financial resources and is likely one of the reasons why many adults reported higher levels of depression during the early months of the pandemic (Posel, Oyenubi and Kollamparambil, 2021).

The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on jobs was unique because most businesses were temporarily shut down, with the expectation that some would reopen once restrictions were lifted. As a result, some workers technically kept their jobs but couldn't work or earn any income during the lockdown (Posel, Oyenubi and Kollamparambil, 2021).

2.3.1.3 Business financial losses

As South Africa entered the peak of the lockdown, many businesses saw their revenue drop significantly. Non-essential businesses, which were not related to emergency healthcare for COVID-19, were heavily affected as restrictions limited their operations. In April, during the

strictest lockdown period, many businesses reported earning much less than usual. These revenue losses could amount to hundreds of millions, or even billions of Rands. As the African country hardest hit by COVID-19, South Africa's businesses experienced challenges similar to those in other countries. In the United States, for example, over 80% of high-revenue businesses reported major revenue declines due to operational shutdowns and closures during the pandemic (Masuku, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on South African businesses, with many experiencing financial losses. However, the workers who depended on their jobs for income were impacted to a greater extent. During the peak of the lockdown, many businesses had to close, which meant that workers lost their jobs temporarily. Most of these workers were employed in the private sector, which provides a large number of jobs in the country. As a result, many workers and their families, who relied on these incomes, struggled to survive. By April 2020, about one-third of the workers who lost their jobs fell below the poverty line, adding 1 to 1.7 million people to those facing financial difficulties (Masuku, 2021).

2.3.2 Adoption of remote work and digital tools

The rapid changes included social distancing, encouragement of remote work and virtual meetings. Virtual meetings initially made use of free software like Zoom, and slowly transitioned to more formalized corporate software like Microsoft Teams to ensure cybersecurity protocols were met (Koirala et al, 2020).

Remote working refers to an employee performing organisation duties away from the traditional workspace which is typically an office space. Virtual technologies enabling remote working had existed for decades prior to the pandemic and accelerated in popularity during lockdowns as people needed to communicate effectively and efficiently. Potential reasons for the slow uptake of virtual technologies prior to the pandemic could have been due to a lack of trust of employees or the loss of control of employees. The onset of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns and need for social distancing forced the implementation of virtual technologies. Travel bans resulted in a reduction in business travel and the embracing of virtual technologies (Amankwah-Amoah et al, 2021). Traditional office workplaces changed post COVID-19, with the introduction of virtual technology and has influenced work culture going forward (Delfino et al, 2021).

2.4 Emerging Technology Practices Post-COVID-19

2.4.1 Remote and hybrid work models

Vyas (2022) posits that hybrid working models will become the “new normal” post the pandemic for highly educated employees in mid to senior level jobs where jobs do not require the employee to be at work to meet their deliverables. Employees performing manual labour will not fall into this category as not all tasks can be performed remotely. Companies in Hong Kong are redesigning workspaces for hybrid working mainly for white collar employees.

Examples of implementation of hybrid work models are the BP oil company who allow employees to work from home (WFH) for two days a week and England as a country that is allowing white collar employees to work from anywhere. WFH has been embraced globally as there are no constraints on business hours (Vyas, 2022).

2.4.2 Cloud computing

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely shaken investor confidence and disrupted our daily lives, making technology a crucial lifeline. One proposed solution is the adoption of remote work for employees. However, many companies are struggling to adapt to this new challenge, while others find it hard to navigate the shift entirely. For instance, businesses that had already invested in cloud computing infrastructure before the pandemic are now operating effectively. Cloud computing enables seamless collaboration and secure communication among remote employees. On the other hand, organizations without such infrastructure face significant difficulties in maintaining smooth operations. By addressing challenges like communication, interaction, and task tracking, cloud computing plays a vital role in ensuring efficient and secure remote work (Alhomdy et al, 2021).

2.4.3 Intelligent automation post COVID-19

“Intelligent automation can be explained as the combination of automation through robotics and artificial intelligence which works together and brings about a digital transformation in the business process automation” (Kumar et al, 2021, p. 204). Companies around the world were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulted in the closure of many production businesses. A global crisis emerged from the unpredicted impact on peoples lives and brought about uncertainty in health and wealth having impacted on about 3.3 billion peoples’

employment globally. Companies were forced to reduce the workforce due poor financial performance. A lack of supply of goods led to high prices and industry was forced to look at intelligent automation (Kumar et al, 2021).

2.4.4 Increased use of digital technology

Lund et al (2020) posits that work not requiring personal contact or operational work with machinery has a high potential for working from home. Working from home is typically using a computer and collaborative software like Microsoft Exchange for emails and Microsoft Teams for calls and meetings. Figure 2.1 below illustrates a survey taken in the United States in 2021 indicating various sectors working from home. Countries which have a large percentage of the workforce working manually in agriculture have lower percentage of the workforce working remotely (Lund et al, 2020).

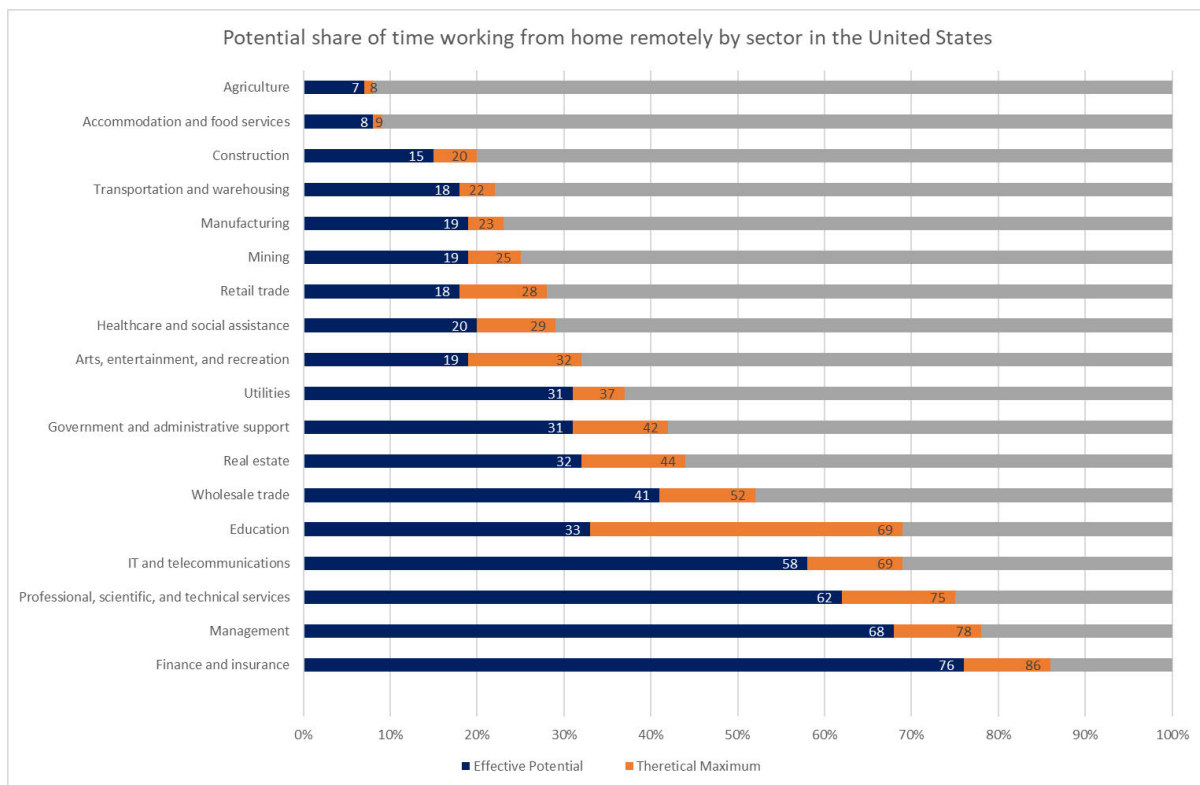


Figure 2.1: Potential share of time working from home remotely by sector in the United States (Source: Adapted from Lund et al., 2021, p. 5)

2.5 Emerging Personnel Practices Post-COVID-19

2.5.1 Use of masks

Governments worldwide have issued guidelines and recommendations on the use of masks, with many making it a legal requirement to wear masks in public spaces to curb the spread of the virus. When adherence to mask-wearing is widespread, it proves to be one of the most effective measures in preventing viral transmission. This preventive measure plays a crucial role in reducing the spread of the disease across large populations. Researchers have used lasers to study how masks reduce disease spread by blocking saliva droplets released when people talk or cough. Studies show that asymptomatic individuals, who don't know they're infected, contribute to about half of COVID-19 transmissions. Wearing masks in public helps prevent the spread of infectious droplets. The World Health Organisation recommends medical or cloth masks for the public and N95 masks, which filter 95% of particles, for healthcare workers. Cloth masks can filter droplets with 50-100% of the efficiency of surgical masks (Rab et al, 2020).

2.5.2 Social distancing

Social distancing means keeping at least a one-meter distance between people and avoiding crowded places where close contact is likely. It has been proven to reduce COVID-19 infections and transmission. To limit social interactions and slow the spread of the virus, many countries have implemented measures like closing shops, schools, and restaurants, banning large gatherings and public events, and encouraging remote work. Studies and data have shown that social distancing measures, such as restricting mass gatherings, closing schools and workplaces, and limiting movement, are linked to fewer COVID-19 cases and lower death rates (Sewpaul et al, 2021).

2.5.3 Hand washing

COVID-19 primarily spreads through respiratory droplets and contact, therefore the World Health Organization has advised that regular washing of hands with soap under running water for at least 20 seconds will help prevent transmission of the virus (Amuakwa-Mensah et al, 2021). Changing behavior has played a key role in slowing the spread of COVID-19. In South Africa, where infection rates are high, there is a need for research on the protective behaviors of young people, who have lower infection rates but can still carry and spread the virus.

Handwashing continues to be the most effective way to reduce transmission (Wel-Billings, 2024).

2.5.4 Vaccination

In 2021, a lively debate emerged over the issue of mandatory vaccines. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, ethicists, scientists, and legal experts have strongly advocated for compulsory vaccination particularly as new variants emerged and a significant portion of the global population remained unvaccinated. Many scientists and healthcare professionals have raised concerns that vaccine hesitancy and low vaccination rates could contribute to the development of new variants resistant to current vaccines (Moodley, 2022).

A key requirement for introducing vaccine mandates in high-risk settings is ensuring a sufficient, free, and accessible supply of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines. This condition has been fulfilled in South Africa, despite global disparities in vaccine distribution. Although vaccination centers are widely spread across the country and supported by temporary pop-up sites, there is still potential to enhance accessibility further through primary healthcare providers and hospitals (Moodley, 2022).

2.5.5 Work life balance and mental health

Employees working from home have more flexibility with their time and can balance their work responsibilities with family responsibilities which results in a happier and more productive employee. Several organisations have maintained working from home post the pandemic because of improved productivity realized from happier employees (Vyas, 2022).

Several governments are now implementing laws to protect employees work from home. An example of this is the “right to disconnect” law where employees rights are protected by allowing them to not respond to work calls and queries outside of working hours (Broom, 2021). Work from home requires discipline and is difficult for some employees to manage and therefore necessitates the regulation of working hours. Work from home also requires employees to take regular breaks in promotion of healthy work practices (Vyas, 2022)

2.5.6 Cultural and organizational shifts

There has been a shift in hygiene culture since the pandemic where organisations are now

required to have healthy workspaces where disease transmission is limited. Vyas (2022) posits that most organisations prefer hybrid working models versus solely working from home and this requires that workplaces reorganize its space. Wellbeing programs are now the norm in many organisations promoting hygiene and healthy work practices. Other programs include “trust and outcome based working culture” which promotes trust within teams (Vyas, 2022, p. 162).

2.5.7 Employee assistance programs

Employee assistance programs are initiatives offered by employers or service providers, designed to address employees' well-being, particularly when personal issues may be affecting their work performance. Globally, the wellness and well-being industry has grown into a trillion-dollar sector, encompassing a wide range of areas from physical and mental health to spiritual wellness. The terms "wellness" and "well-being," are often used interchangeably and are described as an integrated approach to personal development aimed at maximizing an individual's potential within their specific environment. Commercially, the advantages of well-being at an individual level were widely promoted by medical aid schemes and insurance companies. Initiatives and benefits tied to physical wellness and lifestyle habits were integrated into reward and loyalty programs. These programs incentivize participants by offering rewards for consistently making healthy lifestyle choices over time. Wellness is often closely linked to physical health, focusing on the adoption of positive health habits and lifestyle decisions, with strong foundations in medical science. Within this context, mental wellness is primarily viewed as a reactive strategy to address traumatic experiences, rather than a proactive approach aimed at fostering human growth and flourishing (Veldsman and Van Aarde, 2021).

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) can be distinguished from traditional mental health programs by incorporating specific elements, such as (Veldsman and Van Aarde, 2021):

- **Work Focus:** The primary goal of an EAP is to help employees maintain productivity and effectiveness in the workplace.
- **Manager training and involvement:** Since managers are often in a position to observe and identify well-being challenges among employees, EAPs should include training for managers to ensure they can respond promptly and effectively to such issues.
- **Linkages and referrals:** EAPs should educate employees about available support

resources, both within the organization and in the wider community, and provide guidance on how to access these services.

- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** Trust is a cornerstone of EAPs, requiring that all cases be handled with strict confidentiality. Even if the employer funds the program, they are not entitled to details about the nature of the EAP interventions.
- **Short-Term Focus:** EAPs are designed to offer short-term support and are not intended for long-term or ongoing interventions.

2.6 Theoretical Frameworks

Organisational change models illustrate complex systems that are used as guidelines for change management. The models assist in understanding the components involved in the change process and also illustrate that change management is systematic and planned (Werner, 2017).

2.6.1 Lewin's Change Management Model

Kurt Lewin developed a simple model for change management using three steps, namely, Unfreeze, Movement and Re-freezing and is seen as the father of change management (Cummings et al, 2016). The model is illustrated as per Figure 2.2 below:



Figure 2.2: Kurt Lewin's three stage model of organisational change and innovation (Adapted from Werne, 2017)

2.6.1.1 Unfreezing

When the need for change is recognised, organisations need to unfreeze to order to implement change. The reasons for the change will vary and result in the organisation moving from its current position to a new position. The process will impact on employees and leader forcing a change in position (Hussain et al, 2018). Lewin believed that people's behavior stays steady because of a balance between forces pushing for change and forces holding things back. He said this balance needs to be shaken up, or "unfrozen," to let go of old habits and successfully adopt new ones (Burnes, 2004). Schein (1996) posits that if people don't feel safe, they will

ignore or resist new information, avoiding any fear of failure or harm, which stops them from changing. Essentially people need to feel safe from loss or embarrassment before they can accept new ideas and change their old ways (Schein,1996).

2.6.1.2 Movement

In Lewin's model change is movement to a desired position by means of a systemic approach and strategic plans (Werner, 2017). Planned change is challenging due to the complexity of the forces involved. Instead, it's better to consider all the influencing factors and explore different options through a process of trial and error to find the best approach (Burnes, 2004).

2.6.1.3 Re-freezing

Once changes have been implemented these changes need to be cemented and reinforced to create stability in the organisation. Any digression needs to be quickly countered to prevent instability (Werner, 2017). Lewin believed that successful change requires group effort, as individual behavior changes won't last unless group norms and routines also shift. In organizations, this means "refreezing" often involves adjusting the culture, norms, policies, and practices (Schein,1996).

