



Assessing the management of remote work post-lockdown: Leveraging technology for effective integration in retail general management

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DECLARATION

I, Mamnalana Lucy Makudube, declare that this mini dissertation, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Business Administration degree within the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences at North-West University, is my work. I further state that the text and bibliography reflect the sources I have consulted, and my ideas, arguments, and conclusions are sections with no source referrals.

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To God be the glory!

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted traditional retail operations, prompting a rapid shift towards remote work and the integration of digital technologies. This study explores how retail general managers in South Africa have managed remote work post-lockdown by leveraging technology to maintain operational efficiency, employee well-being, and business continuity. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm, the research employs a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and document analysis to collect rich, in-depth data from retail managers and support staff. Thematic analysis revealed seven key themes, including the experiences of adapting to remote work, the challenges and benefits of technology adoption, the impact on productivity, and the implications for team dynamics and organisational culture. The study is grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, Social Exchange Theory, and Perceived Organisational Support (POS), providing a multidimensional understanding of technology-enabled remote work. The findings contribute to both theoretical and practical knowledge by highlighting strategies that can support sustainable remote work practices in the retail sector. Recommendations include enhancing digital infrastructure, providing continuous training, and implementing targeted well-being interventions to support the evolving nature of work.

Key terms: Remote work, retail general management, qualitative research, digital tools, employee well-being, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Perceived Organisational Support (POS), hybrid work, thematic analysis, South Africa.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial intelligence
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
HR	Human resources
IT	Information technology
JD-R	Job Demands-Resources
POPIA	Protection of Personal Information Act
POS	Perceived Organisational Support
SOP	Standard operating procedure
TAM	Technology Acceptance Model

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction to the study

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a profound disruption to organisational operations worldwide, compelling businesses across various sectors to adopt remote and hybrid working arrangements at an unprecedented pace. In the retail sector, which has traditionally depended on physical presence and direct interaction, organisations were required to swiftly reconfigure managerial and support functions to maintain operations during periods of restricted movement and national lockdowns. This sudden shift significantly altered established working methods, reshaping management practices, organisational structures, and daily interactions between managers and employees.

Globally, existing research shows that remote working enabled many organisations to continue operating during the pandemic and, in some cases, led to improved individual productivity. At the same time, it introduced a range of managerial challenges, including maintaining effective communication, monitoring performance, sustaining team cohesion, and supporting employee well-being in digitally mediated work environments (Prasad et al., 2020; Toscano and Zappalà, 2020).

The rapid shift towards remote work highlighted the growing importance of digital technologies and managerial capabilities in supporting effective work practices. Consequently, organisations were required not only to implement appropriate technological solutions but also to adapt management approaches to support employee performance and psychological well-being in remote settings (Etheridge et al., 2020).

From a regional perspective, the transition to remote work was more complex in emerging and middle-income economies. In these contexts, disparities in digital infrastructure, uneven access to reliable connectivity, and varying levels of organisational readiness influenced how effectively remote working arrangements could be implemented. Research focusing on such environments suggests that the success of remote work is closely linked to technological capability, managerial competence, and the extent of organisational support available to employees (Agarwal, 2022). These regional

differences highlight that remote work is not experienced uniformly and that contextual conditions play a critical role in determining both its benefits and limitations.

In South Africa, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on work practices was particularly significant. Government-imposed lockdown regulations required organisations across many sectors to adopt remote working arrangements at short notice, including in retail management and head office support functions. While core retail operations largely remained site-based, functions such as general management, human resources, finance, procurement, and supply chain coordination increasingly shifted to remote or hybrid working modes. Retail general managers were therefore tasked with leading geographically dispersed teams while managing challenges associated with unequal access to digital resources, increased occupational stress, and sustained performance pressures.

Locally, technology became central to enabling remote managerial practices. Digital collaboration platforms, cloud-based systems, and communication technologies played a key role in coordinating operations, monitoring performance, and maintaining organisational continuity. However, the effectiveness of these tools depended largely on how they were perceived and utilised by managers and employees, as well as on the level of organisational support provided. Addressing occupational stress and supporting employee well-being emerged as particularly important considerations during this period, especially within high-pressure sectors such as retail (Prasad et al., 2020).

Against this background, the present study explores how technological solutions support remote work from the perspective of retail general management in South Africa. It focuses on the experiences of retail general managers, the technologies used to enable remote working, the challenges encountered, and the strategies adopted to manage dispersed teams. By situating the study within the post-COVID-19 retail environment, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how retail general managers in emerging economies navigate technology-enabled work arrangements while balancing performance demands and employee well-being. The sections that follow outline the background to the study, the research problem, the research objectives and questions, and the significance of the study.

1.2 Background

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, global businesses have been confronted by unprecedented disruptions, prompting widespread adoption of remote work as a crucial continuity strategy (Jooss *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2021). This shift marked a significant change for the retail industry, which was traditionally reliant on face-to-face interactions and physical presence as the only mode for business transactions between consumers and retailers. In response to government-imposed lockdowns and social distancing mandates, retailers swiftly transitioned to digital platforms and embraced remote working solutions, giving rise to entering the e-commerce space by adopting technologies in retail followed by increased number of online purchases.

Technology integration into business processes has been pivotal in facilitating this transition. It enabled remote collaboration, communication, and management with the help of tools like cloud computing, video conferencing, project management software, and e-commerce platforms. These technologies are now integral to remote work infrastructures and are essential for ensuring seamless operations across geographic boundaries and time zones in the context of retail, marketing, finance, and supply chain management (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021; Jackowska, Luring, 2021; Sharma *et al.*, 2022). In essence, the integration of technology in retail businesses empowers retail managers to oversee operations, coordinate teams, and optimise supply chains remotely, while also enhancing customer engagement. Despite the initial success of the adoption of remote work, the retail sector continues to grapple with challenges in optimising these technological solutions for long-term effectiveness. Critical concerns for retail managers include cybersecurity, employee productivity, technological proficiency, and maintenance of customer service standards. In addition, the human dynamics of remote work, encompassing employee well-being, work-life balance, and team cohesion, remain critically important and require ongoing attention.

Understanding the impact of technology on remote work management within the retail sector is crucial for developing effective management strategies. This study aims to provide a detailed analysis of how retail general managers integrate technology for remote work management, their challenges, and the solutions they implement. By

examining these elements, this research seeks to offer valuable insights into the evolving practices of managing staff remotely in the retail industry and beyond.

1.3 Problem statement

In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the way retail organisations managed their operations. While core retail activities largely remained site-based, many managerial and support functions such as general management, human resources, finance, procurement, and supply chain coordination were required to shift rapidly to remote or hybrid work arrangements. This transition occurred in a context characterised by uneven digital infrastructure, varying levels of technological readiness, and limited prior experience with remote management within the retail sector.

In South African retail organisations, retail general managers play a critical role in coordinating geographically dispersed teams, ensuring operational continuity, and maintaining performance under high-pressure conditions. However, the sudden shift to remote work has exposed several challenges. Many retail' general managers had limited prior experience managing remote teams and were required to rely heavily on digital technologies without adequate preparation, training, or organisational support. Research suggests that the effective integration of technology into work practices depends not only on the availability of digital tools but also on managerial capability, experience, and understanding of the human implications of technology-enabled work (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

Despite the widespread adoption of remote work during and after the pandemic, there is limited empirical understanding of how retail general managers effectively utilise technology to manage remote teams in the South African retail sector. In practice, some managers lack the necessary skills to address challenges such as maintaining team cohesion, monitoring performance, managing cyber security risks, and safeguarding data privacy in virtual work environments (Olson & Olson, 2000). Furthermore, structured training and formal organisational guidance on remote management and technology use remain inconsistent across the retail sector. These gaps increase the risk of diminished managerial effectiveness, employee disengagement, and operational inefficiencies.

Furthermore, the South African context presents additional challenges, including unequal access to reliable connectivity and increased occupational stress, which may intensify the demands placed on retail general managers in South Africa. While the global literature highlights both the benefits and challenges of remote work, there is a notable lack of context-specific research examining how retail general managers in South Africa navigate technology-enabled remote work arrangements and balance performance demands with employee well-being.

Against this background, the central problem addressed in this study is the limited understanding of how technology facilitates effective remote work management among retail general managers in South Africa. Therefore, this study investigates the challenges encountered, the strategies adopted to integrate technology into managerial practices, and the implications of these practices for operational resilience, efficiency, and employee productivity in the post-pandemic retail environment. The research objectives and questions arising from this problem are outlined in the following sections.

1.4 Research aim

This research aims to offer valuable contributions to theoretical and practical understandings of remote work management for managers in the retail sector through incorporating technology in management of remote work within the retail sector using specific approaches. Furthermore, the study also explores the need for effective strategies to manage and optimise remote work practices in the post-pandemic era. Of note, we examine how technology can effectively be utilised from the managers' perspective.

1.5 Research objectives

1.5.1 objective

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate how digital tools and platforms can enhance operational efficiency, productivity, and employee engagement in a remote work setting within the retail sector.

Secondary objective

The secondary objective of this study is to evaluate the impact of technology integration on operational efficiency, employee well-being, and business performance of general management within the retail sector.

1.6 Research question

The current study's primary research question is the following: How can general managers in the retail sector effectively integrate technology to manage remote work in the post-pandemic era?

1.7 Significance of the study

The significance of this study is to provide insights into navigating challenges and capitalising on opportunities associated with remote work for general management in the retail sector. Results and findings may lead to include pioneering work such as adoption of modern digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI), into remote retail management processes and practices.

1.8 Research Gap

Although remote and hybrid work have been widely examined since the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the available research is concentrated in knowledge-intensive sectors within developed economy settings. As a result, there remains limited empirical understanding of how remote work is managed in the retail sector, particularly at the level of retail general management where operational demands, customer facing realities, and the need for real time coordination shape management practice.

Within South Africa, these challenges are intensified by contextual factors such as uneven digital infrastructure, variable access to reliable connectivity, and differing levels of organisational readiness for technology enabled work. Despite the rapid adoption of remote and hybrid work for head office and management related functions during and after the pandemic, there is still insufficient context specific evidence on how retail general

managers integrate digital tools to maintain operational coordination, productivity, employee engagement, and wellbeing.

This study responds to this gap by exploring the experiences and perceptions of retail general managers in South Africa regarding technology enabled remote work management. A detailed review of the relevant literature and theoretical framing that informs the study is presented in **Chapter 2**.