2.6.2 Kotter's 8-Step Change Model

Kotter's 8-Step Change Model focuses on communication, quick wins, and building a culture that supports new practices like hybrid work. The model is a systematic approach to change management and is generally illustrated in eight steps as outlined below (Werner, 2017). Kotter's model is widely used and implemented in business and is highly sort after by leaders who plan on embarking on organisation change. Kotter's model is generally driven from a high level, however it is just as effective when used across multiple layers in the organisation (Pollack and Pollack, 2015).

Kotter's eight stage process of creating a major change can be summarised as follows (Kotter, 1996):

- 1 - Establishing a sense of urgency
- 2 - Creating the guiding coalition
- 3 - Develop a vision and strategy

- 4 - Communicating the change vision
- 5 - Empowering broad-based change
- 6 - Generating short-term wins
- 7 - Consolidating gains and producing more change
- 8 - Anchoring new approaches in the culture

Establishing a sense of urgency is critical to gain support for change and a failure to create a sense of urgency will negatively impact on the rate of success (Kotter, 1996). Effort is required to motivate an organisation to implement changes, as time and effort is required on the part of the personnel (Ansari and Bell, 2009).

Creating the guiding coalition involves finding the right people to lead change (Werner, 2017). The right people need to be empowered for the task at hand and this generally starts with for example, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and their direct reports (Pollack and Pollack, 2015). The guiding coalition can also be stepped down to middle management and technical teams as the situation requires as there is no “one fit for all” solution (Pollack and Pollack, 2015).

Development of a vision and strategy gives the organisation direction and an end goal. The vision needs to be attractive to engage the organisation in the need for change (Werner, 2017). Ansari and Bell (2009) posit that communication of the vision and strategy is one of the two most important steps in Kotter’s process. Managers generally underestimate the importance of communication of the vision and strategy which can result in failure to implement changes (Kotter, 1996). Organisations can improve communication by publishing company news articles, implementing road shows and by implementing coaching workshops to drive the vision and strategy (Pollack and Pollack, 2015).

Kotter (1996) guides organisations to eliminate barriers to change by reorganizing structures and systems to facilitate the empowering of broad-based change. Coaching forms an integral part of change management and is evident in literature (Lubit, 2001).

Generation of short-term wins are very important to illustrate that the change management vision is possible and to maintain momentum towards implementing major changes. Major changes can be difficult to attain and can take a long period of time to attain, thus making short

term wins crucial in maintaining support and drive for the change management team (Pollack and Pollack, 2015). The short term wins need to be clearly communicated indicating relevance to the vision and must be unmistakably successful (Kotter, 1996).

Consolidating gains and producing more change can be achieved by building on wins and used to promote more positive changes. Anchoring new approaches in the culture can be achieved by reinforcing new positive behaviour such that it become habit (Werner, 2017).

2.7 Conclusion

The literature survey has explored pre-COVID-19 work practices where traditional work practices such as working regular hours and working in regular offices was the norm. The changes and impact brought about by the pandemic was researched, followed by the emerging work practises being explored. Further to this, research into organisational change has created a foundation for the understanding of the adaptation that occurred. The next chapter will discuss the research methodology used for this research study.

CHAPTER 3 - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

A researcher must create a research plan grounded in a strong theoretical framework and draw conclusions based on a comprehensive analysis of the gathered data. This chapter presents the research plan or methodology employed in this study. It discusses three research methodologies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, with a focus on the qualitative method used in this research and its relevance to the study. Additionally, the chapter outlines various sampling techniques, data collection methods, participants, locations, ethical considerations, and strategies for ensuring data quality. It also details the data analysis process undertaken to produce reliable and meaningful results (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

3.2 Research Paradigms

Research is founded on beliefs about the world and the potential discoveries it can yield (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). It is the process through which researchers uncover the truth, with each researcher bringing a unique perspective to what that truth may be. There are four important worldviews or beliefs for research, namely Post positivism, Constructivism, Transformative and Pragmatism (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

Postpositivist assumptions are closely linked to traditional research, particularly quantitative methods, and are often referred to as the scientific method or empirical science. This perspective, known as post-positivism, emerged after positivism, challenging the idea of absolute truth in knowledge. It acknowledges that we cannot be entirely certain about knowledge claims, especially when studying human behavior and actions (Phillips and Burbules, 2000).

Constructivism, often linked with interpretivism, is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on how people understand their world through their own experiences and perspectives. Social constructivists explore these personal views, which are shaped by interactions with others, cultural norms, and history, using open-ended questions to gather diverse and detailed responses. Researchers also consider how their own background influences their understanding and aim to build new ideas or patterns based on what participants share, rather than relying on

pre-existing theories (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

The transformative worldview emphasizes that research should be connected to politics and aim to address social oppression, promoting reform that benefits participants, institutions, and the researcher (Mertens, 2010). It focuses on issues like empowerment, inequality, and oppression, encouraging collaboration with participants in designing and conducting the study to avoid marginalization. Transformative research amplifies the voices of marginalized groups, integrates perspectives like feminist or critical theory, and seeks to drive meaningful social change (Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

Pragmatism as a worldview focuses on actions, outcomes, and practical solutions rather than past conditions, prioritizing what works in addressing problems (Patton, 1990). Researchers emphasize understanding the research problem and apply multiple methods as needed, making it a key foundation for mixed-methods studies (Morgan, 2007). Pragmatism encourages a flexible, problem-centered approach to research, using diverse strategies to gain insights into social science issues.

This study used a constructivist approach to understand how employees perceived the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the refinery and their ideas for improving productivity. This method encouraged open conversations and included views from the research participants.

3.3 Research Methodology

Sekaran and Bougie (2016) posit that qualitative research is not easy in that there are fewer established rules and guidelines for analysing data when compared to quantitative research. Research methodology is the way researchers gather, process, and analyze information about a topic. The main goal of research methodology is to answer the research questions. There are three main types of research methods: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Qualitative research uses words to describe findings, while quantitative research uses numbers. Mixed methods combine both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This study used a qualitative research method to achieve its goals (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

3.4 Study Site

The study site was determined to be the sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa where brown

sugar is refined into white sugar. The site has over 300 employees ranging from operators, supervisors, middle managers to senior managers. For the purposes of this study, the middle managers were selected and interviewed.

3.5 Sampling and Population

Sekaran and Bougie (2016) posit that sampling is the process of choosing the correct participants for research from a population. Sampling is beneficial for large populations and provides a practical and economical means of data collection from a smaller representation of that population. The population in this study were middle managers at the sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa. Middle managers were selected because they have offices based on site as compared to executive managers who work remotely and at the head office.

3.6 Sample Frame and Sampling Method

Sekaran and Bougie (2016) posit that the sample frame represents all the elements in the population from which the sample is selected. In this study, the sample frame is ten middle managers at the sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa.

Kothari (2004) posits that census sampling is the collection of information from every item in a population. Since everything is included, there is no randomness, and the results are very accurate. In this study, census sampling was used for middle managers of the refinery in Durban, South Africa. All ten middle managers were approached for permission to participate in the study and all ten middle managers agreed to participate. This simplified the process of sampling and there was no need for a complex sample design.

3.7 Data Collection Instrument

The instruments commonly used for qualitative studies are interviews, observations and questionnaires (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). In this study, the data collection was undertaken by interviewing research participants.

3.7.1 Interviews

There are three main types of interviews, namely unstructured, semi-structured and structured

interviews. Unstructured interviews are conducted without a predefined list of questions for the participants. This approach is mainly used as a tool for data collection to identify factors that require further exploration (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

The collection of information in a structured manner during personal interviews is called a structured interview. In structured interviews, the interviewer uses a fixed set of questions and follows a standard way of recording answers. The interviewer maintains consistency in asking the questions in a specific order and format to all research participants (Kothari, 2004).

“The semi-structured interview is an exploratory interview used most often in the social sciences for qualitative research purposes or to gather clinical data. While it generally follows a guide or protocol that is devised prior to the interview and is focused on a core topic to provide a general structure, the semi-structured interview also allows for discovery, with space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds” (Magaldi and Berler, 2020, p. 4825).

This study followed the semi-structured interview approach where the initial questions were defined, however the participants were allowed to answer freely with the researcher engaging with further exploratory questions.

3.8 Construction of the Instrument

A set of questions was developed for the interview based on the four research objectives. The first five questions were developed as ice-breaker questions and to obtain basic demographic details such as name, age, role in the organisation, length of service and a brief description of their role in the organisation. The balance of the questions were exploratory questions focusing on the four research objectives (see Appendix 4 for Interview Schedule). The interviews were conducted with all ten middle managers.

3.9 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted from September to October 2024. The interviews took about one hour per interview thus totalling about ten hours of interview time. The interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams to allow for automatic generation of transcripts. The transcripts had to be proofread after the interview to correct inaccuracies which resulted from rare instances of poor transcription. The context of the conversations was not changed during the

process of correcting inaccuracies in transcription.

3.10 Data Analysis

“In Vivo” coding was used in this study and is a method where researchers use the exact words or phrases from participants as codes. This approach is especially helpful for beginners in qualitative research, as it allows the data to speak for itself. To distinguish these codes, researchers enclose them in quotation marks. They focus on words or phrases that stand out, such as impactful nouns, action-oriented verbs, evocative language, or metaphors (Mezmir, 2020). There are three main steps for qualitative data analysis and these are Data Reduction, Data Display and the Drawing of Conclusions (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

3.10.1 Data reduction analysis

Data Reduction Analysis has two broad categories, namely content and thematic. In **content analysis**, researchers look at how often certain words or phrases show up in a text to find important terms or repeated ideas. They don’t just count words, they also pay attention to related details like similar words (synonyms), where the words appear in the text, and the words or phrases around them. Content analysis is useful because it’s quick and reliable. With the right software, large amounts of text can be scanned, and keywords counted in no time. Since it uses the original data, there’s little room for personal judgment, making the results trustworthy. However, one downside is that it usually doesn’t take context into account, which can make the findings less detailed or meaningful (Namey et al., 2008).

Thematic analysis is a more detailed method than just counting words. It looks for both clear and hidden ideas in the text. Researchers create codes for these ideas and use them to label parts of the data, making it easier to study later. This can include checking how often themes show up, which codes appear together, or mapping out how codes are connected. Since researchers have to interpret the text to create and apply codes, their views might differ, making it harder to ensure consistency (Namey et al., 2008).

In a data-driven approach, the researcher studies the data carefully, reading it multiple times to find keywords, patterns, or ideas to guide the analysis. In a theory-driven approach, the researcher starts with specific ideas or hypotheses to test. Although they might still review the data closely, the categories for analysis are decided ahead of time, without using the data to shape them (Namey et al., 2008).

Some of the analytical techniques used are Structural Coding, Frequencies and Co-occurrence which are explored as follows.

3.10.1.1 Structural Coding

An effective way to organize large sets of qualitative data is by using "structural" codes. These codes are based on specific questions instead of general themes, and this approach works well for data collected through structured or semi-structured interviews or focus groups, where the same questions are asked across different sessions. Each question and its follow-up prompts are given a code, which is then linked to the question and the related answers in the data. Groups of similar questions about the same topic can also be combined under one structural code (Namey et al., 2008).

Charmaz (2008) posits that collecting, analyzing, and generating theories from data are closely linked, requiring ongoing interaction between the researcher and the data. A key part of this process is using clear and consistent methods for coding the data, which ensures the research is reliable and valid. This focus on careful data coding has been a cornerstone of qualitative research since Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized that collecting, coding, and analyzing data together is essential for creating theories.

3.10.1.2 Frequencies

Counting how often certain words or phrases appear in a dataset is a useful first step in identifying recurring ideas within a large text. This method provides insight into how common specific themes are among participants. Simple keyword searches or word counts enable quick comparisons of language used by different subgroups within the analysis and can assist in developing a thematic codebook. Therefore, depending on what is being counted, frequency analysis can be part of either content or thematic analyses (Namey et al., 2008).

3.10.1.3 Co-occurrence

When analyzing qualitative data, "code co-occurrence" happens when two or more labels (codes) are assigned to the same part of a participant's response. This technique helps researchers identify connections between different themes or ideas within the data (Guest and McLellan, 2003). Analyzing how often different codes appear together in a dataset can reveal

important patterns and relationships that simple counts might miss. By looking at where codes overlap, researchers can find connections between themes, participants, or events, leading to a deeper understanding of the data (LeCompte, 1999).

3.10.2 Data display

Data display is the organizing and presenting of data to identify patterns and draw conclusions. This involves:

- Carefully reading and rereading data transcriptions
- Making notes in the margins
- Highlighting important passages or themes as representations of particular concepts

The goal is to transform raw data into a structured framework that highlights key concepts. While many researchers prefer using paper for this process, some find it more convenient to work on a computer screen. There are software programs, such as NUD*IST or NVivo, that allow one to create diagrams and write research memos directly on the screen (Mezmir, 2020).

Data displays are organized, condensed representations of information that help researchers draw conclusions and take action. They can take various forms, including extended text, matrices, graphs, charts, and networks. For example, extended text provides detailed narratives or descriptions. Matrices organize data into rows and columns, while graphs and charts offer visual representations like bar graphs, pie charts, or line graphs. Networks are diagrams showing relationships between different elements. These displays can be basic, such as time-ordered matrices, or more complex, like meta-matrices that respect chronology. In complex analyses with many interrelated variables, advanced displays like causal networks are useful. Regardless of the type, writing narratives to describe each display is a necessary part of the analysis (Williamson and Long, 2005).

The stories created alongside the data displays show how the researcher's ideas about the data change over time. These displays are important because they clearly show the study's findings in a visual way. They have many uses which help organize, summarize, and analyze the data, and they also make the analysis process easy to understand for both researchers and readers (Williamson and Long, 2005).

3.10.3 Drawing of conclusions

Qualitative content analysis is a flexible method that allows researchers to use either inductive or deductive approaches, depending on the study's goals. The main difference between these approaches lies in how initial codes or categories are developed. The **inductive approach** method is suitable when there is limited or fragmented prior knowledge about the phenomenon being studied. In this approach, codes, categories, or themes are directly derived from the data itself. The **deductive approach** method is appropriate when there is existing theory, research, or literature related to the topic. In this approach, researchers start with predefined codes or categories based on prior knowledge and apply them to the data. By choosing the approach that aligns with the study's purpose and existing knowledge, researchers can effectively analyze qualitative data (Mezmir, 2020).

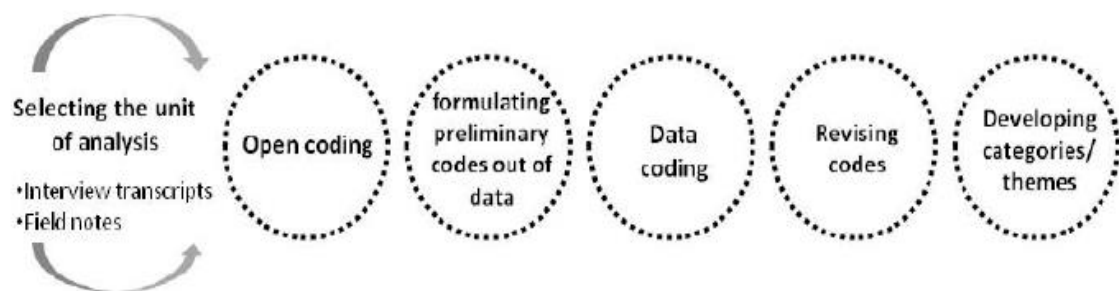


Figure 3.1: Procedure used for inductive approach to qualitative analysis (Source: Mezmir, 2020)

Mezmir (2020, p. 24) posits that inductive category development consists of:

- The research questions
- The determination of category and levels of abstraction
- The development of inductive categories from material
- The revision of categories
- The final working through text, and
- The interpretation of results.