1.8 Limitations

In conducting this research on the effectiveness of remote work integration within the retail sector, several limitations have been identified. These limitations could impact various aspects of the study, from data collection to the generalisability of the findings (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: Limitations of the study

Limitation	Description	Impact	Mitigation strategy
Sample size	A small sample size may limit robustness and generalisability.	Results might not accurately reflect broader population experiences.	Justify sample size based on qualitative research standards.
Retrospective bias	Participants' recollections may be influenced by current perspectives.	Reliability of data may be compromised.	Use triangulation by validating responses with document analysis.
Scope of change management	Limited analysis of change	May not capture the full spectrum of change processes.	Complement findings with literature on

	management aspects.		organisational change.
Qualitative research limitations	Subjectivity in data interpretation and lack of generalisability.	Findings may offer rich insights but may not be broadly applicable.	Maintain reflexivity and use multiple data sources.
Focus on retail sector	Findings may not be applicable to other industries.	Remote work experiences can vary by environment and culture.	Acknowledge sector-specific insights and discuss broader applicability.

1.9 Delimitations

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), delimitations are the geographic boundaries or conceptual scope of a research study established by the researcher. They specify what is included and excluded, outlining the research focus. In this study, certain delimitations were considered during the study design (**Table 1.2**).

Table 1.2: Delimitations of the study

Delimitation	Description
Industry scope	The study focuses exclusively on remote work within the retail sector.
Geographical scope	Research is limited to employees within a specific organisation in Gauteng Province, South Africa.
Participation criteria	Participants are selected based on their involvement in remote work in the retail industry.

Methodological scope	The study employs qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and document analysis.
Time frame	The study examines remote work trends within a specified time.

To ensure a manageable study scope while capturing the diverse retail contexts, the research primarily focussed on the Gauteng Province, South Africa where the main support office is located. This office served as a key hub for operations in the province and was frequented by personnel from approximately 300 surrounding stores. This geographic focus offered a rich and varied sample of retail businesses, which enabled a comprehensive exploration of remote work management practices and challenges within the South African retail landscape.

1.10 Mitigating strategies

Addressing power imbalances was a critical consideration in this study, particularly given the potential disparity between employee participants and their line managers. To mitigate this imbalance, several measures were implemented. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation was used to cross-verify data from interviews, documents, and observations. Member checking involved participants reviewing and validating interview transcripts and the researcher's interpretations. In essence, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to acknowledge and minimise potential researcher bias.

1.11 Summary and Outline

This chapter introduced the background and context of the study, highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic sped up the adoption of remote and hybrid work and increased reliance on digital technologies in retail management. The chapter presented the problem statement, research aim, objectives, and research question, as well as the significance and scope of the study. It also briefly outlined the research gap that the study seeks to address.

The remainder of the dissertation is structured as follows. **Chapter 2** provides a review of the relevant literature and theoretical perspectives relating to remote and hybrid work, technology integration, and employee wellbeing in the context of retail management. **Chapter 3** outlines the research methodology, including the research design, sampling approach, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. **Chapter 4** presents and interprets the study findings, organised into the main themes that emerged from the data and contextualised with relevant literature. **Chapter 5** concludes the study by synthesising the findings, presenting conclusions aligned to the research objectives, outlining recommendations for practice and future research, and providing final remarks.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 catalysed a rapid and sustained shift towards remote and hybrid work across industries, including segments of the retail sector where management and support functions could be performed away from store sites. For retail organisations, this transition altered management practices that were historically grounded in physical presence and direct supervision. Increased reliance on digital platforms reshaped coordination, communication, performance monitoring, and decision-making processes, while simultaneously raising concerns around employee engagement, well-being, accountability, and organisational culture in dispersed work arrangements.

This chapter reviews literature relevant to technology-enabled remote and hybrid work in retail general management. The review is structured into five sections. **Section 2.2** outlines the theoretical frameworks guiding the study, namely the Technology Acceptance Model, Perceived Organisational Support theory, and the Job Demands–Resources model. **Section 2.3** synthesises empirical literature on technology use, leadership practices, employee well-being, productivity, accountability, and organisational culture in remote and hybrid work contexts, with emphasis on retail where available. **Section 2.4** situates the discussion within the South African context, highlighting infrastructural constraints, inequality, and organisational readiness. Section 2.5 integrates the reviewed literature to identify research gaps that motivate the study’s research question and objectives. The chapter concludes with a summary in **Section 2.6**.

2.2 Theoretical framework: TAM, POS and JD-R

This study is informed by three complementary theoretical lenses that together explain technology adoption, organisational support, accountability, and well-being in remote work contexts.

2.3 Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model explains how individuals come to accept and use technology through perceptions of ease of use and usefulness. In remote and hybrid retail settings, these perceptions influence whether managers and employees integrate digital tools into daily operations such as communication, coordination, and performance monitoring. Extensions of TAM, including TAM3, highlight the importance of self-efficacy and user confidence in technology adoption, which are salient in remote work environments where employees rely heavily on digital platforms for task completion and interaction.

The TAM was introduced by Davis (1989). It provides a framework for understanding user acceptance and adoption of new technologies, focusing on the user's perceived ease of use and usefulness. Subsequent extensions of the TAM, such as TAM3 (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008) and AR-TAM (Leue *et al.*, 2014), have incorporated additional factors including computer self-efficacy and perceived enjoyment. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of collaboration tools such as Zoom® and Microsoft Teams®.

This highlighted the importance of these online tools in maintaining communication and collaboration in remote work environments (Etheridge *et al.*, 2020). Social influence and organisational culture are also critical factors influencing technology adoption within the workplace (Agarwal & Prasad, 2000; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2017). Venkatesh *et al.* (2021) reaffirmed the relevance of TAM for understanding technology integration in remote work contexts. Moreover, Pantano *et al.* (2018) emphasised the importance of user-friendly interfaces and AI-driven support tools for enhancing productivity.

Effective change management strategies, with clear communication and training, are essential for successfully adopting technology (Kotter, 1996; Agarwal, 2022). In the same way, robust information technology (IT) support and regular virtual check-ins are crucial in addressing user challenges (Smite *et al.*, 2022). Generally, digital workplace initiatives must emphasise user-friendly tools and platforms while promoting knowledge sharing (Bertot *et al.*, 2018; Wenger, 2000).

In addition, Prasad *et al.* (2020) discussed the need for digital literacy and continuous learning to ensure employees can effectively utilise new technologies.

2.4 Perceived Organisational Support (POS)

Perceived Organisational Support (POS) theory focuses on employees' beliefs regarding the extent to which their organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being. In remote retail contexts, POS is critical in mitigating isolation and sustaining engagement, particularly where physical interaction is limited. Access to appropriate digital tools, training, communication, and managerial visibility signal organisational support and influence motivation and commitment.

The POS theory, introduced by Eisenberger *et al.* (1986), centres on employees' perception of how much their organisation values their contributions and show concern for their well-being. This concept is particularly pertinent in remote work environments, where employees may feel isolated and disconnected from their teams and the broader organisational structure.

Research reports consistently demonstrates that employees who perceive higher levels of support from their organisation are more likely to remain engaged and productive, especially in remote settings (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In the retail sector, where remote work is a relatively new phenomenon, POS plays a crucial role in maintaining employee morale and well-being.

Retail managers must ensure that remote employees have access to appropriate digital resources and feel connected to their teams, even when working from disparate locations (Allen *et al.*, 2020). This is essential for sustaining employee motivation and minimising feelings of isolation, which can negatively impact performance and productivity.

2.5 Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model

The JD-R model explains how job demands and resources interact to shape employee well-being and performance. In remote retail management, digital technologies may function as job resources by enhancing coordination and efficiency, while simultaneously becoming job demands when they increase workload, blur work–life boundaries, or

contribute to technostress. This dual role provides a useful framework for interpreting how technology affects accountability, productivity, and burnout in remote and hybrid settings. The JD-R model, as discussed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), emphasises the importance of balancing job demands with available resources to maintain employee well-being. According to numerous reports from Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2020), Schaufeli and Taris (2014), and Bakker *et al.* (2007), technology plays a vital role in this balance by streamlining tasks and enhancing communication, which can alleviate job demands and help prevent burnout.

Additionally, self-efficacy and the belief in one's own abilities have had a significant impact on job performance (Bandura, 1997; Christensen & Knezek, 2015; Bubou & Job, 2022; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). Toscano and Zappalà (2020) and Golden and Veiga (2005) have also highlighted that effective remote work management, characterised by structured support, clear communication, and adequate resource access, can significantly enhance job satisfaction.

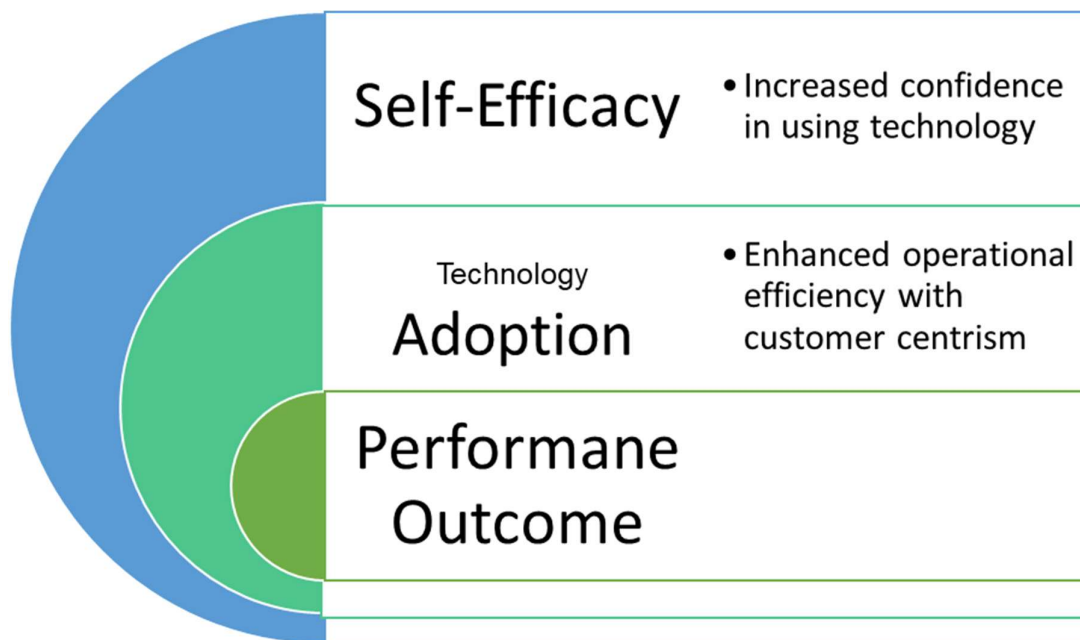
Furthermore, using technological tools such as project management software and communication platforms can mitigate the challenges of remote work and foster better connectivity (Etheridge *et al.*, 2020; Gilson *et al.*, 2015). These insights underscore the critical role of technology in creating a supportive remote work environment that enhances well-being and productivity.

Moreover, technology integration can further enhance productivity and operational processes (Golden & Gajendran, 2019). It facilitates data-driven decision-making, enabling more informed strategic decisions (Davenport *et al.*, 2010). Kniffin *et al.* (2020) contend that remote work strategies must continuously adapt to align with business goals. Nevertheless, technology drives innovation and competitive advantage in most businesses (Chuang & Hsu, 2010).