3.11 Credibility and Trustworthiness

Shenton (2004) posits that there are four main components that ensure trustworthiness namely, Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Conformability.

3.11.1 Credibility

One of the key criteria for researchers is validity and to ensure that the study analyses what is actually intended. The findings need to relate to the reality of the situation as credibility is one of the most important criteria in ensuring trustworthiness. Well established approaches, including the questioning techniques used during data collection and the methods of data analysis, should, whenever feasible, be based on those successfully applied in similar past projects. The study was conducted at the researcher's organisation where the organisational culture was known, and a sense of trust existed between the researcher and the participants (Shenton, 2004).

All individuals that were approached were given the opportunity to decline participation, ensuring that data collection involves only those who were genuinely willing and able to contribute freely. The participants were encouraged to speak openly from the start of each session, with the researcher focusing on building rapport early on and clarifying that there are no "correct" answers to the questions. It was also explicitly stated that participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to provide a reason. These points were covered in the Informed Consent Form (Appendix 3) template used by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

3.11.2 Transferability

Transferability for this case study refers to the ability to use the findings of this case study for other case studies. The inference of this that the results of this case study can be applied to a larger population. The boundaries of the research study need to be well understood before any attempts of transference are made (Shenton, 2004).

Shenton (2004, p. 70) posits some of the parameters to consider are:

- a) the number of organisations taking part in the study and where they are based
- b) any restrictions in the type of people who contributed data

- c) the number of participants involved in the fieldwork
- d) the data collection methods that were employed
- e) the number and length of the data collection sessions
- f) the time period over which the data was collected.

3.11.3 Dependability

To address reliability, the positivist uses methods to demonstrate that repeating the study under the same conditions, with the same methods and participants, would yield similar results. To better address the issue of dependability, the study's processes should be thoroughly detailed, allowing future researchers to replicate the work, even if identical results are not guaranteed (Shenton, 2004).

3.11.4 Confirmability

Ensuring true objectivity is challenging because tests and questionnaires, being human-designed, inevitably reflect the researcher's biases. In qualitative research, the concept of confirmability addresses this concern. Efforts should be made to ensure that the findings stem from the informants' experiences and perspectives, rather than being influenced by the researcher's preferences or characteristics (Shenton, 2004).

3.12 Ethical Considerations

Creswell (2014) emphasizes the importance of researchers proactively addressing ethical issues to safeguard participants, build trust, uphold research integrity, and prevent the misuse of information that could negatively impact their organization. In light of this, the research study was approved by the sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa by means of a signed official Gatekeepers Letter (See Appendix 2). Further to this, the proposed case study was reviewed by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and subsequently approved (See Appendix 1). The Informed Consent Form (ICF) informed potential participants of their rights, especially not to participate if they did not wish to or to withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable in any way (See Appendix 3).

3.13 Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive discussion of the qualitative research methodology employed in the study. It covered details about the population, sample, sampling techniques, data collection instruments, data analysis methods, data quality assurance measures, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 will focus on presenting the findings derived from interviews conducted with middle managers at the sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa.

CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings from the research study, which evaluated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Team for ease of transcription services. The data was then analysed and the results will be presented in this chapter.

4.2 Demographic Information

Census sampling was used for selection of study participants and all ten middle managers

Table 4. 1: Profiles of the research participants

Participants	Department	Role	Gender
R1	Distribution	Supply Chain Manager	Male
R2	Distribution	Inventory Manager	Male
R3	Export	Logistics Manager - Export Market	Female
R4	Production	Liquid Speciality Manager	Female
R5	Production	Production Manager - Cape Sweeteners	Female
R6	Production	Production Manager - Refinery	Male
R7	Marketing	Marketing Manager	Female
R8	Production	Projects Manager	Male
R9	Distribution	Logistics Manager - Local Market	Female
R10	Marketing	Brand Manager	Female

4.3 Themes

For ease of reference, the analysis was aligned to the 4 key themes.

- Role's evolvement and related strategies
- Challenges and mitigation
- Benefits and positive work environment
- Recommendations and future planning

4.3.1.1 Evolvement of managers' roles in response to COVID-19

The results imply that there was an evolvement of managerial thereof. This was informed by the following.

4.3.1.1.1 *Remote and hybrid working arrangements*

Remoted and hybrid work evolvement was the most highly ranked factor. This was informed by the following.

4.3.1.1.1.1 *Adaptation to remote and hybrid*

The pandemic altered the traditional work culture, shifting from an on-site schedule of 8 AM to 4:30 PM to home working. Employees had mixed feelings as some viewed remote work as a benefit, while others felt increased pressure. Hence, the organisation adapted to remote work and management styles evolved, fostering an understanding of the need to balance remote work with in-person interactions for necessary tasks.

And with work being very accommodating as well, we were able to work remotely. (R7)

4.3.1.1.1.2 *Flexible hours*

Relating to the above, flexibility in hours became more pronounced, allowing staff to work from home and adapt their schedules. The adoption of new technologies also facilitated this transition, making daily tasks easier and more efficient. Working from home led to increased productive hours with employees starting earlier and finishing later than normal office hours.

..... with them working from home, there is increased productivity in a sense that you see them starting work early. They tend to start earlier than the normal people that that come in to the office. By 7:00am, you can see they are already active on their laptops, and they tend to finish late as well. (R9)

4.3.1.1.1.3 *Change in training methods*

Trainings also underwent a significant change as many in-person sessions shifted to online platforms. The transition included moving from one-on-one interactions to pre-recorded sessions and online learning. While this required some adjustment, it offered valuable opportunities for engagement with increased participation despite geographical location.

Another example is the change in training. Many trainings that were previously held in person shifted to online platforms, with more online learning and one-on-one sessions via Teams. (R4)

4.3.1.1.2 Employee support

Results implied that managers had become more supportive. This was based on responses which were themes accordingly as below.

4.3.1.1.2.1 Empathy and care

Managers began displaying more empathy and care towards their employees during the pandemic in the following ways.

4.3.1.1.2.1.1 Care and wellbeing

The importance of wellness initiatives and regular check-ins was depicted, and managers acknowledged that personal well-being affected work performance. Regular communication, particularly with remote teams was essential for ensuring that employees were coping and not feeling isolated.

Also, I think that wellness initiatives as well I felt myself always checking like in the morning when I give my team a call, checking if they were fine, if their family members were fine, because all of this, I felt had an impact on the way my employees worked. (R3)

4.3.1.1.2.1.2 Struggles

The COVID-19 had a significant impact with many people facing struggles. It became important to recognise when someone was not doing well and find ways to assist those employees in need.

So, yes, there are a lot of things that COVID-19 did that impacted on us. People are all struggling financially and people are coming into the office and you can actually see when someone is not doing well. (R9)

4.3.1.1.2.2 *Autonomy and trust*

During remote working, one had to practice more trust toward employees and allow them autonomy. The shift from traditional to remote working during COVID-19 required greater trust in employees to complete tasks without direct supervision. Managers had to adjust from controlling visible work to trusting their teams. Building closer relationships with employees also fostered trust, enabling more open communication about challenges.

So, there was a lot of trust that you needed to put into your team. To say or to acknowledge that they are doing the work. For me, that was the biggest adjustment from traditional management versus post COVID-19. (R3)

4.3.1.1.2.3 *Physical and resources*

Resource support was given to employees as well as physical support on site as well. Some managers ensured that employees were online and fully equipped with necessary resources and functional tools such as laptops and data to work effectively.

You need to make sure that as a manager, you check that everybody is online and that everyone is fully equipped with the necessary resources that they need for working well. Make sure that the laptop they are working on is in order. Make sure that we got enough data We have a whole lot of things that we should have. (R9)

4.3.1.1.2.4 *Tolerance and leniency*

Some managers were also more lenient and tolerant with employees. The company policy required employees to be present by 8:00 AM, managers became more accommodating, allowing for real-world issues like traffic delays or leaving early to pick up a child from school. During remote work, employees and their family members were at home. Hence, tolerance was necessary disturbances from others in the home environment during remote working.

We were working from home, so we had to be tolerant of that. I think I felt that as well that we had to be tolerant of that workspace that they have now generated for themselves or developed for themselves, and also having disturbances from other people within. (R3)

4.3.1.1.3 *Communication*

Communication methods had to evolve to virtual due to the transition.

4.3.1.1.3.1 Traditional communication disruption

Traditional communication was disrupted during the pandemic which affected interactions. Some managers noted that post-pandemic, the shift to online work did not suit all aspects of work such as the marketing function, which in turn impacted on efficiency and relationships with external stakeholders. Furthermore, the traditional work structure included daily physical meetings and reviews, which shifted to virtual methods thereby changing the dynamics of team interactions. This required much adaptation:

Whether it was picking up a telephone call or making the call, you know, I do not know whether I am being clear enough, but it was the communication aspect that was, I felt that was disrupted. (R3)

We were not able to meet face to face and it did hamper some of the deadlines initially, because of not being able to meet consistently like we used to before the pandemic. But we have had to adapt to that. (R7)

4.3.1.1.3.2 Digital

Communication shifted to reliance on emails, calls, and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp to keep everyone informed about updates requiring an adaptation to a more digital communication system.

Our department controls mainly queries on shipment documents, turnaround times and I think we had to adapt more in terms of utilizing a more digital communication system like conference calls. (R3)

4.3.1.1.4 *Environment dependant*

However, the evolution process was also dependant on the type of work and environment. For on-site workers, there was not much evolution for managers and they still had to manage staff on site.

4.3.1.1.4.1 *Physical only*

Although some departments transitioned to a hybrid model, departments such as supply chain and operations required everyone on-site daily. Remote work was impractical in the 24-hour production environment, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Operational staff had to be present at work, with remote working only possible for those who tested positive for COVID-19 and needed to quarantine.

Because we operate in an environment that manages 24-hour production, remote working was not practical, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. It wasn't feasible for us to engage in remote work. When other departments transitioned back to normal work structures, remote working didn't apply to us. And it still doesn't really apply. (R4)

4.3.1.1.4.2 *Customers and stakeholders*

In some departments, physical and/or flexible hours were dictated by customers and stakeholder engagements, with some resulting in regular working arrangements. However, many individuals engaged in remote work, which altered collaboration methods.

Regarding flexible hours, much of our day is dictated by customers and engagements with various stakeholders, so we are often confined to regular working arrangements. However, I can say that many of the people we engage with did practice remote working, which led to some changes in how we collaborated. (R4)

4.3.1.2 Strategies implemented to ensure effective working during the pandemic

This primary subtheme outlined the strategies implemented by managers/organisation to ensure effective working during the pandemic.

4.3.1.2.1 *Technology and online*

Naturally, most strategies revolved around technology and online implementation. This was a logical finding. This was informed by the following.

4.3.1.2.1.1 *Communication platforms*

Technology communication platforms were implemented, and these were primarily MS Teams, Zoom and WhatsApp.

4.3.1.2.1.1.1 *MS Teams*

Microsoft Teams was the most highly ranked platform, and it became an essential communication tool, although it was initially met with some frustration. Managers had to adapt quickly to guide their teams effectively, and the platform transformed daily operations, becoming central to workflow and collaboration.

For instance, the use of Teams became crucial, and there was an adjustment period for everyone to become comfortable with the technology. As a manager, I had to first adapt to this, and then guide the team to do the same. It was a quick learning curve to ensure we stayed connected and productive. (R4)

4.3.1.2.1.1.2 *WhatsApp groups*

WhatsApp group and calls were used for faster reach and communication.

We started a WhatsApp group so we can communicate when we when we are away from each other physically. (R2)

4.3.1.2.1.2 *Facilitation*

Technology also played a facilitating role of online meetings, trainings and processes.

4.3.1.2.1.2.1 *Meetings*

Technology facilitated regular online meetings to ensure updates and interactions. Such virtual meetings proved beneficial for also engaging with external stakeholders. In addition, there were established ethics regarding online meetings for professionalism and security purposes.

.....we had to make sure that as a team we still had our regular meetings, even if it was online. So, it did not matter then. People were not seeing each other physically, but we continued having online meetings to get updates and have interaction as well. (R10)

4.3.1.2.1.2.2 *Online platforms trainings*

Training on digital tools and platforms became mandatory especially for those unfamiliar with such platforms. Guidance was provided on how to log in, share screens, and present documents. This training helped develop skills in navigating these platforms effectively.

Trained in whatever aspects we needed to be trained in, if there were any uncertainties with logging on to Microsoft Teams and how to use the camera. (R7)

4.3.1.2.1.2.3 *Digital signing*

Digital signing became crucial for remote work, enabling the submission of invoices and obtaining payment authorisations. This shift represented a significant change in the way work processes were conducted.

And then the one thing is a digital signing We also work here remotely, so to submit invoices and things for payment and get authorization. (R7)

4.3.1.2.1.3 *Support*

Technical support was seen as a crucial aspect to the technology strategy.

4.3.1.2.1.3.1 *Desktop to laptops*

Prior to the pandemic, staff worked mainly with desktops in the office. However, the organisation transitioned to laptops for everyone during the pandemic, thereby ensuring remote working.

Even if it comes down to our own team management, who ensure that those team members who never had laptops before were given laptops. (R7)

4.3.1.2.1.3.2 *Data and connectivity*

The company ensured that all employees necessary connectivity, including data dongles, to minimise interruptions while working from home/remotely.

So, everyone has laptops now and we needed to make sure that all those laptops had connectivity. Meaning that you needed to make sure that everyone has dongles. (R9)

4.3.1.2.2 *Flexibility and remote*

Further work related flexibility and remote strategies included the following.

4.3.1.2.2.1 *Flexible work expectations*

For some managers, there were no strict rules regarding working hours for employees. While there were check-ins, employees were generally expected to remain flexible with their hours, understanding that being home did not mean constant presence on the computer. If a task was completed before the end of the day, there was no requirement to stay online thereby reflecting a strategic shift towards a more task-based approach to productivity.

The expectation was that you do not generally knock off at 4:30pm because the understanding is you are home and you are not systematically on your PC. The expectation was that if something is needed at 6:00pm, can it be done? For which, I felt was a fair trade off. (R2)

4.3.1.2.2.2 *Hybrid meetings*

In the post-pandemic environment, there was a recognition of the importance of physical contact for human interaction, while also acknowledging the need for privacy. Hence face-to-face meetings increased, achieving a balance between in-person and virtual meetings.

As we got more into the post pandemic environment, the face-to-face meetings became more often. And now I think it is very well balanced between live and Teams calls. I am comfortable with where we are now, so it is important to see people and not just on the screen. (R2)

4.3.1.2.2.3 *Time management*

Managing time effectively for work and family became a key focus which was not a practice taken seriously before the COVID-19 pandemic. This highlighted importance of efficiency and prioritisation.

So, time is an extremely valuable resource and that was tested the most in terms of too many things to do and not enough people and time in the day to do it. So, in terms of managing my time allocated to tasks and my time allocated to interacting with people I had to learn to manage time very well and balancing that work requirement with family requirements. (R8)

4.3.1.2.3 COVID-19 protocols

COVID-19 protocols were seen as an inherent site requirement.

4.3.1.2.3.1 Sanitisers and PPE

Protocols to contain the virus were implemented such as using sanitisers and PPE, including masks. Staff were required to adhere to these safety measures. The sanitisation rules were welcomed and stations for hand sanitisers were established at building entrances.