Kossek and Lautsch (2018) identified several challenges associated with remote work, such as managing cybersecurity risks, ensuring data privacy, and maintaining team cohesion in a virtual environment (Olson & Olson, 2000). However, remote work also presents opportunities, including access to a global talent pool, reduced overhead costs, and enhanced work flexibility.

Figure 2.1 illustrates the interconnectedness of self-efficacy, technology adoption, and performance outcomes. It highlights the importance of self-efficacy in driving technology adoption and ultimately leading to positive performance outcomes. Confidence-building workshops and goal-setting training can further enhance self-efficacy. Comprehensive technology training and ongoing support are essential for effective technology use (Camp *et al.*, 2022).

Figure 2.1: Interconnectedness of self-efficacy, technology adoption, and performance outcome



Together these frameworks guide the interpretation of findings in Chapter 4 by linking technology adoption, organisational support, and work design to managerial effectiveness and employee outcomes.

2.6 Empirical literature on remote and hybrid work

2.6.1 Remote and hybrid work models in retail

Remote and hybrid work models vary in structure and implications for flexibility, collaboration, and operational control. In retail, hybrid models are often favoured because

they allow administrative and managerial tasks to be performed remotely while preserving in-person interaction for store operations. The rapid adoption of remote and hybrid work models due to the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed industries like retail. Traditionally reliant on in-person interactions, the retail sector was forced to re-evaluate its operational frameworks to maintain business continuity (Prasad *et al.*, 2020; Kniffin *et al.*, 2020).

Remote work models including fully remote, hybrid, and office-first, each present unique challenges in maintaining operational efficiency and employee cohesion, especially in the retail sector (Heffernan *et al.*, 2023). This shift highlights the importance of structured remote work management practices. **Table 2.1** illustrates the varied structures of remote work and hybrid models, outlining the trade-offs between flexibility, collaboration, and operational efficiency.

Understanding these models helps retail managers choose the best approach for their teams, considering factors such as employee autonomy, office culture, and the challenges of maintaining cohesion in remote settings.

Table 2.1: Remote work models (Yarooms, 2020)

Model	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
Fixed hybrid	Employees follow a set schedule for in-office and remote workdays.	Predictability and continuous structure.	Limited flexibility.
Flexible hybrid	Employees have autonomy to choose when to work remotely or go into the office.	Increased flexibility that caters to individual preferences.	Potential lack of structure leading to confusion about availability.

Office-first hybrid	The office is the primary work location, with remote work allowed on certain days.	Strong office culture that promotes collaboration.	Less flexibility for remote workers.
Remote-first hybrid	Remote work is the default, with occasional office visits for meetings or team activities.	Maximises flexibility while simultaneously reducing office costs.	Limited in-person interaction, challenges with team cohesion.
Fully remote	Employees work entirely outside of the office.	Increased flexibility, a broader talent pool, and environmental benefits.	Communication barriers, isolation, and work-life balance challenges.
Hybrid remote	A mix of remote and in-office employees within a company.	Offers balance for different work styles and job functions.	Requires clear communication and management strategies.
Remote teams	Specific teams or departments work independently from various locations.	Allows specialisation and remote talent acquisition.	May be siloed from other teams within the company

Each remote work model has its own unique advantages and disadvantages, and the best choice for an organisation will depend on its specific needs, culture, and employee preferences. In the current study, the hybrid model was the focus as it offers the most

balance between flexibility for employees and operational efficiency for retail managers (Prasad *et al.*, 2020).

The hybrid model allows for both in-person collaboration critical in retail for activities such as stock management and customer service, as well as remote work, which has become increasingly necessary for administrative tasks and reducing overhead costs (Heffernan *et al.*, 2023).

Additionally, hybrid models accommodate varying work styles, promoting employee satisfaction and engagement (Smith, 2021), aligning with the research objectives of improving both operational efficiency and employee well-being.

2.7 Technology adoption and use

Empirical studies highlight the growing reliance on digital tools, such as cloud-based communication platforms, CRM systems, and inventory management software in retail management. Perceived usefulness, ease of use, and organisational support, particularly during post-pandemic transitions, shapes technology adoption.

COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of technology in the retail sector, particularly for managing remote work. According to Heffernan *et al.* (2023), retail companies increasingly turned to digital tools like cloud-based communication systems, collaborative software, and e-commerce platforms to facilitate the transition to remote work. Technology adoption, however, is not without its challenges.

Many retail managers struggled with integrating these tools into pre-existing operational frameworks, leading to inefficiencies in managing both in-store and remote staff. The integration of technology into retail management in the post-COVID-19 era now focuses on leveraging tools such as CRM systems, inventory management software, and digital collaboration platforms to streamline operations. For example, the implementation of CRM systems enables retail managers to track customer interactions, manage team performance remotely, and maintain a high level of service across digital and physical spaces (Petit, 2024). Inventory management tools also play a crucial role in ensuring

stock levels are maintained across multiple store locations without the need for physical presence of a manager.

Several factors influence technology adoption, including ease of use, perceived usefulness, and organisational support. Retail organisations must address these factors to ensure the successful implementation of remote work technologies (Davis, 1989).

Based on research conducted by Van Zoonen *et al.* (2021), these factors can be categorised into four distinct types: structural, relational, contextual, and moderating factors (**Table 2.2**). Understanding these factors is essential for retail managers seeking to facilitate a smoother transition for their teams in a post-pandemic landscape. Moreover, each factor can be articulated in relation to its role in facilitating or hindering the integration of new technologies, such as cloud-based communication tools and inventory management systems.

By identifying these influences, retail organisations can better tailor their strategies for technology adoption, ensuring that employees are equipped to maintain productivity and communication in a remote working environment.

Table 2.2: Factors influencing the adjustment to and adoption of remote work (Van Zoonen et al., 2021)

Factor type	Specific factor	Description
Structural factors	Work independence.	The ability to complete tasks independently without continual interaction with colleagues can positively influences adjustment and technology adjustment as employees who can work autonomously may find it easier to integrate new tools into their workflow.
	Clarity of job criteria.	Clear and explicit job criteria help employees manage their work more effectively while understanding how new technologies can be

		used. This leads to better adjustment and smoother adoption.
Relational factors	Interpersonal trust.	Higher levels of trust in colleagues and supervisors were found to negatively impact adjustment. However, if trust that technology is beneficial and supported by their peers, employees are more likely to adopt it.
	Social isolation.	Feelings of social isolation negatively affect adjustment to remote work and can either hinder or motivate the adoption of communication technologies that help bridge the gap between remote employees and their teams.
Contextual factors	Change in work location.	A significant change in work location (for example, from office to home) negatively impacts adjustment but often necessitates the adoption of new technologies to maintain productivity and communication.
	Perceived disruption.	Greater disruption in work routines and practices, such as those caused by the pandemic, negatively affects adjustment and may influence openness to adoption of new technologies that promise to restore some level of normalcy.
Moderating factors	Organisational communication quality.	High-quality communication within the organisation can positively influence adjustment and usage of new technologies, although its impact on mitigating negative relational factors is limited.

	Communication technology use.	Frequent use of existing communication technologies can make the transition to new tools smoother, as employees are already accustomed to interactions across digital media.
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2.8 Synthesis: Challenges and Opportunities in Remote Retail Management

Empirical studies have highlighted persistent challenges in remote retail management.

2.8.1 Employee training and support for technology adoption

Continuous training and support are essential for employees to successfully adopt new technologies, particularly in remote work settings. Organisations in the retail sector should establish ongoing training programs to accommodate various skill levels and learning preferences. These programs can take the form of virtual workshops, webinars, and on-demand resources to ensure that all employees have access to the information they need (Vogel *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, providing a dedicated support system, such as a help desk or online forums, can help employees troubleshoot issues as they arise and reinforce their confidence in using new technologies. By prioritising training and support, organisations can enhance employee engagement and productivity, ultimately leading to a more effective remote working environment.

2.8.2 Measuring and evaluating technology effectiveness

To ensure that technology integration in remote work settings meets performance standards, organisations should regularly measure and evaluate the effectiveness of their chosen tools and processes. This involves collecting data on key performance indicators related to productivity, employee satisfaction, and communication effectiveness.

Regular feedback from employees can also provide valuable insights into the user experience and identify areas for improvement (Sullivan *et al.*, 2022). By establishing a culture of continuous evaluation, organisations can adapt their technology strategies to better meet the evolving needs of their remote workforce and drive long-term success.

2.8.3 Challenges and opportunities in managing remote work

Retail managers face unique challenges when it is required of them to remotely maintain customer service and manage supply chains. Leaders in the retail sector must adapt to the increasing reliance on digital solutions without compromising operational efficiency. Digital tools, including e-commerce platforms and CRM systems, are critical for improving operational efficiency in this context (Smith, 2021).

These technologies facilitate better communication, enhance data analysis capabilities, and streamline processes, which allow retailers to respond swiftly to market demands and consumer expectations. Integrating CRM tools requires careful planning and training to ensure smooth adoption. Retail managers must identify the specific needs of their organisation and provide comprehensive training to staff members that will enable them to utilise such tools effectively.

An example from retail management illustrates how inventory management systems streamline operations across multiple stores (Petit, 2024). Implementing a digital inventory management system can significantly reduce discrepancies and enhance stock visibility, enabling managers to make informed decisions about stock levels and replenishment strategies. By providing real-time data on inventory status, these systems allow retailers to optimise their supply chain processes, thereby reducing costs associated with excess inventory and stockouts.

2.8.4 Challenges

The retail sector faces unique challenges in implementing remote work models due to the operational nature of retail jobs. However, for back-office functions such as HR and marketing, remote work offers flexibility and potential cost reductions (Mabaso & Manuel, 2024). Nevertheless, certain tasks, such as on-the-job training, creative merchandising, and customer engagement, are more effectively done in person.

The overall transition to remote work in retail management, however, presents several challenges. A key issue is employee engagement as retail employees, particularly those

in customer-facing roles, may struggle to remain engaged when working remotely due to the lack of in-person interaction (Kniffin *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, this significant portion of the retail workforce, must always be physically present in stores or warehouses, which limits opportunities for remote work and potentially exacerbates social inequalities. Subsequently, employees may struggle to find a balance between work and home life, particularly those in time-sensitive roles such as inventory management or online order processing, which may lead to burnout.

Managing employee performance remotely also poses difficulties, as traditional supervision methods are less effective in a virtual environment (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). Another challenge is promoting team collaboration. Virtual platforms, such as Microsoft Teams® and Slack®, have helped bridge the gap, but they cannot fully replicate the collaborative environment of in-person meetings.

In relation to this point is the significance of reliable internet access, which in developing regions or rural areas, may become a challenge making remote work less feasible. Retail managers must also work to maintain a unified organisational culture, which can deteriorate when employees are dispersed across remote locations. Remote work can lead to psychological and emotional stress due to isolation from colleagues, especially for employees who thrive in team-oriented environments.

2.9 Leadership, accountability and operational coordination

Remote leadership requires clear goal-setting, performance monitoring, and trust-based accountability mechanisms. Digital dashboards and project management tools enable oversight without constant physical supervision, though their effectiveness depends on leadership practices and organisational readiness.

Effective leadership is crucial for managing remote teams, particularly in the retail sector, where employee engagement and productivity can significantly impact overall performance.

Leaders must foster an environment of open communication and collaboration to ensure that remote employees feel connected and supported (Northouse, 2018). This usually

involves establishing clear goals, providing regular feedback, and proactively encouraging team members to share their thoughts and ideas.

Furthermore, leaders should promote a culture of accountability in a positive manner, where employees are empowered to take ownership of their responsibilities while also being held accountable for their performance. By adopting these best practices, leaders can create a more cohesive and motivated remote workforce.

2.10 Employee well-being, engagement and social dynamics

Remote work literature consistently identifies social isolation, blurred boundaries, and reduced informal interaction as risks to well-being and engagement. These challenges are relevant in retail, where teamwork and visibility traditionally support motivation and performance.

isolation can have negative impacts on employees' adjustment to remote work. There is a critical link between social dynamics and the overall effectiveness of remote work arrangements. The descriptions provided in **Table 2.3** detail how feelings of disconnection, reduced job satisfaction, decreased productivity, and increased stress and anxiety are interconnected, which can significantly affect employees' well-being and job performance.

The findings from Van Zoonen *et al.* (2021) underscore the importance of fostering social connections and addressing the emotional aspects of remote work to enhance employee adjustment and productivity.

Table 2.3: Impact of social isolation on remote work adjustment (Van Zoonen et al., 2021)

Negative impact	Description
Feelings of disconnection	Social isolation can lead to a sense of disconnection from colleagues, negatively impacting an employee's ability to adjust to remote work. This disconnection can result in feelings of

	loneliness and a lack of belonging, which are detrimental to mental well-being and job satisfaction.
Reduced job satisfaction	The absence of informal interactions and social support from colleagues can reduce job satisfaction. Employees may miss out on the camaraderie and spontaneous interactions that typically occur in a traditional office setting.
Decreased productivity	Social isolation can lead to decreased productivity. Without immediate support and feedback from colleagues, employees may struggle to stay motivated and focused on their tasks.
Increased stress and anxiety	The lack of social interactions may increase stress and anxiety, making it harder for employees to balance work and personal life effectively.

2.11 Cybersecurity, risk and control

Remote work increases exposure to cybersecurity risks, requiring robust organisational strategies such as secure access protocols, training, and authentication systems to protect data and maintain operational resilience. Cybersecurity is another major concern, as remote work increases the risk of data breaches. Retail companies must implement robust cybersecurity measures, such as virtual private networks, endpoint security, and multi-factor authentication, to protect sensitive customer and company data (Rahman & Yulianti, 2023). According to Lund *et al.* (2020), specific challenges persist in the context of cybersecurity (**Table 2.4**). Retail managers must ensure robust cybersecurity measures, such as secure remote access protocols, to safeguard

In addition to cybersecurity concerns, employee isolation is a growing issue in remote work. Remote retail employees often report feelings of disconnection from their teams, which can hinder productivity and team cohesion (Toscano & Zappalà, 2020).

Regular check-ins and virtual team-building activities are essential to address this challenge and maintain employee morale (Jailobaev *et al.*, 2021).

Table 2.4: Remote work cyber security strategies (Rahman & Yulianti, 2023)

Cybersecurity	Strategy	Description	Effectiveness	Link to remote work
Employee training and awareness	Training sessions	Educating employees about security best practices, including recognising phishing attempts.	Reduces the likelihood of human error, which is a common vulnerability in cybersecurity.	Enhances the ability of remote workers to identify threats, improving security posture.
Endpoint security solutions	Security software	Deploying antivirus, firewalls, and intrusion detection systems to protect remote devices.	Ensures all devices used by remote workers are secure and compliant with organisational policies.	Protects devices accessed remotely, which may be more vulnerable to cyber threats.
Regular software updates and patching	Software maintenance	Keeping software up to date to protect against vulnerabilities through regular updates.	Minimises exploitation risks by ensuring that known security flaws are patched promptly.	Essential for remote devices that may access organisational resources, which maintains overall security.

Data encryption	Data protection	Encrypting data both at rest and in transit to safeguard sensitive information.	Protects data integrity and confidentiality, making it unreadable to unauthorised parties.	Crucial for remote workers accessing sensitive data, ensuring that intercepted data remains secure.
Password less authentication	Enhanced login security	Replaces traditional passwords with client certificates and Public Key Infrastructure.	Reduces risk of credential theft and improves user experience.	Facilitates secure access for remote workers without the need for managing multiple passwords.
Multi-factor authentication	Additional security layer	Incorporates multiple verification factors, such as one-time pins and biometric authentication.	Significantly lowers the risk of unauthorised access.	Enhances security for remote access, especially when using potentially insecure networks.
Virtual Private Networks	Secure Connection	Creates an encrypted tunnel for secure communication between	Protects data from interception, ensuring confidentiality	Essential for remote workers using public Wi-Fi, securing connections to

		remote employees and the internal network.	during remote access.	company resources.
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2.12 South African context: infrastructure, inequality and readiness

In South Africa, the implementation of remote and hybrid work is shaped by uneven digital infrastructure, variable access to reliable connectivity, and organisational capability differences. Scheduled rolling power outages, reliance on mobile internet, and socio-economic inequality influence the feasibility and effectiveness of technology-enabled work.

These contextual constraints distinguish South African retail from settings commonly represented in international remote work literature and underscore the need for context-sensitive approaches.

2.13 Synthesis and research gaps

Empirical studies have highlighted persistent challenges in remote retail management, including sustaining engagement, coordinating interdependent workflows, and managing cybersecurity risks (Rahman & Yulianti, 2023). Retail managers must also contend with unequal role suitability for remote work, as many customer-facing functions require a physical presence.

Simultaneously, opportunities include increased flexibility for administrative roles, broader access to specialised talent, and cost efficiencies through reduced physical infrastructure (Heffernan et al., 2023). Effective leadership, training, and technology selection have been consistently identified as critical enablers of successful remote work outcomes.

Synthesising the reviewed literature reveals several gaps. First, empirical research on remote work has focused predominantly on knowledge-intensive sectors, with limited attention to retail general management.

Second, few studies examine the interaction between technology adoption, organisational support, and managerial well-being within retail contexts.

Third, South African-specific evidence remains scarce, particularly regarding how infrastructural instability and inequality shape remote work outcomes. Fourth, limited research integrates TAM, POS, and JD-R frameworks to explain technology-enabled management in retail. Finally, qualitative insights into managerial experiences remain underrepresented.

These gaps justify the study's focus on exploring how retail general managers in South Africa integrate technology into the management of remote and hybrid work.

2.14 Summary

This chapter reviewed theoretical and empirical literature relevant to technology-enabled remote and hybrid work in retail general management. Drawing on TAM, POS, and the JD-R model, the review highlighted how technology adoption, organisational support, and work design shape productivity, accountability, and well-being.

Empirical evidence showed both the opportunities and challenges of remote and hybrid work in retail, while the South African context underscored the influence of infrastructural and socio-economic constraints.

The chapter identified clear research gaps that inform the study's research question and provide the foundation for the methodology outlined in **Chapter 3**.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed to investigate how retail general managers in South Africa integrate technology to manage remote work in the post pandemic context.

It presents the research design, philosophical positioning, approach, sampling strategy, data collection methods, and procedures used to analyse the data. The chapter also addresses issues of trustworthiness and ethical compliance to ensure the credibility and integrity of the study.

3.2 Research design and philosophical positioning

This study is positioned within an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism is concerned with understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences within specific social and organisational contexts. Given the exploratory nature of this study and its focus on managers' lived experiences of remote work, an interpretivist stance was considered appropriate, as it allows for rich, context sensitive insights to emerge (Saunders et al., 2019).

Rather than seeking generalisable causal relationships, the study aimed to understand how retail general managers perceive, interpret, and respond to the challenges of technology enabled remote work.

This philosophical positioning supports an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences and aligns with qualitative inquiry, where meaning is socially constructed rather than objectively measured.

3.3 Background to research method

The Research Onion Framework (Saunders *et al.*, 2016) as illustrated in **Figure 1.1**, guided this research, beginning with the outer layers of philosophy and approach, while

working inward to the specific methods of data collection and analyses. In addition, the ethical considerations for this study will also be outlined and discussed.

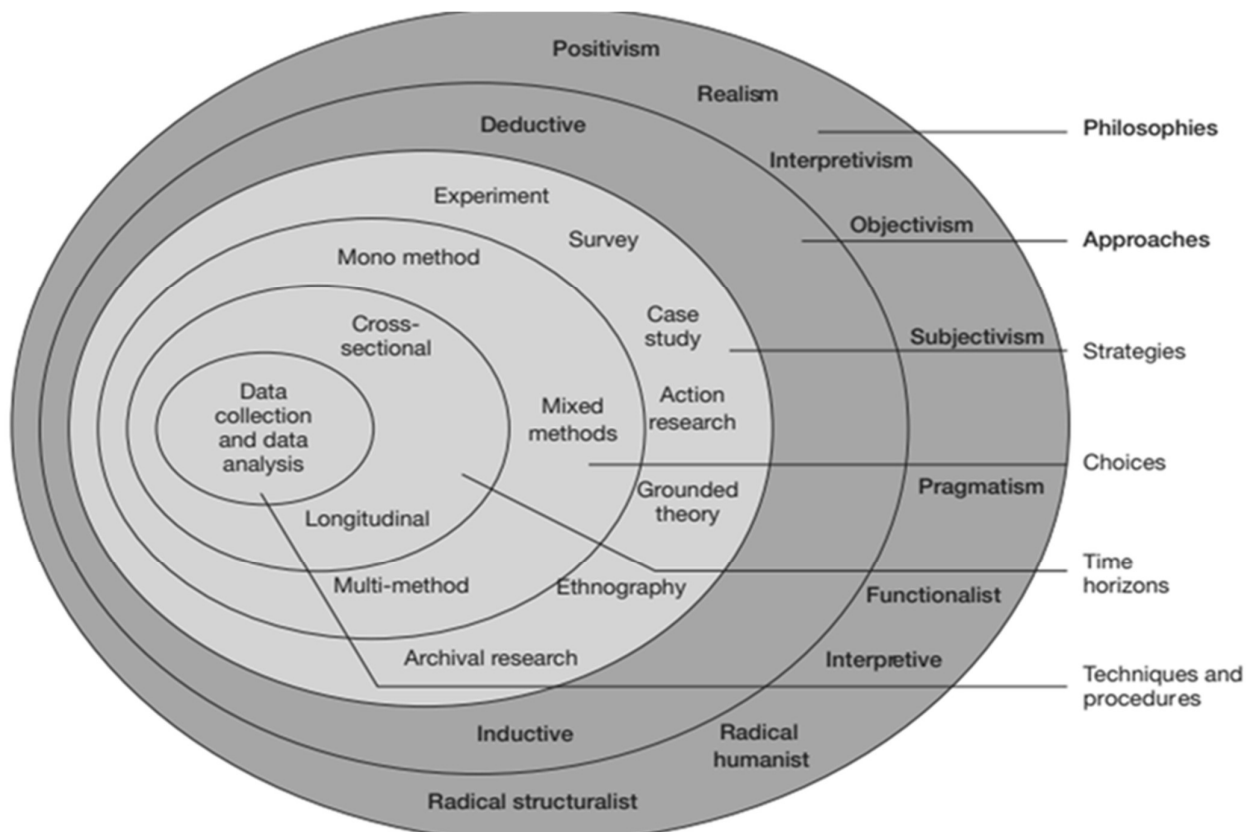


Figure 1.1: The Research Onion Framework (Source: Adopted from Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

3.3.1 Research design

The Research Onion Framework (Saunders et al., 2016) guided the research design in this study for assessment of management of remote work post-lockdown and leveraging technology for effective integration in general management in the retail sector. As illustrated in **Figure 1.1**, the research design will be developed based on choices made proceeding from the outer layer's inward, covering the following aspects.