I think that the most companies implement the same thing. You know, sanitizers, masks. (R2)

and we had to ensure that our teams adhered to these protocols and wore the appropriate PPE. (R4)

4.3.1.2.3.2 Social distancing

Social distancing was also promoted. Screens were provided in eating and workspaces to facilitate social distancing when necessary. In addition, measures such as limiting office occupancy to no more than two people at a time was implemented. Notices were also posted throughout the workplace to encourage compliance.

With regards to the social distancing and with regards to having meetings, production meetings moved to Microsoft Teams and where we had eating spaces and workspaces, where there was more than one person, we provided screens if employees couldn't social distance. (R6)

4.3.1.2.3.3 Screening points

The security team was equipped with screening devices to check temperatures upon entry. Staff were only allowed inside the factory only if their temperature was normal.

We made sure that our security was equipped with the screening devices. When you come in, they will need to check your temperature. If your temperature is fine then you are OK to be inside the factory. (R9).

4.3.1.2.3.4 Vaccination policy

One respondent asserted that the organisation also implemented a mandatory vaccine policy, which faced resistance from some employees who believed in personal choice. However, it was argued that if one person in a department chose not to get vaccinated, it posed a risk to all. Whilst this was seen as a harsh requirement, the stance taken was that employees had to abide by the company policy or seek employment elsewhere.

The mandatory vaccine and you know you have to think with a level head there because a lot of people do not want to take the vaccine. And the argument was that, hey, hold a second. My life. My choice, which is fair, but you also need to understand if you are in a department of 10 and you are the one person who has not taken it, why should the other nine take the risk due to you not wanting to? (R2)

4.3.2 Challenges and mitigation

This primary theme examined the challenges experienced during and post the pandemic as well as managerial strategies to mitigate the challenges.

4.3.2.1 Challenges experienced during and post the pandemic

The challenges experiences during and post pandemic were varied. This was informed by the following and is illustrated in the hierarchy chart in Figure 4.3 on the next page.

Challenges and mitigation				Adaptation of management style to address challenges			
Challenges experienced during and post pandemic							
Operational			Staff support	Supportive leadership			Process and operations
shortages and overworking	Ensuring fairness	phy...	mental health	Empathy and encouragement	Flexibility and unders	Supportive....	increased follow ups
staff leave and shortages	Operational	comp....					Trust
Over worked staff		on-site require..		safety health	Communication and engagement		
			meetings		frequency	clear communication	inf...
Remote working			Supply chain and logistics				Continuous learning
Technical	load shedding		Transportation and logistics	meetings	Weekly online		
Connectivity and data			Supply Chain	physical meetings			
Readaptation to physical working at the office			Impact of challenges on work				
fear and grief	upholding COVID-1 protocols	inconsistanc	physical support	relationships	delays and deadlines	Productivity and operations	Skills.....
					long waiting periods	Delays	Customers
	Social Dynamics	comfort	Trainings	Communica...		operational disruption	social distanc

Figure 4.3: Hierarchy chart for challenges experienced during and post pandemic (Source: Adapted from NVIVO 20)

4.3.2.1.1 Operational

Naturally, operational challenges were highly ranked by participants. This was a logical finding.

4.3.2.1.1.1 Staff shortages and overworking

The aspect of staff shortages to the overworking of other staff in order to relieve them.

4.3.2.1.1.1.1 Staff leave and shortages

The COVID-19 led to increased sick leave with warehouse staff being heavily affected. Those who contracted the virus had to quarantine for extended periods, which disrupted work processes. In addition, many staff members had to take time off due to serious illnesses or to care for sick loved ones during the pandemic, with some even losing family members. Managers often had to cover for sick staff, working long hours and taking on operational tasks beyond typical managerial duties.

And during that time period, a lot of our team members did have their family members that were seriously ill in hospital and although they did not have the

virus, they were forced to be at home or take time off to oversee to their loved ones. (R6)

4.3.2.1.1.1.2 Over-worked staff

Relating to the above (staff shortages), other employees were working consecutive long shifts. Fatigue was high, and morale was low. Some employees were even more concerned about being away from work than earning overtime.

The other challenge was that the pandemic created a lot of risks to production. The risks and challenges were that employees that were at work, were to be forced to work long hours because of short staff. Because people took sick leave because of the Pandemic. (R6)

4.3.2.1.1.2 Ensuring fairness

Some employees worked from home while others, especially in on-site operations, were required to be on-site. This caused friction, as those at site felt disadvantaged and led to conflict.

I tried to change that because I felt it was unfair. As in operations we must be operational. We are required to be on site and I feel we are more efficient if we are on site and we engage each other. While in the office I found that that the other departments, when they saw that we allowed some of the individuals to work from home while others were required to be in the office, it created this unfairness among the team, you understand? (R1)

4.3.2.1.1.3 Physical work and social distancing

Furthermore, even on site, managers and staff faced challenges in maintaining physical distancing while performing necessary physical work and interactions.

So, a lot of the physical type of work and interactions that managers were doing, myself as well, at the time, required us to maintain this distance and even the distance was an issue. (R8)

4.3.2.1.2 Remote working

Whilst remote working was favoured, there were challenges related to remote working.

4.3.2.1.2.1 *Technical*

Technical issues and challenges were the most highly ranked in relation to remote working.

4.3.2.1.2.1.1 *Connectivity and data*

Connectivity issues posed challenges while working from home. When connectivity was problematic, employees often had to find alternative locations to work effectively. Some also had to decide whether to go physically to the office when faced with these issues, as poor connectivity hindered operations and productivity. There was also a need to ensure that staff had enough data.

Challenges that were faced with technology, even the network and making sure that people did not run out of data. So those are the things that we had to address. (R10)

4.3.2.1.2.1.2 *Load shedding*

In addition, load shedding affected internet connectivity making it frustrating for employees trying to work remotely.

And then we also were exposed to load reduction. So, you are trying to do your work within those periods where you did not have load reduction, so planning around that as well was challenging for me personally. (R3)

4.3.2.1.2.2 *Online expectations*

Working from home presented other challenges such as increased expectations for immediate responses to emails. Hence employees felt pressured to work continuously.

I must say though that working from home remotely does have its challenges. If you know you just sit at the computer and you would walk less because you just feel like every e-mail that comes through, you have to answer immediately. People expect that more of you. There is more expectation. It is more like, in terms of responding to people. People expect you to do stuff by 4:30pm. They need responses and you do not walk around into offices at home. You just sit at the computer. (R7)

4.3.2.1.2.3 *Technology adaptation*

Many employees struggled to adapt to technology making it difficult to stay connected and perform their jobs effectively.

Another challenge was with people who were uncomfortable with technology. Many had to learn quickly how to use platforms like Teams and how to upload information online. Not everyone is naturally comfortable with technology, so the learning curve was steep. People had to figure out how to stay connected and use these tools to do their jobs effectively. (R4)

4.3.2.1.3 *Personal interaction*

The lack of personal interaction brought about the following challenges.

4.3.2.1.3.1 *Physical support*

The absence of personal contact was a challenge especially for those facing difficult situations like loss. The inability to offer the desired physical support made it difficult for staff as those affected felt isolated and the team struggled to provide adequate assistance.

The first major one was the lack of personal contact. People really felt the absence of face-to-face interaction, especially those who were going through difficult times, like experiencing loss. (R4)

4.3.2.1.3.2 *Communication breakdowns*

Another challenge experienced was a communication breakdown during the initial phase of remote work, primarily due to delays in IT setting up necessary digital platforms.

So firstly, I would say or personally for me, the challenge would have been the communication breakdown. During the initial stage of remote working, because we had to wait for IT to put us on to like your Teams uploading all of those technological or digital programs that we needed to communicate efficiently. (R3)

4.3.2.1.3.3 *Relationships*

Meeting colleagues online rather than in person delayed meaningful interactions and conversations. This was a challenge especially when new team members joined, which affected relationship-building.

Some of the challenges for me, especially when it came to new people joining us in the department. You are missing that personal interaction. (R10)

4.3.2.1.3.4 *Trainings*

Furthermore, the transition to online training was challenging due to the lack of personal connection between trainers and trainees which affected the training and learning dynamics.

When it came to online training, it was far from a seamless transition. There were many learnings and adjustments during that period. The lack of personal connection during training was felt. If you thrive on the interaction between trainer and trainee, that dynamic was missing, and it was something we had to work on. (R4)

4.3.2.1.4 *Staff support*

Staff support in relation to health and safety was an ongoing challenge at the time.

4.3.2.1.4.1 *Mental health*

The inability to provide support during times of loss for colleagues affected by the pandemic was challenging. Mental health concerns among team members were significant, as many were worried about themselves and family members being exposed to COVID-19. One manager experienced the fear of a subordinate who believed she would die from the virus, highlighting the psychological challenges faced during this period. In addition, the isolation of remote work exacerbated feelings of loneliness among staff.

I had to also deal with, you know, as I mentioned before, the mental health concerns of the team members as well as checking on them and how they were doing because close family members were exposed to COVID-19 and they were obviously worried and concerned about their family and their family's health as well. (R3)

I think it had the biggest impact on me was one of my subordinates who had COVID-19. We were keeping in touch telephonically. So, I think it was that the employee actually believed that she was going to die, and you must understand that at this point when COVID-19 just came out and there was that first wave, a lot of people were dying and there were in a coma (R8)

4.3.2.1.4.2 Safety and health

Safety concerns were significant for employees working late or on standby during emergencies, affecting their ability to get home safely. In addition, staff were worried about their own health due to anxiety surrounding COVID-19, especially following the loss of many colleagues. This led to uncertainty about the outcomes of COVID-19 diagnoses.

I remember that being a challenge, as safety was a concern not only for the people working here but also for those we needed to call in during emergencies. For those working late or being called out on standby, getting home safely was a concern as well. (R4)

4.3.2.1.5 Supply chain and logistics

Supply chain and logistics were affected by the pandemic disruptions.

4.3.2.1.5.1 Supply chain

Supply chain disruptions occurred due to reliance on raw materials from supplier. In light of this, there were concerns about ensuring that products from suppliers, particularly from China, were COVID-19 free raising issues about contamination and safety.

We did have supply chain disruptions. Uh, because now we basically wait for raw materials and then we blend a final product. (R5)

4.3.2.1.5.2 Transportation and logistics

Restrictions on truck movements and curfews further complicated operations, impacting the ability to deliver stock to customers. Special permits were needed for transporters to operate thereby adding to difficulties.

So, for me, those are the challenges that I could say that I have picked up on and also during the pandemic there were a few things that we were unable to do as well, being in the transport industry. (R9)

4.3.2.1.6 Re-adaptation to physical working at the office

Post-COVID-19, the re-adaptation to physical work brought about its own related challenges.

4.3.2.1.6.1 Fear and grief

Some employees faced grief due to COVID-19-related losses, leading to reluctance in sharing confined office spaces. People were fearful of the work atmosphere uncertainty about safety protocols, which created high levels of stress. Unclear hygiene practices also led to animosity that required management to mediate and address employees' concerns to calm fears and reinforce safety measures.

So, you have to deal with that and I think with close confined spaces, like with small offices, they were a bit reluctant to be too many people in the office. (R2)

4.3.2.1.6.2 Comfort of home

Returning to the office after working from home presented challenges, as employees had to readapt to the office environment. Those who had become comfortable with remote work experienced detachment issues due to losing the benefits associated with home-working.

When we got back, it was a new change as well because remember, you had already adapted to now working from home. So now you are to readapt to get getting back to the office. So that came with its own set of challenges, and I think especially people who are comfortable working at home, we have a bit of grief because I mean there is a lot of benefits to working at home. (R2)

4.3.2.1.6.3 Inconsistencies

Frustration arose from the inconsistency in remote work policies across departments post-pandemic. Some teams were allowed to continue working from home while others, needing to perform on-site tasks could not.

And I think also frustration because certain departments with after the pandemic were still allowed to work from home while others were not. But you know, I think the challenge was trying to make them understand that the decision was based on what your deliverable is. For example, if you have to go count stock, you cannot do that from home. You have to be practical about that. And I think that is that. We have to drive and explain to them and we want that. (R2)

4.3.2.2 Impact of challenges on work

Having identified the challenges in the preceding themes, this primary subtheme examined the impact of the challenges thereof.

4.3.2.2.1 Productivity and operations

Productivity and operation were inherently impacted and was highly ranked. This was a logical finding.

4.3.2.2.1.1 Operational disruption

There were disruptions in productivity throughout the supply chain, leading to reduced output. At one point, one factory had to shut down when a foreman returned from a cruise ship linked to COVID-19 cases, which caused production to slow down. Resolving of issues also took longer and required more effort.

So, it was quite an extensive productivity disruption throughout the supply chain where we saw obvious product reduced output in terms of documentation. I believe there was also a curfew. (R3)

4.3.2.2.1.2 Reduced labour

Staffing shortages in the warehouse affected the timely preparation of orders and logistics. Operations were further impacted when some team members contracted COVID-19. There was a reduction in sugar production which was due to reduced labour and limited working hours.

There was reduction in sugar production as well, so we had to wait for sugar to be produced and that was also driven by COVID-19 and having reduced labour

present and working within particular hours of the day, or running the refinery, you know at particular hours, I think. (R3)

4.3.2.2.1.3 Remote work and its impact on productivity

While much work transitioned online, in some instances, productivity was impacted when stakeholders were unavailable due to remote working. Face-to-face interaction/meetings were seen as more effective in these instances.

But then this happened in that we had low productivity even on our side when our stakeholders are not available because their company is taking the decision that they did not need to be at work on specific days as well. (R7)

4.3.2.2.1.4 Social distancing on site

Social distancing also impacted productivity, especially in the factory setting where workers could not be in close proximity to each other, thereby leading to reduced output.

Social distancing was actually a very key item that impacted on a lot of things especially the need for people to be in the factory. People could not work close to each other and it had a big impact on productivity. (R3)

4.3.2.2.2 Delays and deadlines

Delays and not meeting deadlines was an added impact. This was informed by the following.

4.3.2.2.2.1 Delayed communication and resolving problems

Delayed communication due to remote working led to delayed processes and resolving of issues. This contrasted with the office environment, where immediate resolution was possible by simply walking over to a colleague. There were also delays in communication from the distribution side, which further complicated timely problem resolution.

The other challenge was that that there are times where you need something urgently to try and get hold of someone, although they supposed to be available on teams or on a cell phone, you can't get hold of them in the time required. They do eventually come back to you, but at the time when you needed them, they were not available, whereas it is different if you're in the office. (R1)

4.3.2.3 Adaptation of management style to address challenges

Having established the challenges and impact thereof, this primary theme outlined how managers adapted their management style to address challenges.

4.3.2.3.1 Supportive leadership

Supportive leadership was the most highly ranked. This meant that participants became more supportive in their style in the approaches to address the challenges faced. Such supportive leadership was informed by the following.

4.3.2.3.1.1 Empathy and encouragement

Within the supportive leadership aspect, empathy was the highest ranked factor. There was an emphasis on empathy in leadership to alleviate pressure on the team. Participants recognised the importance of understanding that not all struggles are visible, leading to a more compassionate approach. During challenging times, managers and staff focused on supporting each other through regular check-ins and simple messages to ensure everyone's safety and well-being. In addition, some provided emotional support to colleagues experiencing feelings of loneliness and fear, helping to foster a sense of community and encouragement among the group.