3.3.2 Philosophy (On the outer layer)

Saunders *et al.* (2019:130) refers to research philosophy as a “system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge”. The two most prominent used research viewpoints are: positivist and interpretivist. Positivism entails working with an observable social reality to produce law-like generalisations (Saunders *et al.*, 2019) and suggests that a “phenomenon is understood through models, which constitute true explanations that are independent of the observer” (Sanchez *et al.*, 2021:2).

Such models involve variables associated by generalisable casual mechanisms that can be measured empirically (Cascio, 2012; Edmondson & McManus, 2017). Bryman (2016) also supports this view, noting that the positivist paradigm focuses on uncovering objective truths through statistical analysis and empirical evidence.

On the contrary, Schwandt (2014) highlights that an interpretivist paradigm provides deeper insights into the subjective experiences of people. Interpretive philosophy posits that social reality is not isolated from the researcher; however, this approach involves socially constructed worlds that are multidimensional (Babones, 2016; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). In essence, this approach emphasises understanding the meanings individuals assign to their experiences and how they perceive and navigate everyday life.

This study incorporated the interpretive paradigm. According to Saunders *et al.* (2019:148), “interpretivism holds that human beings are different from a physical phenomenon because they create meanings”. In this regard, by taking an interpretivism stance, the researcher is expected to create new and rich interpretations about the study participants (Abadullah Kamal, 2019).

For this study, this entails obtaining multiple perspectives from participants regarding the management of remote work through technology integration in the retail sector. Similarly, the interpretivist paradigm offers valuable perspectives on the personal and cultural dimensions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) of remote work that may not be fully captured by a positivist approach.

3.3.2.1 Approach (On the second outer layer)

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), research is divided into two strategies: qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative research approach involves speaking to or observing human behaviour and asking open-ended, face-to-face questions. This method employs both empirical statements, as descriptive statements about the meaning of the responses in real words rather than about other cases, and methods.

Put differently, qualitative research deals with words, thoughts and perceptions while quantitative research focuses on statistical data collected through surveys to determine social reality (Taherdoost, 2022). On the other hand, quantitative research is the method of employing numerical values derived from observations to explain and describe the phenomena that the observations can reflect on them (Taherdoost, 2022).

The current study adopted a qualitative research design to help explore complex phenomena and understanding the nuanced experiences and perspectives of individuals. The choice for choosing a qualitative method is that it allows for genuine ideas to be collected from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Taherdoost (2022) states that this strategy helps a researcher to uncover ideas, incorporate human experience, and access the emotional data that derives decision-making responses. Therefore, this approach allowed the researcher to explore the concept of technology integration and how it affects remote work from the viewpoints of retail managers and employees.

3.3.2.2 Strategy (On the third outer layer)

The research strategy outlines the general plan for data collection and analysis. A case study strategy was employed to explore how specific retail organisations integrate technology in remote work settings. This strategy allows for an in-depth understanding of the practical applications and challenges faced by retail managers (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

3.3.2.3 Time horizon (On the fourth layer)

This study adopted a cross-sectional approach, which involves collecting data from a population at a single point in time, as described by Wang and Cheng (2020:65). While this description aligns with the general characteristics of cross-sectional studies, it is essential to note that the primary focus of cross-sectional studies is on the analysis of data collected at one time, rather than observing changes over time. As a result, a cross-sectional design was applied to gather and analyse data within this short-term period. Moreover, cross-sectional studies are typically less expensive and easier to conduct compared to longitudinal studies (Wang and Cheng, 2020:65). This approach enabled the researcher to efficiently capture and analyse the current state of technology integration in remote work within the retail sector. According to Melnikovas (2018:34), a time horizon describes the period over which a study occurs.

3.3.2.4 Techniques and procedures

The innermost layer focuses on the specific techniques and procedures employed for data collection and analysis. This study used interviews as the primary data collection method. Interviews were selected as they provided in-depth insights into the experiences and challenges encountered by retail managers when integrating technology to support remote working arrangements (Saunders et al., 2016).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to capture detailed and nuanced information relating to participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions. These interviews were characterised by the following features:

Flexibility: Although the interviewer followed a predefined interview guide, flexibility was maintained to explore emerging themes and issues that arose during discussions. This approach allowed for a deeper and more contextually rich exploration of participants' perspectives.

Depth: The interviews were designed to explore the participants' personal experiences and viewpoints in depth. Open-ended questions were used to encourage detailed and reflective responses.

Rich data: The interview approach facilitated the generation of rich and detailed data, offering insights into the participants' thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences. This was particularly valuable for understanding the complex and sensitive issues related to remote working experiences.

Personalised interaction: Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, enabling personalised interaction and allowing participants to express their views freely and in detail.

Validity and reliability: Several strategies were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings of this study. Member checking was employed, allowing the participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpretations and representations of their responses. This process ensured that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives and experiences. In addition, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process to document the researcher's reflections, assumptions, and decision-making. This practice promoted transparency and assisted in minimising the influence of researcher bias during data analysis and interpretation.

3.4 Research approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted to capture detailed and nuanced accounts of participants' experiences. Qualitative research is particularly suited to studies that seek to explore complex organisational phenomena where limited prior research exists and where context plays a critical role in shaping behaviour and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In the context of South African retail management, remote work practices are shaped by infrastructural constraints, organisational culture, and managerial discretion. A qualitative approach enabled the researcher to explore these factors holistically, rather than reducing them to predefined variables.

3.5 Strategy

The study employed a case study strategy, focusing on retail organisations operating within South Africa. Case study research allows for an in-depth examination of contemporary phenomena within real life contexts, particularly where boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018).

This strategy was appropriate given the study's focus on post pandemic remote work practices, which are embedded within specific organisational, technological, and socio-economic conditions.

3.6 Population and sampling

The target population comprised retail general managers and selected support staff involved in remote or hybrid work arrangements. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience of managing or working within technology enabled remote environments.

Purposive sampling allows researchers to deliberately select participants who can provide rich and relevant insights into the research problem, rather than aiming for statistical representation (Bryman, 2016). This approach ensured that participants possessed the requisite managerial experience and contextual knowledge necessary to address the research objectives.

3.7 Data collection methods

Data were collected through semi structured interviews. This method enabled the researcher to explore predetermined themes while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues of personal relevance. Semi structured interviews are widely recognised as effective in qualitative management research, particularly when exploring perceptions, experiences, and decision-making processes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Interviews were conducted either face to face or via digital platforms, depending on participant availability and logistical considerations. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and were audio recorded to ensure accuracy.

3.8 Data analysis procedure

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. This method involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The analysis followed the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke, which includes familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, theme review, definition, and reporting.

Thematic analysis was selected due to its flexibility and suitability for interpretive research, allowing themes to emerge inductively from participants' accounts rather than being imposed a priori.

3.9 Trustworthiness and rigour

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was supported through member checking, whereby participants were given the opportunity to verify the accuracy of interview transcripts and interpretations. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting methodological decisions and analytical processes.

Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling, allowing the researcher to critically reflect on assumptions and potential biases throughout the research process. These measures align with established qualitative criteria for rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.10 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained in accordance with North West University guidelines. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

All data were securely stored and handled in compliance with relevant data protection legislation. No identifying information was disclosed in the reporting of findings, and participation was entirely voluntary.

3.11 Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework underpinning the study. By adopting a qualitative, interpretivist approach supported by semi structured interviews and thematic analysis, the research was designed to generate rich and contextually grounded insights into remote work management in the South African retail sector.

The next chapter presents the findings arising from the analysis of the collected data.

CHAPTER 4 PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF STUDY FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following a systematic process of familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, and refinement. All interview transcripts were fully coded, and themes were developed inductively based on patterns that recurred across participants' accounts.

Although the use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to emphasise different aspects of their experiences, all participant views were considered during the coding process. Therefore, the themes presented in this chapter represent patterns of shared meaning across the dataset, rather than the perspectives of isolated individuals.

Direct quotations were included selectively to illustrate key themes and subthemes. The inclusion of a quotation does not imply that the view was held solely by that participant; rather, quotations were selected because they clearly reflected sentiments expressed by multiple participants. When perspectives diverged, these differences were explicitly acknowledged and discussed within the relevant theme.

To maintain clarity and readability, not every participant comment was quoted verbatim. Nevertheless, the analysis remained grounded in the complete dataset and reflects both convergent and divergent managerial experiences.