As for the curfews, it was really about trusting the process and moving forward. We stayed in contact with each other, checking in to make sure people arrived home safely. A simple message like 'arrived safely' helped us look out for one another. (R4)

4.3.2.3.1.1.1 Flexibility and understanding

Similarly, flexibility became essential in managing teams during challenging times. Managers also had to adapt to changing circumstances and support each other, emphasising the importance for being flexible and of thinking outside the box. Checking in on team members' well-being became critical, leading to a more understanding approach in leadership and collaboration.

So, for me, I had to be a more understanding manager and be flexible and understand what things we were going through. It has happened and we need to make sure that we are flexible. We understand and we support each other and make sure that we continued checking in on each other. (R9)

4.3.2.3.1.2 Supportive over instructive

This approach focused on being supportive and understanding rather than instructive, especially as employees returned to work after COVID-19. Motivation was needed to help employees adapt to online meetings, emphasizing that this was the only available way to work.

It was quite simple. Rather than being instructive, it was more about supportive and understanding where the issues came from. (R2)

4.3.2.3.1.3 Trust

There was a culture of trust that was identified by some managers as a major factor in team dynamics thereby emphasising the importance of trusting team members to prioritise and complete their tasks efficiently and effectively.

And I think one of the major things was you know a culture of trust. Having that trust with your team. Trust that they would prioritize the tasks that needed to be done within the day and trusting that they would get it out in time. And you know executed to the limit that it needs to be. (R3)

4.3.2.3.2 Communication and engagement

Communication and engagement became an added method of adaptation to deal with challenges.

4.3.2.3.2.1 Meetings

The following approach to meetings was adapted.

4.3.2.3.2.1.1 Physical meetings

Physical meetings were maintained to provide reminders and check on progress. however, meetings were broken down into smaller, staggered groups to minimise interactions and confined spaces.

So, instead of having singular large meetings, we would break down the meetings into smaller groups and stagger them through the day. So, I minimized interactions or getting people into a very confined space. So that was one of it. (R8)

4.3.2.3.2.1.2 Weekly online meetings

When in the office, meetings were scheduled on Mondays mostly online via Teams. These weekly team meetings were held to ensure everything stayed on track.

Whereas with my team, I make sure that we have a weekly meeting. (R10)

4.3.2.3.2.1.3 Focussed online meetings

Focused online meeting on smaller teams were found to be more productive than larger ones.

The learnings were that if you have fewer people on a Teams meeting, you have a more productive meeting. (R6)

4.3.2.3.2.2 Clear communication

Clear and concise communication was emphasised to ensure tasks were completed with a focus on what was important. Effective communication was also essential to keep communication lines open.

Another thing I would do is give clear and concise instructions to the team so they were aware of exactly what needs to be done. (R3)

4.3.2.3.2.3 Frequency

There was an increase in email communication, updates, and minute-taking due to online meetings. In addition, regular calls and open communication helped keep the team engaged while moving away from old practices. Managers also focused on boosting morale by engaging with staff to create a better work environment.

We had to stop relying on the old ways of doing things and think about what would work best moving forward. For me, what helped was having regular calls with my team, keeping communication open so I could understand where they were coming from and keep them engaged. (R4)

4.3.2.3.3 Process and operations

Adaptation in regard to process and operations were informed by the following.

4.3.2.3.3.1 Increased follow-ups

Daily virtual check-ins were conducted to address potential challenges and ensure work was on track. Follow-ups were done sometimes even using WhatsApp or calls to ensure tasks were completed when email communication was delayed.

Think also virtual check ins that I did with my team on a daily basis to ensure that everything was in order for the day or if they were anticipating any challenges that they were going to experience within the day that would affect their work. (R3)

4.3.2.3.3.2 Fairness in site operations

In some departments, all team members were required to work from the office to ensure fairness, based on the belief that if some employees couldn't work from home, then the option shouldn't apply to the entire team. This rule was implemented mainly for all operations and supply chain staff.

I made it clear that in supply chain under my team that we are operations. So, though the business had a rule that we can work three days from home, I got all my management team to agree that that will not apply to us. That no more working from home. Everyone is required to work from the office even if you have a laptop or if you have a phone and you feel that you can be effective working from home. I came from an angle that although I do trust you, you are still effective working from home. It's more in terms of fairness. (R1)

4.3.2.3.4 Skills and learning

The challenges experiences also led to skills and learning adaptation.

4.3.2.3.4.1 Continuous learning

Efforts were made by some managers to improve digital skills by learning about new programs from the IT department. This included adopting flexible and adaptable learning methods to manage the team on a digital platform rather than in person.

I also tried to improve my digital skills by learning as much as I could on the Internet. Regarding the programs that our IT department was uploading. So, I tried to do that as something that I wanted to do. It was not a necessity, but something that I thought would help during this situation that we were in. (R3)

4.3.2.3.4.2 Multi-skilling strategy

The goal was to maintain production and profitability despite challenging conditions. Hence, during the pandemic, there was a focus on addressing productivity issues by placing employees in other roles and promoting multi-skilling through training. Meetings were also held to inform the team about the importance of adapting to new tasks without expecting immediate compensation.

Where people were absent. Checking on how the productivity was holding up in terms of getting people who are less productive in, in roles that they were not necessarily trained for. (R8)

4.3.2.3.4.3 Technology skilling

Despite some challenges with technology, there was a recognition of the need to upskill and adapt. Hence, through upskilling on technology platforms communication improved through the use of Teams, enabling easier interaction not only within immediate teams but also across groups in different regions.

Teams communication was where we used to communicate on e-mail. It was so much easier to communicate on Teams in cross functional teams, so not only with your immediate team, but it would include your colleagues from the other organizations that we in or other umbrella operations like Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Botswana. So, it was improved communication. (R3)

4.3.3 Benefits and positive work environment

This primary subtheme outlined the change related benefits and its impact since COVID-19 as well as how the leveraging of remote work arrangements fostered a positive work environment and is illustrated in Figure 4.4 below.

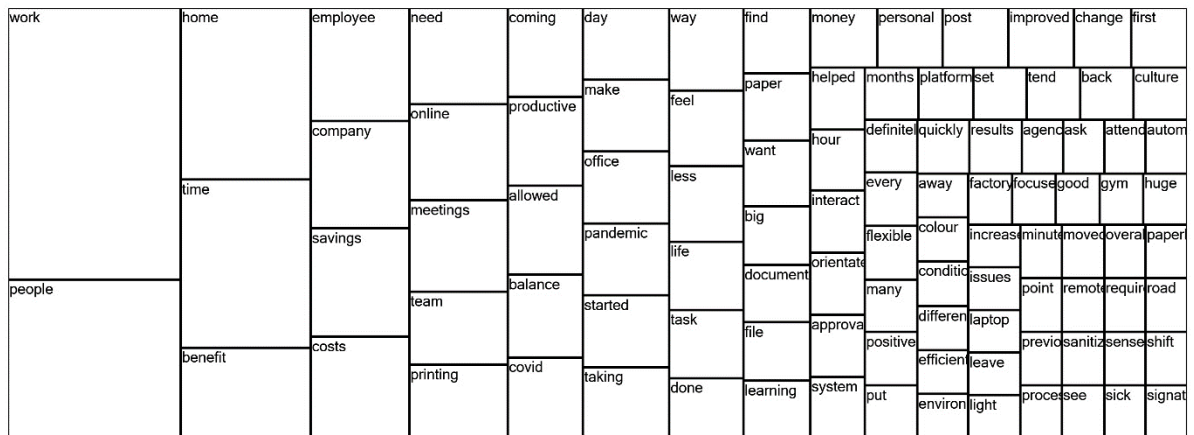


Figure 4.4: Illustration of tree map for the benefits and impact of COVID-19 on the workforce (Source: NVIVO 20)

4.3.3.1 Change related Benefits and impact since COVID-19

There were a plethora of change related benefits and positive impact thereof. This was informed by the following.

4.3.3.1.1 Efficiency and productivity

The benefits had a strong impact on efficiency and productivity in a positive way.

4.3.3.1.1.1 Productivity

Improvement in productivity was noted and informed by the following.

4.3.3.1.1.1.1 Productivity levels

Participants observed that being physically present in the office did not guarantee productivity, and remote work led to higher effectiveness in completing tasks. Therefore, increased productivity was noted among team members working remotely, as they saved time and money by avoiding travel and traffic.

So, for me it is increased productivity and what I have also noticed is that they have benefited in the sense that they do not have to travel to the office and that saves you time and money. As you know that the South African roads are congested with traffic. (R9)

4.3.3.1.1.1.2 Fewer distractions

Working from home was perceived as more productive as it minimised distractions of the office. More work got done without interruptions from colleagues and having less time for socialising. This led to longer working hours and increased overall productivity.

I think some people feel that they are more productive. I feel also when I work from home that I am actually more productive working from home than being disturbed in the office. You get a lot more done if you are working from home. (R1)

4.3.3.1.1.1.3 Task vs time orientated

This change effectively prioritised task completion. The shift from a time-oriented to a task-oriented approach moved away from the traditional 8:00 am to 4:30 pm work schedule. Employees became focused on completing specific tasks rather than merely appearing busy during working hours. This was similar to the Google model, which allows for flexible work hours based on task completion. While the ideal model hasn't been fully adopted, the move towards task orientation has shown potential benefits for both employees and the organization.

It is being more task oriented than time oriented. You know, as I said previously before the whole pandemic, everything was about 8:00am to 4:30pm. Find something to do between time. People used to pretend to be busy just so that they do not get into trouble. I think since then it became more task orientated. You have a list of tasks to do, and if it is done, you have delivered what was due to the company. (R2)

4.3.3.1.1.1.4 *Freedom driven productive staff*

The option to work from home has led to increased employee freedom and happiness, thereby promoting productivity. Many prefer the relaxed environment of remote work, feeling less monitored which improved work-life balance, resulting in more productive employees.

It has improved the employees lives and work life balance and you find that you now have happier employees who are more productive. (R9)

4.3.3.1.1.2 *Efficiency*

Relating to productivity came efficiency which was also noted as a key benefit.

4.3.3.1.1.2.1 *Feedback and engagement*

The ability to set up virtual meetings quickly and establish faster feedback loops has enhanced engagement with others. Virtual calls, with representatives from other regions, enabled detailed discussions of lab results. In addition, customer engagements via Teams improved overall efficiency.

Even customer engagements can now happen on Teams, making us more efficient overall. I think that's been a huge time saver, and it's really helped us improve our overall efficiency. This shift has definitely been a big win. (R4)

4.3.3.1.1.2.2 *Faster problem resolution*

The shift to virtual meetings has was seen to reduce the time and effort required to address issues, making it easier to set up calls and share screens. This new way of working has streamlined processes, allowing for quick resolutions of IT problems and improving overall efficiency.

I feel like it allowed us to reduce the time it would normally take to address issues. For example, even post-COVID-19, many of us are now comfortable with Teams meetings. One great thing about this is that, in the past, setting up a meeting took a lot of time and effort, especially when people had to be there in person. It was time-consuming, required effort, and was costly. (R4)

4.3.3.1.1.2.3 *Decision making*

The seemed to be quicker decision-making leading to faster achievement of desired outcomes.

.....also feel that the productivity of the people we're working with, not only at the refinery but also with other stakeholders, has improved. It takes much less time to reach desired outcomes, and we're able to make decisions much faster as a result. (R4)

4.3.3.1.1.3 *Processes and time*

There were added benefits of process streamlining and time saving.

4.3.3.1.1.3.1 *Time saving*

Time management has improved due to the continuation of online meetings, which save time. Many documents that previously required printing have transitioned online, allowing for multitasking during meetings. This shift has reduced travel time thereby enabling staff to start work earlier and maintain flexibility throughout the day.

Time management has improved in that the online meetings have not gone away.

In fact, it saves a bit on time. (R6)

4.3.3.1.1.3.2 *Streamlining*

The transition to digital platforms has streamlined processes such as managing approvals through systems such as SAP. This automation has improved efficiency, enabling quicker access to meaningful information while reducing costs in time and resources.

Like working on a digital platform, obtaining signatures, you know, particular documents that were not as difficult as it was before. You know, in terms of approaching a management team for signatures, it was, it was quite proficient in that it was streamlined. (R3)

4.3.3.1.1.3.3 *Online documents*

The ability to sign documents online streamlined the process, making it quicker and easier to file documents by organising them into project-specific folders.

The mere fact that now we can sign approved documents online. It is quicker and it is easier for filing. You can file easily online because you can do folders for each project and things like that. (R10)

4.3.3.1.2 Employees

Benefits relating to employees per say had a significant impact both on employees and organisation.

4.3.3.1.1.4 Flexibility and balance

Flexibility and balance for employees was a key benefit thereby informing the following.

4.3.3.1.1.4.1 Cost saving

The shift to remote work has resulted in cost savings for both employers and employees by eliminating transportation expenses. Employees benefit financially from reduced fuel costs and time saved by avoiding traffic, positively impacting their income.

In terms of less employees being in the office in terms of, I would say cost savings for the employer and the employee as well. You know, we did not have to worry about transportation costs to work. Also, I think those were some of the benefits that I have seen and still seeing with regards to the change in the ways we worked. (R3)

4.3.3.1.1.4.2 Work-life balance

The transition to remote work improved work-life balance for employees. Many have found it easier to manage their time, allowing for family interactions and healthier meals at home. This flexibility has led to increased employee satisfaction.

So, in terms of work life balance, it has helped significantly and in getting home on time and having supper with my family is a big bonus, so it overall I think it improved employee satisfaction. (R6)

4.3.3.1.1.4.3 Flexible Schedules

The flexible work schedules led to quicker task completion and employees willing to work beyond regular hours, thereby enhancing overall productivity while working from home.

OK, so the first big thing for me was working with people who had flexible schedules while working from home. Sometimes, this arrangement worked really well because I could get assistance after regular working hours. Their flexible time meant that certain tasks received attention more quickly, which was helpful. (R4)

4.3.3.1.1.4.4 Personal responsibilities

Remote work offered flexibility for attending to personal matters, such as doctor's appointments, car services and/or childcare.

I think it would benefit them if they could even work one day remotely because to be honest, there are times where in between your meetings you have something or some family emergency, and you are close and at home. You are closer than having to be at work. (R7)

4.3.3.1.1.5 Employee health and wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of employees was seen as an added benefit with positive impact on the organisation in the following ways.

4.3.3.1.1.5.1 Reduced sick leave

The flexibility of remote work has resulted in reduced leave and sick days, as employees can more easily manage personal health needs. For instance, working from home allowed staff to visit the doctor which was difficult when commuting to the office. Employees also preferred to work from home when feeling unwell, instead of taking sick leave, thereby enhancing their ability to balance work and health.

You know, even after the pandemic, when the employee feels like they would rather operate from home today because they are not feeling well. (R9)

4.3.3.1.1.5.2 *Comfort and bonding*

There was an appreciation among team members and sensitivity towards their colleagues' well-being. This fostered skills in empathy and support, particularly for those who had lost loved ones, leading to a stronger bond among team members.

It was a steep appreciation curve for colleagues and their well-being in the workplace We got schooled on the finer art of interacting with people and being sensitive to things that people were going through. For example, a pandemic. People had lost relatives and loved ones. So, we love the skill of comforting people and that basically brought people together and it was that invisible bond that is still there. And all the people might not realize it. (R8)

4.3.3.1.1.5.3 *Gym*

Remote work allowed staff to access the gym enabling them to prioritise fitness which is more challenging when working in the office.

Then they are able to get to the gym with no hassles of getting back home. Whereas, if you in the office you cannot always go to the gym in the morning and get to the office at 8:00am. (R7)

4.3.3.1.1.5.4 *Less stress*

Working from home reduces stress by eliminating concerns about traffic and weather leading to a more relaxed employee.

The thing for me firstly is that people are less stressed. You are not stuck in traffic. You are not worried about the weather, especially those days when you are working from home, so people are more relaxed. (R10)

4.3.3.1.3 **Resources**

The changes made by manager during the pandemic has also led to resource based benefits and impact. This was informed by the following.

4.3.3.1.1.6 Paperless

There has been a significant shift towards a paperless environment in the workplace, with reports indicating about a 50% reduction in paper usage. Employees have adapted to digital filing systems while working remotely leading to decreased printing.

We have become a more paperless, alright; we were not fully paperless but from where we were to where we are. I would say from my perspective, it is a 50% reduction. (R2)

OK, for Exports team, I find that one benefit was we moved from a paperless filing system, so it was reduced paper usage. (R3)

4.3.3.1.1.7 Energy and utilities

Working remotely/from home has led to utilities cost savings for the business, such as electricity and water. Simple measures such as turning off lights and fewer people using facilities, contributed to such savings.

And I am talking about something as simple as lights. If a light is switched off for one extra day in the week, it is a saving to the business, right? And now that people are still allowed to work from home. (R2)

4.3.3.1.1.8 Printing costs

The shift to remote work further resulted in lower printing costs. Employees could now approve artwork and documents online, saving the company money on printing and ink.

The printing costs have gone down. (R7)

4.3.3.1.1.9 Consumables

Costs for consumables such as tea, coffee, sugar and toilet paper were also being minimised through remote working.

You are also saving the company on costs for things like tea and coffee and toilet paper. (R10)

4.3.3.1.4 Technology

Increased technology usage and adoption was the enabler of virtual benefits and impact thereof.

4.3.3.1.1.10 Technology adoption

The increased comfort with using online platforms such as MS Teams has facilitated larger gatherings for training sessions and meetings, enhancing productivity and enabling more effective discussions. Furthermore, the use of video based engagement was beneficial as people were drawn to visual content.

OK, so I think the level of comfort we've gained with using Teams and other online platforms has allowed us to bring larger groups together for things like training sessions or company meetings. It has made it easier to gather, share points of view, and review proposals from the company, enabling more productive discussions. This has been a significant win. (R4)

4.3.3.1.1.11 Real time monitoring

The digital shift allowed for the conversion of manual log sheets into digital documents, enabling remote monitoring of factory performance without the need for physical presence. WhatsApp groups also facilitated the sharing of relevant reports, providing immediate insights into factory operations and allowing for analysis.

And part of the learnings in COVID-19 was to take log sheets that were manual and make them into soft copies like an Excel document. So now you can remotely see exactly what transpired in the previous hour. In the Lab for an example, what analysis was done in the last hour? The results gave me an idea of how the factory is performing. Previously I physically had to walk 10 minutes into the plant and then then take 10 minutes to come back. (R6)

4.3.3.1.5 Collaboration and reach

There was greater collaboration and reach through transition to online approaches.

4.3.3.1.1.12 Broader reach

The transition to online platforms during the pandemic enabled interaction with individuals across geographic regions, including those from different countries. This not only enhanced training experiences, but also allowed for the adoption of new work ethics and practices. It also improved access to better resources and facilitated interactions with external stakeholders.

From my perspective, the benefit of training during this time was that we got to interact with people outside of our usual circles, thanks to the online platform. This was interesting and probably wouldn't have happened if the pandemic hadn't pushed us to be more creative. (R4)

4.3.3.1.1.13 Enhanced collaboration

Online meetings enable insights from various individuals, even if they are in different locations or unable to attend in person. This flexibility brought quick feedback and engagement from all stakeholders, thereby enhancing collaboration and decision-making.

And also working more on digital platforms or using technology is easier to interact with many people at the same time because in a meeting you can invite many people. So, you can get insights from many people, whereas if it is a physical meeting, sometimes some people can come but if they work in different offices or they work in different areas or they are stuck in the factory and cannot attend. (R10)

4.3.3.1.6 Culture

There was also the benefit of physical organisational culture that was derived from the pandemic situation.

4.3.3.1.1.14 Hygiene focus

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered perceptions of hygiene and personal safety. All/most staff now prioritise hygiene such as sanitisation to prevent germ transmission, leading to fewer health issues and reduced medical expenses. Post-pandemic, many health and safety practices remain in place and a culture of wearing masks when sick. This ongoing commitment to hygiene reflects a positive cultural shift in the workplace, promoting health and safety awareness even beyond the pandemic.

A lot of those learnings from the COVID-19 policies that were sent out in terms of the health and safety. So, you will find that we still have a lot of the sanitization stations around the factory. There is a lot of signages that is still up there, although the masks have fallen away. We do not really enforce it, unless you were sick previously. But now when people are sick, it is a commonplace to see people wearing masks post pandemic and it is that culture change and that is that in the workplace. And that is actually quite a good benefit. (R8)

4.3.3.1.1.15 Resilience

The organisation and its management successfully adapted to necessary changes and implemented measures during the pandemic. Hence this showed/promoted resilience emphasising their ability to perform effectively even in crises.

But look at where we are now and the things that we have learned. So, anything that comes my way I think I would definitely face it. Whatever challenge it is I will make sure that I am still able to do my job very well even under crisis. (R10)

4.3.3.2 Leveraging remote work arrangements to foster positive work environment

This primary theme examined how the leveraging of remote work arrangements to fostered positive work environment.

4.3.3.2.1 Wellness and balance

Remote working led to increased staff wellness and balance which contributed to a positive work environment.

4.3.3.2.1.1 Work-life balance

Work-life balance was achieved through and the positive impact of flexible work arrangements on personal lives. There were numerous benefits of spending more time with family, maintaining performance balance, and allowing employees to manage personal responsibilities alongside work demands. Hence, the ability to work from home facilitated better productivity and efficiency while encouraging personal well-being.

The work like balance, again, with that flexibility that a lot of people did have I think they were able to harness that and balance it quite well in terms of their working from home, balancing personal requirements versus work requirements while in a home setting. (R8)

4.3.3.2.1.2 Employee wellness

The organisation implemented several initiatives during and after COVID-19 to enhance employee wellness and well-being, inclusive of mental and financial challenges. This shift in culture reflected a greater focus on employee health and financial stability, leading to a positive response from staff who appreciated the support.

What I have noticed is during the COVID-19 time and even post COVID-19, the company has put in place a lot of initiatives to ensure Employee Wellness and well-being and they have put in a lot of thought into developing a lifestyle change. That is the kind of theme that they were driving throughout COVID-19 and even post COVID-19 to help employees cope with the mental challenges as well as financial challenges that we experienced. (R3)

4.3.3.2.1.3 Financial

Remote and hybrid work arrangements also resulted in significant cost savings for employees such as reduced petrol and transport costs, leading to increased employee satisfaction.

So, every day those people are now saving on time and their money that they are not spending money on petrol and all those things. (R9)

4.3.3.2.1.4 Satisfaction and retention

Employee satisfaction and retention was promoted through remote working.

4.3.3.2.1.4.1 Satisfaction

Eliminating the commute to work not only saved costs but also reduced stress, contributing to a more positive mindset at the start of the day. Hence many staff preferred remote/ the hybrid working environment as they found it more relaxing compared to the open-plan office structure. This led to increased employee satisfaction.

I believe my immediate team prefers it this way as well because you know it is just a more relaxing environment for them to be working at home. I would also say that our office structure was more for open plan. (R3)

4.3.3.2.1.4.2 Retention

The positive change in remote workplace culture for employees contributed to their decision to stay with the organisation.

I think it would be linked to the positive culture. You know the positive change and culture in the workplace. I would say roughly that would be a good reason for people to actually stay in terms of that they built these bonds with people through this pandemic. They have actually grown quite a bit with this whole way of life that came out of it. (R8)

4.3.3.2.2 Improved engagement and interaction

Improved engagement and interaction contributed to a positive work environment.

4.3.3.2.2.1 Willing communication and Interaction

There was an improvement in communication as team members became less reliant on email and more inclined to pick up the phone for direct conversations. In addition, regular interactions led to increased attendance at meetings, fostering better engagement among team members.

Being less instructive on e-mail and picking up the phone because you needed to hear that voice. So, I think there is improvement in communication. (R2)

4.3.3.2.2.2 Non work-related meetings

Relating to staff willingness, the first half-hour of some meetings was for non-work-related conversations, such as personal updates and hobbies. It encouraged a relaxed atmosphere where employees could engage in light-hearted discussions, contributing to a more positive work environment. This aimed to foster a positive department culture by alleviating the pressure typically associated with meetings.

But there's something we started every Monday, every Monday at the end of the day we have a team meeting. The first half an hour of that meeting is dedicated to non-work conversations. So, by just having that half an hour wait, it is just non work related. It tends to set a positive vibe for the work week. And I found that we were doing that for over six months. (R2)

4.3.3.2.3 Task driven

Task driven work became a recurring theme, which further promoted a positive work environment.

4.3.3.2.3.1 Task accountability

Employees demonstrated increased accountability while working from home, as it motivated them to prove their effectiveness to retain their flexibility.

Then they will put it even more effort to make up for the time that they have lost, now that they know how flexible the company is. Allowing them to work from home. They also want to prove a point. That is why when I am working from home, I am very productive because remember, at the end of the day, no one wants to lose this benefit. (R10)

4.3.3.2.3.2 Ability to do other tasks

Working at home allowed employees to focus on paperwork and tasks without interruptions. This flexibility enabled them to work at their own pace with minimised distractions thereby ensuring deadlines were met.

There are limited distractions and they can attend to the work in their own time, you know, bearing in mind that it is done within the time frame that it needs to be done. (R3)

4.3.4 Recommendations and future planning

This primary theme recommendations made to improved methods of work to maintain positive impact, whilst also recommending planning efforts for future a pandemic or related as illustrated in Figure 4.5 on the following page.

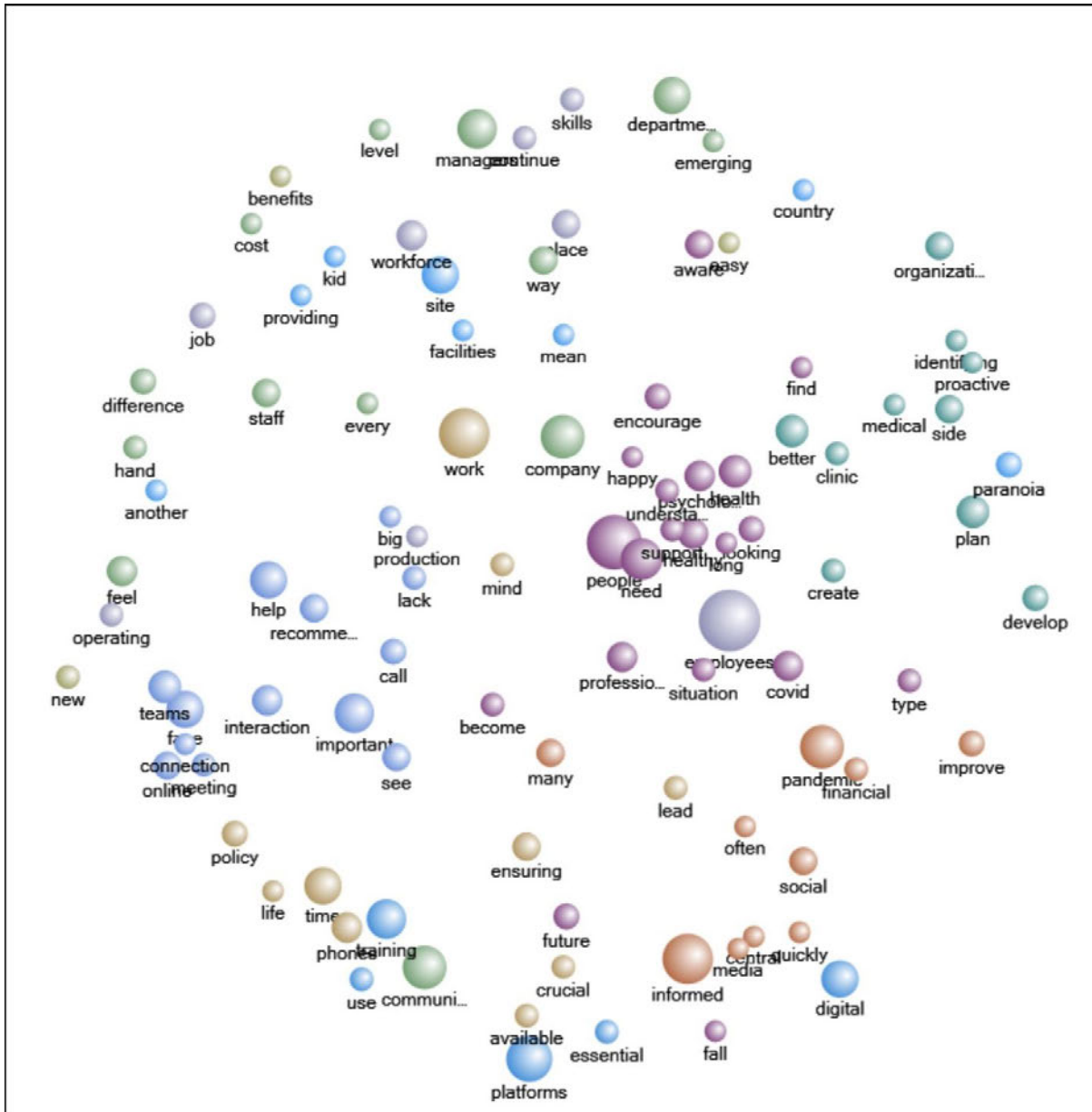


Figure 4. 5: Cluster analysis for recommendations and future planning (Source: NVIVO 20)

4.3.4.1 Recommendations to improve methods of working for positive impact

Participants made various recommendations to improve methods of working for positive impact. This was informed by the following subthemes.

4.3.4.1.1 Assistance for employees

There should be more assistance for employees in the following ways.

4.3.4.1.1.1 Health and mental well-being support

Suggestions were made to enhance mental health support through better awareness and by hiring professional psychologists, particularly in high-stress environments such as refineries. Employees valued these wellness initiatives as they positively impacted both mental and financial well-being.

We often just have a clinic system on site, and while our staff does what they can to the best of their abilities, for a large site like the refinery, it would make sense to employ a professional psychologist. There are so many issues affecting our employees, from accidents to the death of colleagues, and a psychologist would be well-utilized in such situations. (R6)

4.3.4.1.1.2 Employee care and welfare facilities

There should be workplace facilities such as on-site day-care centres which could benefit employees, especially single mothers, by providing peace of mind and improving focus. In addition, having amenities such as gyms, indoor soccer, or paddle courts could promote physical health and foster stronger relationships among staff and encourage a healthier and more productive workforce, as seen in other countries.

In first-world countries, some workplaces provide facilities like day-care centers for employees' children, making things easier by eliminating the need to drop children off elsewhere. A future recommendation for us would be to establish an on-site exercise facility, which would encourage a healthier workforce. We don't have one now, but it's something to consider. (R6)

4.3.4.1.1.3 Financial advice and support

It was suggested that the organisation could improve by offering financial guidance to employees, especially after the financial strain many faced during COVID-19. Many

employees had family members affected financially, leading to loans that took time to repay. Expanding financial planning support and enhancing wellness programs was recommended.