The previous chapter outlined the research methodology adopted for this study, including the research paradigm, design, population, sampling approach, data collection instruments, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. This chapter presents, analyses, and interprets the qualitative data generated from the semi-structured interviews.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of retail general managers regarding the integration of remote work and digital technologies. Data were collected from 17 participants within the retail sector in Gauteng Province. A qualitative approach, supported by thematic analysis, was employed to examine how

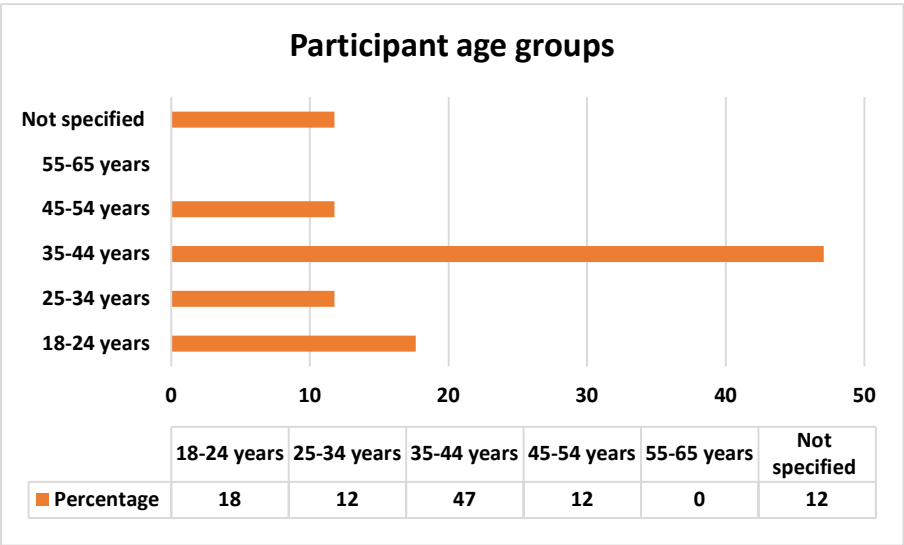
digital tools influenced operational coordination, productivity, engagement, and managerial effectiveness, while also considering broader implications for business efficiency, employee well-being, and overall performance.

The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and concepts within the data related to remote work adaptation, technology use, accountability, team dynamics, and future managerial practices. These patterns were organised into conceptually coherent themes. This analytical process yielded seven overarching themes, which are presented in **Table 4.1**. The findings associated with each theme are discussed in the following sections and are contextualised with relevant literature.

4.2 Demographic details of the participants

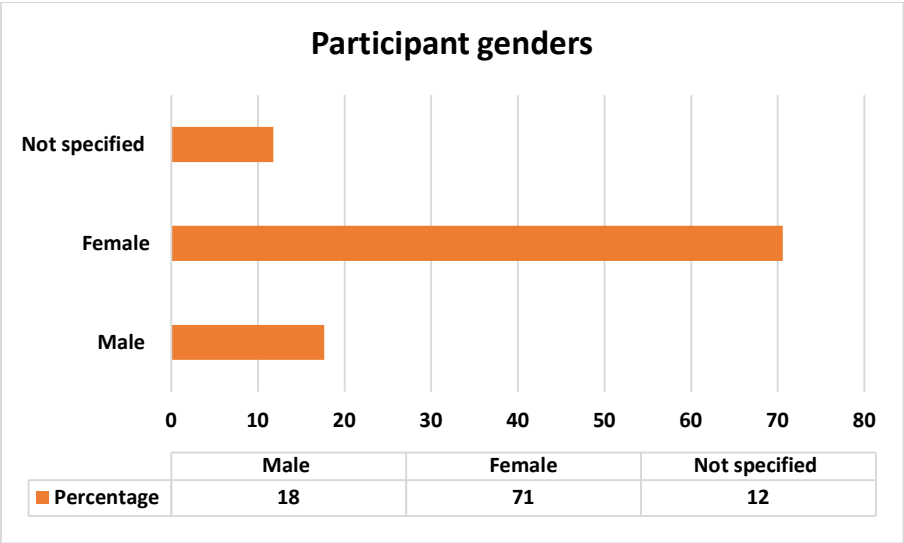
The age distribution of participants indicated that most respondents were aged 35–44 years, accounting for 47% of the sample (**Figure 4.1**). Participants aged 18–24 years made up 18% of the total, while those aged 25–34 years and 45–54 years each represented 12%. No participants were recorded in the 55–65 years age category. Additionally, 12% of participants did not specify their age group.

Figure 4.1: Categorical description of study participant age groups (N=17)



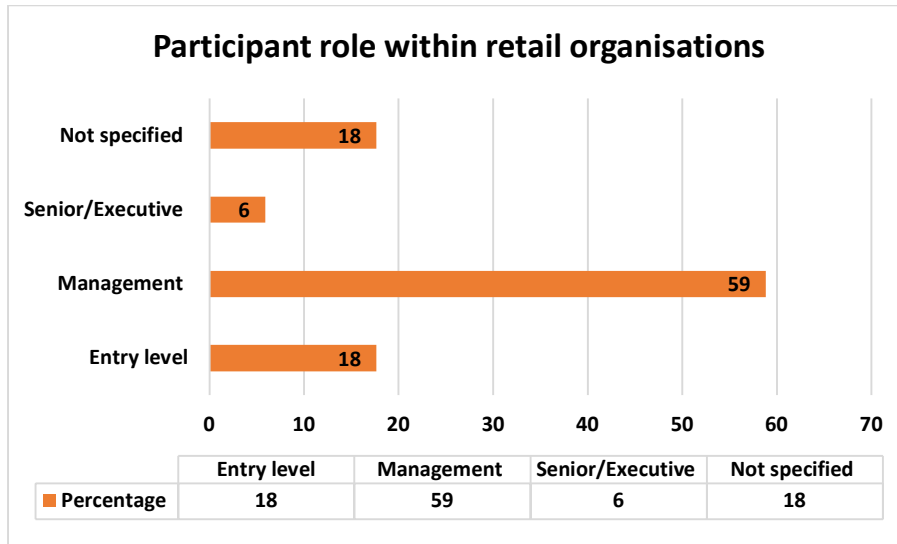
The gender distribution among participants indicated a numerical predominance of females, who constitute 71% of the sample (**Figure 4.2**). Males represented 18% of the study participants, while 12% of participants did not specify their gender.

Figure 4.2: Categorical description of study participant genders (N=17)



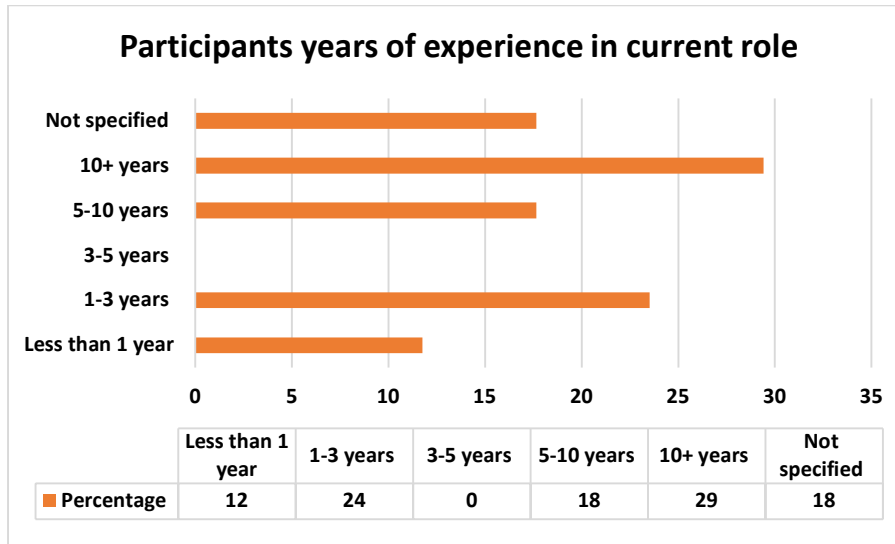
Baseline demographic data revealed that most participants (59%) occupied management positions within their retail organisations, with a smaller proportion (18%) of participants representing entry-level positions, and only 6% holding senior or executive-level roles (**Figure 4.3**). Notably, another 18% did not specify their role.

Figure 4.3: Categorical description of participants’ role within their retail organisations (N=17)



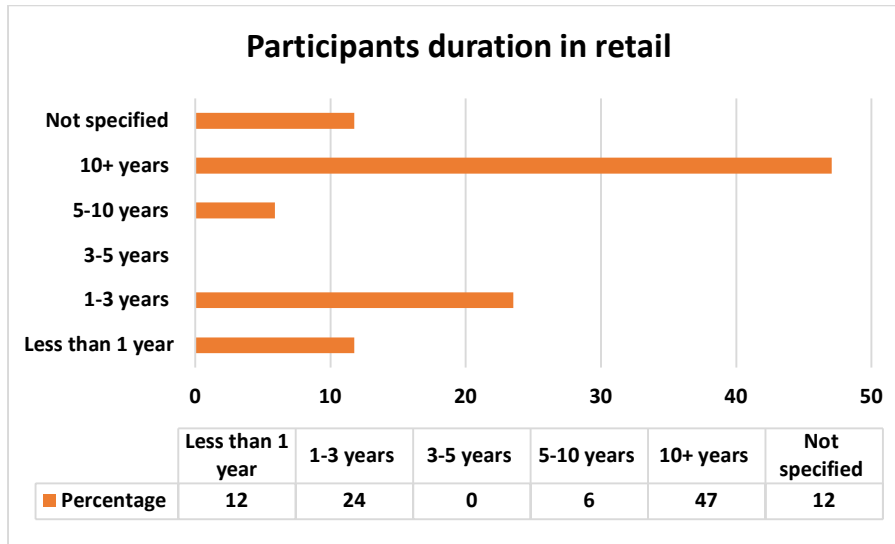
The data on participants' years of experience in their current roles reveals that most respondents had substantial tenure (**Figure 4.4**). Specifically, 29% of participants reported having been in their current role for over 10 years, suggesting a deep level of expertise and stability within their positions. A further 24% reported 1–3 years of experience, while 18% had been in their role for 5–10 years. Only 12% of participants had been in their position for less than one year, and notably, no participants reported a tenure of 3 to 5 years. Additionally, 18% of responses were not specified (support staff).

Figure 4.4: Categorical description of study participants' years of experience in their current role (N=17)



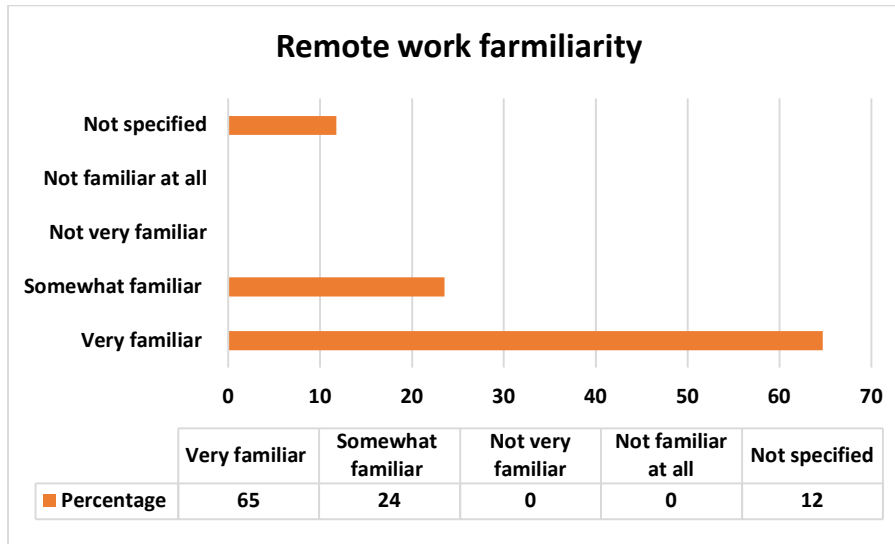
The data on participants' duration in the retail sector indicated that a substantial proportion of respondents (47%) had accumulated over ten years of experience, suggesting a highly seasoned sample of participant (**Figure 4.5**). Approximately 24% of participants reported having 1–3 years of experience in retail, while 12% had <1 year of experience. Only a small fraction (6%) of participants had 5–10 years of experience, and notably, none of the participants had 3–5 years of experience. Additionally, 12% of participants did not specify their duration in the retail sector.

Figure 4.5: Categorical description of study participants' duration in retail (N=17)



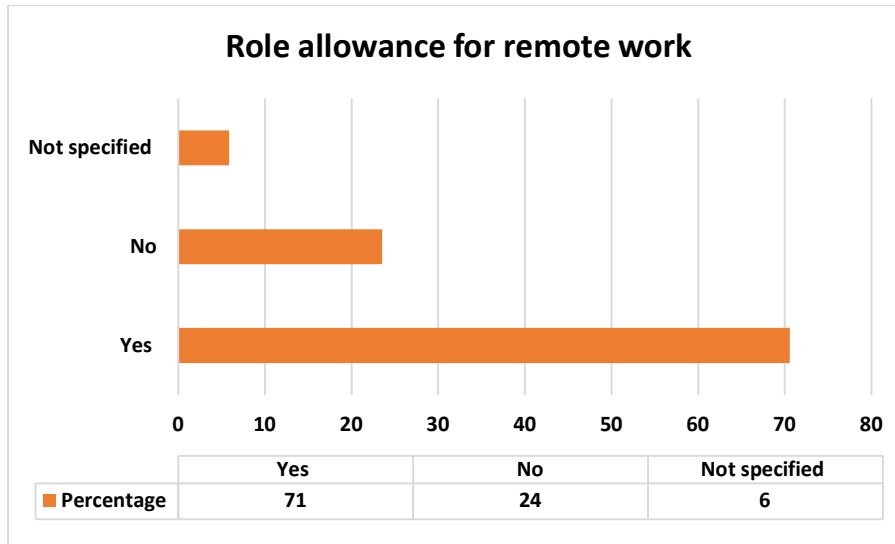
The findings regarding participants' familiarity with the concept of remote work revealed that a substantial majority of 65% of participants were very familiar with it, while 24% indicated they were somewhat familiar (**Figure 4.6**). Notably, no participants were not very familiar or not familiar at all with the concept, suggesting a generally high level of awareness and understanding of remote work practices among the sample. However, 12% of the participants did not specify their level of familiarity.

Figure 4.6: Categorical description of study participants familiarity with the concept of remote work (N=17)



The data on whether participants' roles allow for remote work showed that a majority of 71% of participants confirmed that their roles permit remote work (Figure 4.7). In contrast, 24% of participants indicated that their roles do not allow for remote work. A small proportion of 6% did not specify whether their roles accommodate remote working arrangements. These results suggested that remote work is a viable option for most participants, although it is not universally accessible across all roles.

Figure 4.7: Categorical description of study participants' role allowance for remote work (N=17)



4.3 Identified themes

To understand the experiences, challenges, and impacts of remote work integration into general management in the retail sector, 17 individuals were interviewed. Their responses led to the findings of this research. Seven themes emerged from the data (**Table 4.1**).

Table 4.1: Identified themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes
1. Experiences in adapting to remote work	• Ease of transition and challenges • Isolation and connection • Work structure and routine adjustments
2. Technology adoption: Benefits and challenges	• Tools utilised • Perceived effectiveness and benefits • Infrastructure and technical hurdles • Training and support gaps
3. Impact on operational efficiency and productivity	• Individual productivity and focus • Operational flow and bottlenecks • Customer interaction challenges

4. Employee well-being and engagement	• Work-life balance in terms of flexibility versus boundaries • Stress, motivation, and mental health • Remote engagement and recognition strategies
5. Team dynamics and communication patterns	• Shifts in communication frequency and style • Collaboration effectiveness • Maintaining team cohesion
6. Business performance and cultural considerations	• Tangible benefits • Cultural challenges and trust issues • Role suitability in terms of remote versus in-store employees
7. Future outlook and required skills	• Predictions for remote or hybrid work in retail • Essential skills for remote effectiveness

These themes provide valuable insights into the adaptation to remote work process, the role of technology in remote work, the effects on performance and well-being of employees, and the future trajectory of remote work in the retail sector. The themes highlight the benefits of flexibility and digital tools, alongside challenges related to infrastructure, work-life balance, team cohesion, and cultural shifts.

4.4 Theme 1: Experiences adapting to remote work

This theme explores the participants' personal journeys and challenges as they transitioned to, and navigated remote work arrangements, within the general management of an organisation in the retail sector. The analysis identified varying degrees of ease and difficulty in adaptation, the emergence of social and professional isolation, and the critical need for adjusting work structures and routines.

4.4.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Transition ease and challenges

The findings indicate a mixed experience regarding the transition to remote work. Some participants reported a relatively smooth adjustment, often attributing this to benefits such as reduced interruptions leading to improved focus.

For instance, Participant 1 noted: *"No difficulty adjusting. Less interruptions helped focus"*.

This study found that while initially challenging, adaptation occurred reasonably quickly. However, others encountered significant immediate hurdles. A key challenge identified was the lack of formal organisational support and training for navigating remote work.

Participant 11 explicitly stated: *"There was no formal training provided"*.

This was corroborated by additional responses that highlighted the need for *"Remote Leadership training"* and *"Clear remote work policies and expectations"*.

Managing health conditions remotely presented another challenge, although some found it ultimately beneficial.

4.4.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Isolation and connection

A significant challenge reported by participants was the feeling of social and professional isolation stemming from remote work.

Participants 4 and 13 explicitly identified: *"Isolation and loneliness"* as a major difficulty.

Participant 9 elaborated further on this sentiment, stating: *"Often feels isolated as seeing someone physically is not the same as online"*.

While digital tools like video calls were used to maintain contact, the quality of these interactions was often perceived as different from face-to-face engagement.

4.4.1.3 Sub-theme 1.3: Work structure and routine adjustments

Establishing and maintaining boundaries between professional and personal life emerged as a critical struggle for many participants working remotely.

Participant 11 highlighted challenges related to work-life balance, through noting that: *"Without clear boundaries, work often extended beyond normal hours"*.

This sentiment was echoed by Participant 1, who stated: *"Must set fixed hours. Remotework blurs time: people expect constant availability"*.

Some participants adapted by working extended hours.

Participants 4 and 13 reported: working *"from 5 AM to 5 PM"*.

To cope, individuals implemented strategies like setting fixed work hours, creating a dedicated workspace, and employing digital boundaries (Seinsche *et al.*, 2024). However, the comfort of the home environment sometimes led to neglecting necessary breaks.

This was noted by Participant 4 and 3: *"You hardly take breaks because of comfort"*.

This underscores the difficulty in replicating structured work routines outside the traditional office setting.

4.5 Theme 2: Technology adoption: Benefits and challenges

This theme examines the specific digital tools employed by participants during remote work, evaluating their perceived effectiveness and benefits alongside the infrastructural and technical challenges encountered. It also touches upon the gaps identified in training and support related to these technologies.

4.5.1.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Tools utilised

Participants reported using a variety of digital tools to facilitate remote work. Microsoft Teams® emerged as the most frequently mentioned platform, primarily for communication and collaboration, enabling essential check-ins with managers and staff and helping manage store needs remotely.

Participant 1 had the following to say: *"During COVID, enabled check-ins with Regional Managers and staff. Teams helps manage store needs"*.

Zoom was also utilised for meetings and training purposes by several participants. For workflow management, tools like Workday® were used for HR processes, while Yoobic® served multiple functions including communication, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and scheduling. Kronos® was also mentioned as a tool used for scheduling.

Participant 10 said: *"Zoom was used for meetings and training"*.

Participant 3 said: *"Workflow tools included Workday for HR processes"*.

Participant 6 said: *"Internal tool, Yoobic for communication, SOPs, and scheduling"*.

4.5.1.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Perceived effectiveness and benefits

Digital tools were widely perceived as crucial for maintaining operational continuity during the shift to remote work. Microsoft Teams® was noted for enabling vital check-ins and facilitating key processes such as remote approvals through screen sharing capabilities. Workflow management tools like Workday® were appreciated for the transparency they offered.

Participant 8 summarised the general sentiment, stating that digital tools: *"Make it easier to navigate through your work"*.

4.5.1.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Infrastructure and technical hurdles

The interviews made one thing unmistakable. Infrastructure was not merely an occasional nuisance; it actively shaped managers' day to day experience of remote work in South African retail. Participants spoke repeatedly of unreliable internet connectivity, dropped calls and the regular disruption caused by rolling power outages. Systems froze during tasks, collaboration tools timed out, and the steady rhythm of work was frequently interrupted. These challenges translated into missed meetings, stalled processes and tangible reductions in operational efficiency. In practical terms, digital platforms were only as effective as the local infrastructure allowed them to be.

Research on remote labour markets in emerging economies reflects similar constraints, noting that uneven digital access directly influences how remote work operates in practice (Agarwal, 2022; Statistics South Africa, 2022). Much of the international literature assumes stable connectivity as a baseline condition for remote work. However, the findings of this study challenge that assumption. Within the South African context, infrastructural instability functioned as an additional job demand that consumed managerial time and attention rather than remaining a neutral background condition.

Viewed through the Job Demands Resources model, this pattern becomes clearer. Weak infrastructure reduced access to critical job resources such as reliable technology and uninterrupted system access, thereby increasing job demands in line with the framework proposed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007). Technology that would typically function as a resource was therefore experienced simultaneously as a source of strain. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of remote work technologies must be evaluated in relation to local infrastructural realities, particularly within developing economy contexts.

Despite the benefits of technology, significant challenges arose from unreliable infrastructure. Poor network connectivity was a frequently cited issue.

Numerous participants noted that it: "*would Pose a Challenge at times*" and "*often cause challenges*".

Rolling scheduled power outages (locally coined as Loadshedding) emerged as a major disruptor, particularly impacting the use of communication platforms like Teams®.

Participant 15 stated: "*Loadshedding disrupted Teams check-ins*".

This infrastructural unreliability forced some participants to make personal investments in alternative power solutions, such as batteries and inverters, to maintain workflow.

Participant 8 confirmed the difficulty, stating: "*Sometimes during loadshedding it can be challenging to work*".

4.5.1.4 Sub-theme 2.4: Training and support gaps

While training for some specific technological tools was provided (for example, for Workday®), participants reported a lack of broader training and support for adapting to remote work practices.

Participant 11 explicitly noted: “[*the absence of*] formal training provided [*for remote work*]” in general and called for “*Remote Leadership*” specifically.

This indicates a gap in organisational preparedness for the shift. Furthermore, inadequate material support was mentioned.