One area we could improve is providing financial guidance to our employees. During COVID-19, although we were considered essential workers, many of our employees had family members at home, which affected them financially. Many people took out loans during that time, and I'm sure it took a while to pay them off. Financial planning and guidance are areas that are currently lacking, and that would be a significant recommendation from my side, alongside improving employee well-being and expanding our wellness programs. (R6)

4.3.4.1.2 Leadership

There were also recommendations made that pertained to leadership of the organisation.

4.3.4.1.2.1 Agile leadership skills

The organisation should focus on developing leadership to be more agile, helping managers navigate through uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This would involve building skills to adapt to unexpected challenges rather than relying on traditional leadership practices.

I think develop leadership to be more agile, to try and develop these types of skills. You know, to help managers navigate through uncertainty like the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a lot of uncertainty. (R3)

4.3.4.1.2.2 Culture

Leadership must drive a positive culture as department culture significantly impacts the quality of work output, as happier employees tend to invest more effort and care into their tasks compared to unhappy ones. Furthermore, managers and leaders can enhance their effectiveness through emotional intelligence (EQ) through EQ training focusing on skill development rather than direct instruction.

World culture is very important, but it is obviously starting at a department level and the vibe or the atmosphere in the department makes a very big difference to the output, not really to the volume of output of the work. But the quality that you get, it is simple. An unhappy person will do the thing for the sake of doing

it, whereas a happy person would do it with a little bit of the lack of a better word, love in their work, you know. (R2)

4.3.4.1.2.3 Policies

There appeared to be no formal policies in place for flexible hours or work-life balance. Instead, arrangements were often made through informal agreements with management, and practices varied across departments. Hence there should be an official policy in regard to flexible and remote working

As far as I'm aware, there are no policies or rules in place to encourage flexible hours or work-life balance. (R6)

4.3.4.1.3 Technology and trainings

There should be a continuous drive for technology transformation and trainings to complement such.

4.3.4.1.3.1 Technology driven

Being tech-savvy was viewed as beneficial due to the increasing shift towards technology in the workplace. The new generation entering the workforce drove the need to move to digital platforms. Digital information distribution could make information easily accessible on employees' phones, thereby enhancing their experience and engagement.

I am very tech savvy. I think there are a lot of benefits to being much more into technology. Teams has proven that and also culture. (R2)

4.3.4.1.3.2 Digital transformation

Staying updated with digital transformations was seen as essential for benefiting the organisation. Proactively adapting to these changes could prevent the need for sudden unexpected changes in the event of another crisis.

The digital world is always changing. I think maybe trying to stay abreast of the digital transformations will help the organization as well, because I mean, everything will be done in advance and we do not need to have another pandemic

on our hands and then trying to, you know, digitally transform the organization. (R3)

4.3.4.1.3.3 Quality trainings

Training on digital platforms was identified as crucial for ensuring employees could adapt to future situations requiring digital communication. training related to maintaining professionalism in digital interactions, including dress codes also needed to uphold image at a virtual level.

Personally, as well, I think that the digital platforms that we used, training on that or looking at updating the digital platforms that we use and ensuring that employees are trained. So, should we be put into a similar situation in the future, we are able to adapt and go back and fall onto these digital communication platforms. So training is essential and important. (R3)

4.3.4.1.4 Communication and interaction

There were various recommendations in relation to enhancing communication and interaction.

4.3.4.1.4.1 Personal interaction

Personal interaction in a remote work environment was still with the need for occasional face-to-face interactions to foster relationships. Therefore, by having in-person meetings or workshops could enhance communication compared to only relying on online platforms. Furthermore, the implementation of regional visits to support remote teams was seen as a positive step towards maintaining engagement and oversight.

Your production teams and although we've become so used to all meetings on teams, I feel face to face interaction, even if it's once a month or once a quarter, I think it's important that that we break away from Teams once in a while. Just put an actual face to the person, you know. (R1)

4.3.4.1.4.2 Boundaries

It was recommended that there should be clear boundaries between personal and professional life, especially with the constant availability of technology, which can lead to distractions.

Hence, staff should set aside time for both work and rest to maintain focus. There should be a review of the cell phone policy, where a strict no-cell-phone policy should be enforced to minimise distractions.

Yes, I think clear boundaries are crucial. With platforms that allow you to easily take your work wherever you go, it's easy for personal and professional life to overlap too much. It's important to ensure that people work but also take time to rest. Ensuring there's enough time set aside for both your professional and personal life, with clear boundaries, is essential. (R4)

4.3.4.2 Planning for future pandemic or similar

This primary theme informed the planning that should be considered in the event of a future pandemic.

4.3.4.2.1 Awareness

It was important to focus on more awareness promotion as so it can facilitate preparedness. This can include the following.

4.3.4.2.1.1 Awareness creation

There must be awareness creation in relation to health and to encourage all employees to lead a healthy lifestyle, as this could improve their chances in future pandemics. It was also important to be proactive and creating a response template for potential future pandemics was highlighted, ensuring that plans could be implemented quickly when needed.

Yes, I think what COVID-19 has taught us is that, early on, we learned that those most vulnerable were people with comorbidities. Given that scenario, the recommendation is that, even while at work, we should encourage all of our employees to lead a healthy lifestyle. If we face future pandemics, the absence of such conditions may give individuals a better fighting chance. (R6)

4.3.4.2.1.2 Increased communications

There was also a need for improved communication regarding health risks, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence there should be internal leaflets in various languages to ensure all employees received important information directly.

Communication on it. So, we tend to rely or depend on line managers and supervisors to inform the lower-level staff. But I feel like during those times when it is important communication; leaflets should be printed internally to save costs, even to hand out to staff in their different vernacular, because that is one way to ensure that every single employee gets to hear the information first hand. (R7)

4.3.4.2.1.3 Official information channels

There must be reliable central communication platform to prevent misinformation that is often circulated on social media. Broadcasting accurate information about the pandemic and its transmission is crucial and ensuring that employees engage with the information effectively.

The first thing I remember about the COVID-19 pandemic is that, at that time, everyone was constantly checking their phones for any updates. It was crucial to have a central platform to communicate information that had been vetted and was accurate. A lot of the information circulating, especially on social media, was often incorrect or misleading, which could go viral very quickly. (R4)

4.3.4.2.2 Workforce

There must be added measures from a work forces perspective.

4.3.4.2.2.1 Multi skilled workforce

There should be places for a multi-skilled workforce. Hence, establishing a cross-training matrix for employees to learn various jobs was seen as critical for maintaining productivity and flexibility across departments.

With the absenteeism we foresee, it makes sense for employees to know more than one job. The cross-training we implemented after section 189 has already introduced employees to more roles than before. We're not fully there yet, but having a training matrix in place, where employees learn five or six jobs, will improve things for the organization. (R6)

4.3.4.2.2 *Psychological and emotional management*

Managing paranoia and anxiety in the workplace was seen as a significant challenge during COVID-19. Overcoming these feelings was crucial for improving productivity and wellbeing. Hence, the presence of on-site psychologists should be considered.

Paranoia or an anxiety is the first thing to set into most people. I do not have a solution for you for that. I am not a psychologist, but I think that is the trick to get to find a way through the paranoia and concern. (R2)

4.3.4.2.3 *Risk analysis and continuity*

A concerted effort should be made into risk analysis and continuity measures.

4.3.4.2.3.1 *Proactive risk analysis*

There is a need for proactive planning and analysis to identify and address potential shortfalls to improve overall operations. Ongoing risk analysis was also needed to keep the organisation aligned with emerging health trends and developments.

I think also maybe analysing in terms of the organization or in terms of our department as well trying to be more proactive in planning. Trying to analyse or identify maybe the “what would be” shortfalls that our department has and ways in which we can improve them. I think it would also put us in a better position. (R3)

4.3.4.2.3.2 *Continuity arrangements*

There should be a preparedness template for future pandemics ensuring that the organization can quickly implement plans and respond effectively to emerging situations. Other ideas include the designing of workspaces with social distancing in relation to future pandemic considerations to ensure continuity.

In terms of social distancing, we should take that into account when designing new control rooms or workspaces. By designing with the possibility of future pandemics in mind, we can make it easier to maintain compliance with social distancing guidelines. If the workspace is already equipped for it, transitioning during a pandemic becomes smoother. (R6)

4.3.4.2.4 Resources

Resources remain crucial in preparation for future events.

4.3.4.2.4.1 Laptops

There is a need for equitable access to resources such as new computers and laptops that should be provided to all staff and not just certain departments, to ensure consistency and fairness within the organisation.

As a good example, new computers and laptops. Some of the staff still have desktops, so I think what they apply to other departments, they must be able to apply to everybody else. (R10)

4.3.4.2.4.2 Sanitisers

Ongoing promotion of hygiene in the workplace is crucial and the organisation must improve the availability of sanitisers, as existing stations were deemed insufficient for the number of employees required to be on-site.

I feel that when it comes to hygiene on site, because now most employees are required to come on site a few days a week and operations are required to be all the time on site, I think the company must do a better job to promote hygiene in the workplace and to have sanitizers more readily available. I know there are some sanitizer stations, but I think I think it's not enough. (R1)

4.4 Conclusion

The data has been analysed and four major themes have been identified, namely:

- Role's evolution and related strategies
- Challenges and mitigation
- Benefits and positive work environment
- Recommendations and future planning

The four themes will be explored further in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the analysis of the qualitative research interview results. This chapter will focus on discussion of the results. The aim of this study was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees at a refinery in Durban, South Africa, and to determine if there were any benefits from the changes implemented to counter the impact of the pandemic. This will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

5.2 Key Findings

The key findings will be discussed in alignment with the key themes:

- Role's evolvement and related strategies
- Challenges and mitigation
- Benefits and positive work environment

5.2.1 Role's evolvement and related strategies

5.2.1.1 Remote work

One of the key findings of this study was the concept of remote working or flexible work hours. Several sub themes arose and will be discussed further. The first sub theme was that of adaptation to the new working arrangements. Employees were not prepared for this change and had to adapt to the changes in work arrangements, where employees were now being asked to work from home due to quarantine restrictions implemented by the South African government.

Kaushik and Guleria (2020) posit that businesses must ensure their employees are adequately prepared for remote work. Some organizations address this by providing an allowance to help employees establish a dedicated home office for uninterrupted work when needed. This support can cover various essentials, including high-speed internet, power backups, necessary gadgets and devices, or office furniture like desks and ergonomic chairs.

Further to this, the change from traditional working at the office to working from home brought

about flexibility in working hours where employees now found that their work moved towards task based objectives allowing them freedom to complete work at their own pace and timing on condition that the task was completed before given deadlines. This change empowered employees to perform at their desired levels and increased productivity.

5.2.1.2 Employee support

Lourenco, Silva and Oliviera (2022, p. 808) posit that organizational empathy can be considered as the set of empathic emotional responses by organizations in the face of the various situations of difficulty perceived, motivating them to create and implement practices that seek to alleviate people's sufferings and seek their well-being.

Managers had to develop softer skills and practise empathy and care due to the sensitive nature of illnesses and death during the pandemic. Wellness initiatives were initiated within the organisation in an attempt to create a safer working environment. With many business units having to shut down due to quarantine restrictions, some employees were faced with a reduced income due to reduced working hours or overtime benefits resulting in managers having to coach employees to save money for these difficult periods. A sense of trust had to be developed between manager and employees whilst some worked remotely. Managers also had to be very tolerant of the situations arising from remote work when an employee was multitasking with family responsibilities.

5.2.1.3 Communication

With the implementation of quarantine and social distancing, face to face communication was limited for health safety reasons, to prevent the spread of the virus. This brought about a plethora of changes in communication where managers and employees now had to interact indirectly. The first of the tools to be used were the typical phone calls and email, which then evolved into video calls or conferencing via software like Microsoft Teams.

Microsoft Teams allows users to send instant messages, make internal calls, and collaborate on files and documents in a secure, centralized platform. It enables staff to communicate from anywhere using chat, voice, or video calls and conferences. Introduced in 2017, the platform experienced rapid growth in usage during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hargreaves, Clarke and Lester, 2022).

Managers also started using WhatsApp Groups to communicate with their teams for more direct communication. Whilst Microsoft Teams worked well for meetings and collaboration, WhatsApp Group communication was more convenient for direct communication with individuals in a group.

5.2.1.4 Health protocols

Several changes were implemented to prevent the spread of the virus. Employees were encouraged to use face masks and practise hand sanitation by regular washing of hands or using alcohol-based hand sanitisers. The masks prevented employees from spreading airborne moisture droplets from one to another, and the hand sanitisation killed bacteria and viruses on an individual's hands (Carmosino, 2020).

The concept of social distancing was introduced to create a physical gap between employees so that the virus could not physically transfer from one person to the next. Social distancing emerged as a key measure to help contain the spread of the virus. It refers to maintaining physical space between individuals. Acts like handshakes, hugs, social gatherings, close contact at work, and kissing loved ones are deeply ingrained human behaviours developed over centuries, but social distancing challenges these norms. As a precautionary step, it aims to limit the spread of COVID-19 within communities (Abbass et al, 2022).

The refinery health and safety team developed protocols which limited the number of people that could be present in offices, and meeting rooms. The refinery management installed physical screens at points of communication, for example reception and security departments, so that physical airborne droplets of moisture could not transfer from one individual to another. All people entering the refinery were screened to check their body temperature on arrival, where a high body temperature was an indication of potential COVID-19 virus infection. Employees at the refinery were also encouraged to take the COVID-19 vaccine and this later became mandatory for all employees and encouraged by the South African government.

5.2.2 Challenges

In operations, staff shortages posed a problem during the pandemic as many employees fell ill and had to take sick leave of absence. With the high rate of sick leave, this created a strain on the remaining staff to keep operations running. Many employees were impacted in terms of

being over worked and experienced exhaustion which led to poor productivity. Further to this, the issue of fairness arose in respect of which employees were allowed to work from home. The refinery addressed this with guidance that all employees performing physical work were not able to work from home for practical reasons. Office and administrative employees were allowed to work from work, where possible and practical.

Remote working, whilst possible for some, and being a new concept for the refinery brought about new challenges, for example connectivity to the internet. The refinery addressed this by giving approved employees working remotely, cellular data sim cards so that the employee was able to connect to the internet. An unexpected challenge that arose was the intermittent and erratic electricity supply from the countries energy supplier where electricity supply was periodically switched off by the service provider to save power in order to prevent to collapse of the national electricity grid in a concept come to be known as “Load Shedding”. Unfortunately, the refinery was unable to assist employees with this problem and if the problem persisted, employees had the option to come into the office to do work. Whilst remote working was encouraged, some employees were technically challenged and battled to work from home without technical support. Some employees also complained of the stress experienced in managers expecting a quick response to emails and messages.

Remote working reduced personal interaction between employees and resulted in reduced connectivity between team members. This also resulted in employees feeling isolated and a decrease in personal support from team members who used to work closely. New team members did not integrate well into the team as there was limited to no physical interaction between team members working remotely.

One major difference between regular work environments and remote work during COVID-19 is the absence of face-to-face interactions with colleagues. The widespread adoption of telework created a shared experience affecting not just a few individuals but thousands of workers. Co-workers relied on technology to stay connected and alleviate feelings of social isolation and loneliness during the pandemic (Toscano and Zappalà, 2020).

5.2.2.1 Impact of the challenges

Bloom et al (2020, p. 1) posit that “businesses anticipate a large reduction in productivity within

firms, partly because measures to contain COVID-19 are expected to increase intermediate costs”.

The main impact on operations was the decrease in productivity which was because of reduced manpower due to illness. The refinery requires operational employees to be at work to physically run the refinery and when there are multiple team members absent, it resulted in the affected sections of the operations to stop or slow down to prevent the total outage of the plant. A reduction in employees due to illness also affected dispatch of product from the warehouses which forced the plant operations to slow down due to high stock levels.

5.2.2.2 Adaptation

Managers had to adapt to the challenges stated and the main theme identified was that managers had to become more empathetic and supportive of subordinates. Managers and staff initiated a daily check in with each other as a support system to ensure that all members were aware of each other’s mental and physical health. This led to a sense of community which helped maintain morale in these challenging times. The need to be flexible was also noted due to the complications that arose from unknown problems and managers had to be supportive versus being instructive.

A leader can demonstrate empathy through both words and actions. Words serve as a strong initial indicator that the leader cares for their team, resulting in positive reactions. However, empathy must also be backed by actions that align with these words. Further to this, the ability to understand and resonate with others' emotions is an important skill for effective and visionary leadership. Empathetic leadership fosters trust, connection, and loyalty among team members, ultimately strengthening and supporting their growth (Lourenco, Silva and Oliveira, 2022).

A culture of trust was developed by teams because of persistent and unplanned staff shortages. Supervision was overworked and unable to oversee every team member forcing employees to take responsibility for their tasks and achieve targets with minimal management.

Communication during the pandemic was key, and several methods of communication were developed in line with social distancing protocols. Physical meetings were reduced and team

members joining were limited to key individuals only. Weekly MS Teams meetings were held with all team members to ensure that everything stayed on track. Communication was improved to be clear and concise using predefined agendas and sharing minutes after each meeting.

Operations increased communication of production reports to teams from weekly reports to daily reports using MS Excel tracking spreadsheets and the use of WhatsApp groups to communicate key daily production data, for example volume of product produced per day.

In certain departments, all team members were mandated to work from the office to maintain fairness, driven by the belief that if some employees were unable to work remotely, the option should not be available to the entire team. This policy primarily affected operations and supply chain staff.

Due to the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment employees were encouraged to multiskill and learn other team members jobs. Managers were required to support and drive multi-skilling with the aim being to maintain efficiencies during times of staff shortages. The COVID-19 period has pushed human resources to focus on motivating, upskilling, and reskilling employees to adapt to new technologies, manage relationships, and become multi-skilled to navigate changing economic landscapes and crises effectively (Kaushik and Guleria, 2020).

5.2.3 Benefits and positive work environment

5.2.3.1 Efficiency and productivity

This case study has found that most employees found that remote work improved productivity levels for various reasons such as, fewer distractions at home resulting in improved focus on work. There was also less time for socialising as colleagues were also working from their own homes and not in close proximity to each other. Employees working from home enjoyed flexible working times and moved from a time orientated mindset to a task-based mindset. Remote working fostered an improved work-life balance due to employees experiencing more freedom and happiness with free will. This resulted in improved productivity and efficiency.

Virtual meetings allowed for faster feedback loops with the benefit of enhanced engagement

eliminating distance between the people in the meetings. This resulted in faster problem resolution and decision making. Online meetings brought about time savings for employees with the elimination for the need to travel to a common venue for the meeting.

Online approval systems increased in number with the refinery moving towards a paperless environment. The ability to sign documents streamlined many processes making it quicker to share and file documents.

5.2.3.2 Benefits to employees

Cost savings were achieved by employees who worked from home due to the elimination of travel to work costs. Another significant benefit was the elimination of stress due to morning and afternoon traffic in the Durban Metro area. With increased time at home, some employees utilised the time to make improvements at home allowing for family interaction and preparation of healthier meals. Flexible schedules allowed for employees to complete tasks faster with employees willing to work past regular hours.

The flexibility of remote work resulted in a reduction in sick leave and an improvement in employees' health and wellbeing. Employees now choose to work from home when unwell instead of taking sick leave. The reduction in the stress of commuting to the office and spending an entire work day at the office improved immunity and helped employees to recover faster. Remote work also allowed employees flexibility to go to the gym thereby reducing stress levels and improving health and wellbeing.

5.2.3.3 Resource cost savings for the organisation

Significant savings were achieved within the organisation with work moving away to a paperless work environment. The savings achieved were in terms of less printing of documents and instead using electronic versions of the document. Electronic signing of documents was accepted and encouraged using software like Adobe PDF software. With employees not being at work, energy savings were achieved by not requiring air-conditioning, water and lighting. Smaller savings were achieved by reduced consumables requirements.

5.2.3.4 Improvement to Culture

The pandemic brought about focus on hygiene and personal safety. Employees were trained and encourage to wash hands and sanitise to prevent germ transmission. This ongoing practise

indicates a shift in culture towards health and safety awareness even beyond the pandemic. Managers ongoing efforts to improve the health and wellbeing of their staff has been an indication of their resilience.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the discussion of results explored the challenges faced by the employees and the positive changes that came out of the situation. The pandemic forced many employees to adapt to NWW, especially with the shift to remote work. This change brought about several challenges such as staff shortages and feelings of isolation among team members. However, the refinery found ways to overcome these challenges by introducing new communication tools like Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp which helped keep everyone connected. Managers also had to become more understanding and supportive showing empathy and flexibility to help their teams through difficult times.

On the positive side the study found that remote work had many benefits. Employees reported being more productive because they had fewer distractions and could work at their own pace. They also enjoyed a better work-life balance as they saved time and money by not commuting to work. The refinery itself benefited from cost savings as less paper and energy were used when employees worked from home. Additionally, the focus on health and safety during the pandemic led to a lasting change in workplace culture with employees becoming more aware of hygiene practices.

Overall, this study shows that while the pandemic brought many challenges, it also created opportunities for positive change. The refinery's ability to adapt and support its employees during this time highlights the importance of flexibility, empathy and the use of technology in the workplace.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the conclusion and recommendations derived from the key findings discussed in earlier chapters. The aim of the study was to explore the NWW of managers in a refinery in Durban, South Africa, post the COVID-19 pandemic with the intention of identifying positive outcomes from the adaptation to the changes, and furthermore making recommendations to improve on the NWW. The study utilized a qualitative approach, selecting respondents through census sampling. Data was gathered via semi-structured virtual interviews and analyzed using a thematic approach, with the results subsequently presented and discussed.

6.2 Key Findings

The study discovered that there have been several changes implemented at the refinery since the start of the pandemic, some of which include remote work, an increase in employee support, improvement in communication and improvement in health protocols. The study results reveal that remote working is a very positive benefit to those employees that are able to work remotely, in that remote working has introduced flexibility into the employee's life which has resulted in an improved work life balance. Participants noted that employee support also increased since the pandemic with the introduction of wellness initiatives to ensure that employees are safe at work from a health perspective. Further to this it was found that managers had become more empathetic having been exposed to managing difficult situations during the pandemic. These changes have resulted in employees feeling cared for and respected resulting in improved employee performance.

With the implementation of social distancing at the refinery, the study has found that with the limitations of personal contact, managers and employees were forced to communicate indirectly. This indirect communication led to the rise in popularity of digital communication with applications like Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp over and above the traditional email applications. Microsoft Teams has now become the standard protocol for meetings at the refinery as employees are unable to attend in person.

Participants responded positively about the implementation of the hygiene protocols in the refinery. Sanitising stations were introduced at all entrances of the factory and sanitiser was

freely available to all employees at their workstations. Employees were also supplied with free face masks for use at work and at home. Social distancing was also practiced at the workplace by limiting the number of people present in gatherings and meetings in a confined space or room.

Some of the main challenges identified in the study was that of staff shortages due to employees falling sick during the pandemic. This led to poor efficiencies and reduced productivity in the factory as remaining employees scrambled to keep the factory running. For those employees that were asked to work remotely, other challenges arose in that some employees some employees did not have internet connectivity at their homes, and the company had to implement solutions for these employees to be able to work remotely. To add to the complexity of remote working, South Africa's national power supplier had implemented load shedding and was not able to guarantee a constant supply of electricity. This led to further productivity and efficiency issues.

The study reveals that whilst the refinery experienced productivity challenges, administrative employees experienced positive benefits from the pandemic especially in terms of remote working. Administrative staff found that working from home allowed them to work more efficiently without the distractions of colleagues and they were able to focus and complete tasks faster resulting in more personal time, which resulted in an improved work life balance.

Employees also experienced significant cost savings in terms of transit costs to work and back home. The transit benefits extended to significant time savings as well where employees did not have to lose time travelling to work and back home. The study revealed that this additional time benefited employees personal time with family. Further to this, some employees were now able to work from home if feeling unwell versus coming in to work and compromising themselves and colleagues.

6.3 Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the importance of strengthening and promoting the NWW through targeted training and development programs for managers. Equipping managers with the skills to effectively implement, adapt, and sustain the NWW is critical to ensuring its long-term success. This study has demonstrated that the NWW has already yielded significant

benefits for employees, including increased job satisfaction, improved work-life balance, and enhanced productivity. These positive outcomes highlight the value of maintaining and further embedding the NWW within the organizational culture.

To fully realize the potential of the NWW, it is essential that its benefits are formally recognized and integrated into the company's policies and procedures. For instance, the absence of a clear remote working policy at the refinery has the potential to create misunderstandings and conflicts between managers and employees. Establishing comprehensive guidelines for remote work, including expectations, communication protocols, and performance metrics, would provide clarity and consistency, fostering a more harmonious and productive work environment.

Additionally, the successful implementation of the NWW relies on ensuring that employees have access to the necessary tools and resources to perform their roles effectively. This includes providing laptops as standard equipment for all remote workers, as well as offering subsidies for high-speed internet connections to employees who may otherwise struggle to afford them. By addressing these practical barriers, the organization can ensure that all employees are empowered to work efficiently and contribute to the company's goals, regardless of their location.

6.4 Recommendations for future research

This study focused on managers at the refinery in Durban, South Africa. Future research can be improved by expanding the study to include employees, as their perspectives and experiences are crucial in assessing the full impact of the pandemic on the organization. By incorporating employee insights, researchers will gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the pandemic affected various aspects of the workplace, such as productivity, job satisfaction, mental health, and overall organizational performance. This broader scope will provide valuable data that can help organizations develop more effective strategies for crisis management, employee support, and future preparedness.

6.5 Conclusion

This study has looked at the NWW at the refinery, including its benefits and challenges. The results show that the NWW has brought many advantages for both employees and the company and should be supported and treated as the new normal. Remote work in particular has become very popular amongst middle managers and is now a key part of the NWW. The study has found that some employees are happier and more productive because of the NWW, but more research is needed to fully understand why this is the case.

In summary, the NWW has been a positive change for the refinery, improving employee satisfaction and productivity. To keep these benefits the company should continue to support the NWW and to explore how it can be improved even further. More research will help uncover the reasons behind its success and ensure it works well for everyone.

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APPENDIX 1: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



02 September 2024

Shalendra Hemraj Jaganath (931489043)
Grad School of Bus & Leadership
Westville Campus

Dear SH Jaganath,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00007363/2024
Project title: Exploring new ways of working of managers post-pandemic at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 19 July 2024 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted FULL APPROVAL.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 02 September 2025.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dìpane Hlalele (Chair)
/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 2: GATE KEEPER'S LETTER



Prof Cecile Gerwel Proches
Graduate School of Business and Leadership
University Of KwaZulu-Natal
Westville Campus
Durban
3630

01 July 2024

Dear Prof Cecile Gerwel Proches

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

This letter serves to confirm that I hereby acknowledge and approve the research of Shalendra Hemraj Jaganath within the Tongaat Hulett Group for the completion of his MBA degree.

Sincerely,

Signature		
Date	17 July 2024	17 July 2024
Name	Zyven Rambakus	Neil French
Designation	General Manager	Commercial Executive

Signature		
Date	17 July 2024	18 July 2024
Name	Don Solomons	Sashir Milne
Designation	Route to Market Strategy Manager	Chief People Officer

Ananzimnyama Hill Road, Tongaat, 4400 • P O Box 3, Tongaat, 4400, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Telephone: +27 32 439 4000 Fax: +27 32 945 3333 • www.tongaat.com

Tip-offs anonymous - Email: Tongaat@tip-offs.com Website: www.tip-offs.com FreeCall: 0800 212 187

APPENDIX 3: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL
For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE TEMPLATE

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: 03 September 2024

Dear _____

My name is Shalendra Hemraj Jaganath from the Graduate School of Business and Leadership, UKZN, tel. no. [REDACTED] email 931489043@stu.ukzn.ac.za.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research to determine the new ways of working within a refinery in Durban, South Africa. The aim and purpose of this research is to determine the new ways of working of managers at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa, and provides recommendations for improvement. The study is expected to enroll approximately ten managers from the Refinery in Durban, South Africa, and will involve census sampling. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be 45 minutes to 60 minutes for the interview.

The study will provide no direct benefits to participants.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00007363/2024).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at tel. no. [REDACTED] email 931489043@stu.ukzn.ac.za or my supervisor, Professor Cecile Gerwel Proches at tel. no. 031 2608318, email gerwel@ukzn.ac.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary and participants may withdraw at any point, and that in the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation, the participants will not incur penalty or loss of treatment or other benefit to which they are normally entitled. There will be no consequences to the participant for withdrawal from the study and the procedure/s required from the participants for orderly withdrawal will be an email to the researcher requesting withdrawal from research participation. The researcher will terminate the participant from the study if the participant is unavailable to participate at the appointment time and is unable to postpone the survey meeting within a suitable time frame determined by the researcher.

No costs will be incurred by participants as a result of participation in the study. There are no incentives or reimbursements for participation in the study.

Participation is confidential and the participant names will not be mentioned, and codes will be used in the write up of the dissertation. Data will be saved in a safe password protected folder. As per the University rules, the data will be deleted after five years.

CONSENT

I _____ have been informed about the study entitled "Exploring the new ways of working of managers at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa" by Shalendra Hemraj Jaganath.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at tel. no. _____ email 931489043@stu.ukzn.ac.za or supervisor, Professor Cecile Gerwel Proches at tel. no. 031 2608318, email gerwel@ukzn.ac.za.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Gqozo Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable,
I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable) Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable) Date

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Question 1: What are the NWW of managers post pandemic at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa?

- How has the role of managers at the sugar refinery evolved in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly concerning remote work and team management practices?
- What specific strategies and technologies have been implemented by managers to ensure effective working amongst staff and stakeholders during/post pandemic?
- How effective are these new methods of working and its impact on the organisation?

Question 2: What are the challenges experienced by managers post-pandemic in their NWW at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa?

- What are the challenges faced by managers in the work environment given the new methods of working and the nature of the organisation in the post-pandemic era? (E.g. Operational, staff, risks, performance, productivity, communication, etc.)
- How do these challenges impact the operations of the organisation and work environment?
- How have managers adapted their management style and approach to address/mitigate the challenges posed by the pandemic?

Question 3: What are the benefits experienced by managers post-pandemic in their NWW at a sugar refinery in Durban, South Africa?

- Describe the benefits derived from the new ways/methods of working post pandemic?
- How have these benefits impacted on the organisational work environment?
- How have managers leveraged remote work arrangements post-pandemic to foster a more positive work environment?
- What lessons have managers learned from navigating the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of methods of working?

Question 4: Are there any recommendations with regards to improving the NWW?

- What are the recommendations that can be made to improve the current/new methods of working towards having a more positive organisational impact post-pandemic?
- What can be done better in the event of a similar future pandemic or situation?