Participant 16 stated: “*The lack of company's support - by supplying a dongle made it sometimes difficult to join meetings*”.

This highlights how insufficient resources could hinder participation in company requirements.

There were also calls for improved or better-integrated tools.

Participant 11 suggested that: “[*While Microsoft Teams® was useful*], it does have its limitations” and advocated for “*Better collaboration tools*”.

4.6 Theme 3: Impact on operational efficiency and productivity

This theme delves into how the adoption of remote work models and associated technologies influenced work output, operational processes, and customer interactions within the retail general management context. It examines reported changes in individual productivity, identifies operational flow disruptions, and highlights specific challenges encountered in maintaining customer engagement remotely.

4.6.1.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Individual productivity and focus

A significant number of participants reported an increase in their personal productivity while working remotely. This improvement was frequently attributed to a reduction in workplace distractions.

Participant 5 articulated: *"Less interruptions helped focus"*. The time saved by eliminating commutes was another key factor contributing to productivity gains as: *"Saved work time (less travel)"*.

Participant 4 stated: *"Loved it; saved time, less stress, more productivity"*.

The study participants further noted that reduced traffic stress improved energy levels and strategic thinking.

Participant 11 strongly affirmed this, stating: *"I was certainly more productive and had much more focus time in comparison to the current full time in office set up"*.

Participant 1 asserted: *"In-office presence doesn't always equate to productivity. Remote work can be more focused"*.

4.6.1.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Operational flow and bottlenecks

The transition to remote work presented a mixed impact on operational flows within the retail organisations studied here. While certain processes were reportedly streamlined, such as the ability to gain remote approvals, new bottlenecks emerged.

Participant 14 said: *"Delay when People Business Partners unavailable to approve tasks"*.

Infrastructure challenges such as poor network connectivity and rolling power outages, directly impeded workflow and operational continuity for several participants. Specific operational tasks, such as audits, also faced delays that required escalation to resolve.

4.6.1.3 Sub-theme 3.3: Customer interaction challenges

A critical operational area negatively impacted by remote work, according to participants of this study, was direct customer interaction. Several participants highlighted the difficulty in maintaining prompt and effective customer service when working remotely.

Participant 4 stated it was: *"Hard to maintain prompt customer interaction remotely"*.

Participant 13 elaborated on this sentiment, explaining: *"when working remotely you can't engage with customers...everything is delayed"*.

This limitation was particularly relevant for roles requiring a physical presence in stores.

Participant 2 cautioned: *"If your role requires you to do store visits, remote work will be challenging for you"*.

These responses underscore the incompatibility of fully remote work with certain customer-facing retail functions.

4.7 Theme 4: Employee well-being and engagement

This theme addresses the multifaceted effects of remote work on employees' mental and emotional states, their ability to balance work and personal life, and their overall connection and engagement with the organisation. Key areas explored include the tension between flexibility and boundary management, impacts on stress and motivation, and the strategies employed or needed for remote engagement and recognition.

4.7.1.1 Sub-theme 4.1: Work-life balance in terms of flexibility versus boundaries

Managers valued the flexibility associated with remote work. At the same time, many reported that the boundary between work and personal life blurred rapidly. Long working hours, difficulty disengaging from work and limited opportunities for psychological recovery were common experiences. Even where participants attempted practical strategies such as setting fixed working hours, creating dedicated workspaces or establishing household routines, these efforts often failed to offset increased workload intensity.

Existing research cautions that, in the absence of organisational norms supporting boundary management, remote work can intensify rather than reduce work demands (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014; Xanthopoulou et al., 2020). From a Job Demands Resources perspective, weak structural boundaries reduce recovery resources and heighten the risk of sustained strain and burnout. Flexibility without adequate organisational safeguards may therefore undermine well-being rather than enhance it.

Achieving a healthy work-life balance presented a significant challenge for many participants operating in a remote setting. The blurring of lines between professional responsibilities and personal life was a common concern.

Participant 11 explicitly said: "*Blurred boundaries between work & personal life. Overworking & burnout*".

This sentiment was reinforced by Participant 12, who noted the tendency to work extra hours from home to demonstrate productivity: "*It is hard because when you are working from home you work extra hours because you always want to show that you are Productive*".

Consequently, the need for establishing clear boundaries was strongly emphasised by participants in the current study, with suggestions of setting fixed hours and implementing policies that define work hours, response times, and workload distribution. Despite these difficulties, the flexibility afforded by remote work was highly valued by participants, seen as a factor that increases commitment and motivation.

4.7.1.2 Sub-theme 4.2: Stress, motivation, and mental health

Social and professional isolation emerged as a significant concern. Managers described the loss of everyday informal interactions such as spontaneous conversations, quick clarifications and casual check ins. These absences affected motivation, emotional well-being and perceived visibility within the organisation. The frequency with which participants referred to these informal interactions highlights their importance in supporting effective management and engagement.

This finding aligns with prior studies demonstrating that reduced informal workplace interaction weakens social support and trust, both of which are essential for sustaining engagement in remote contexts (Golden & Veiga, 2005; Toscano & Zappalà, 2020). Perceived Organisational Support theory offers further explanatory value, suggesting that reduced relational contact and limited visible support can erode employees' perceptions of being valued by the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). These findings indicate that well-being in remote retail management is shaped not

only by individual coping strategies but also by the relational and structural supports embedded within organisational practices.

Remote work had a dual effect on participants' stress levels reported in this study. For many, the elimination of daily commutes significantly reduced stress.

Participant 5 said: "*Less traffic improves energy, focus*".

Participant 1: "*Avoids traffic stress, improves calmness*".

However, new stressors emerged, including the previously discussed feelings of isolation and the pressure to be constantly available. Motivation appeared to be positively influenced by factors such as recognition of effort and achievements, feelings of trust from the organisation, and the valued flexibility offered by remote arrangements. The importance of supporting mental health was acknowledged.

Participant 16 mentioned: "*[access to employer-provided] mental support webinars after hours*".

4.7.1.3 Sub-theme 4.3: Remote engagement and recognition strategies

Maintaining employee engagement in a remote setting required conscious and deliberate efforts from management. Regular check-ins were identified as a key strategy, although participants cautioned that these needed to be balanced to avoid perceptions of micromanagement. Various recognition strategies were employed or suggested, including explicitly acknowledging staff effort and achievements, using virtual shoutouts, sending personalised messages, offering incentives, creating video acknowledgments, and shifting towards continuous feedback rather than relying solely on annual reviews.

Participant 17 emphasised: "*[A foundational need for a] Consistent Culture, targeted training, and aligned leadership*".

4.8 Theme 5: Team dynamics and communication patterns

This theme examines the ways in which remote work arrangements altered interaction styles, collaboration effectiveness, and the overall sense of cohesion within retail

management teams. It considers shifts in how frequently and through what means team members communicated, the impact on collaborative tasks, and the strategies needed to maintain team unity despite physical separation.

4.8.1.1 Sub-theme 5.1: Shifts in communication frequency and style

The transition to remote work often led to changes in communication patterns within teams. Some participants reported that communication became more frequent and was perceived as more critical. There was a marked shift towards reliance on scheduled virtual meetings, primarily using platforms like Microsoft Teams® and Zoom®, and an increased use of digital messaging for day-to-day interactions. Despite efforts to maintain normalcy, such as encouraging the use of cameras during calls, the difference from in-person interaction was palpable.

Participant 9 noted: *"It hasn't changed a lot since we encourage switching on of cameras...Often feels isolated as seeing someone physically is not the same as online"*.

Participant 12 observed a shift towards more formal interactions, stating that relationships became *"strictly professional"*.

Some participants expressed a preference for *"Direct in the moment communication"* over potentially delayed or overlooked emails.

4.8.1.2 Sub-theme 5.2: Collaboration effectiveness

Digital collaboration tools played a significant role in enabling teamwork remotely. Platforms like Microsoft Teams® allowed team members to simultaneously view and update shared priorities and facilitated processes like remote approvals through screen sharing. However, collaboration was not without its challenges in the remote setting. Uncertainty about colleagues' real-time availability or responsiveness created hurdles. Additionally, some participants felt that the existing tools had limitations that hindered more seamless collaboration.

Participant 12 suggested: *"[A need for focused] team building and collaboration...in order to achieve best results"*, indicating that technology alone may not suffice.

4.8.1.3 Sub-theme 5.3: Maintaining team cohesion

Sustaining team cohesion required proactive and intentional measures in the absence of shared physical space. Regular check-ins were frequently cited as a necessary practice to keep team members connected. Virtual team-building activities were also suggested to foster rapport while promoting open communication, such as encouraging camera use during virtual meetings and establishing virtual open-door policies to signal availability, were seen as helpful strategies.

Participant 16 said: *“Regular virtual check ins on MS Teams, Digital SOP and check lists on Yoobic”*.

Furthermore, leadership actions, including effective delegation and actively fostering a collaborative environment, were highlighted as important for maintaining team unity.

4.9 Theme 6: Business performance and cultural considerations

This theme investigates the perceived effects of remote work integration on overall business performance, encompassing tangible benefits like cost savings, alongside challenges related to maintaining organisational culture and establishing trust. It also explores the crucial distinction participants made regarding the suitability of different retail roles for remote versus in-store work.

4.9.1.1 Sub-theme 6.1: Tangible benefits

Participants identified several tangible benefits resulting from the shift to remote work, impacting both employees and the business. Significant cost savings for employees were frequently mentioned, primarily due to reduced travel expenses. For the business, potential cost reductions were foreseen in areas such as office space and rent and corporate travel. As discussed under Theme 3, increased individual productivity was reported by many. Furthermore, offering flexibility through remote work was perceived to enhance employee commitment. An additional strategic advantage highlighted was the potential to access a broader talent pool, unconstrained by geographical limitations.

Participant 11 noted: *“Expand the talent pools beyond geographic boundaries”*.

4.9.1.2 Sub-theme 6.2: Cultural challenges and trust issues

Maintaining the established organisational culture, particularly the energetic and interaction-driven culture typical of the retail sector, was perceived as a significant challenge in a remote setting.

Participant 11 articulated this concern: "*Retail culture thrives on in-person interactions, energy and a strong connection. Maintaining this can be challenging*".

Participant 17 called for: "*consistent Culture*" and "*aligned leadership*".

Trust emerged as a critical underpinning for successful remote work.

Participant 16 noted their company's reluctance towards remote work, speculating: "*Not sure if it is a trust issue*".

4.9.1.3 Sub-theme 6.3: Role suitability in terms of remote versus in-store employees

A clear distinction emerged between roles suited to remote or hybrid work and those requiring physical presence. Office based and support functions, including general management, finance and human resources, were widely regarded as compatible with remote or hybrid arrangements. In contrast, customer facing and store operational roles were consistently viewed as unsuitable for full remote work due to their reliance on physical interaction, real time supervision and on site coordination.

This distinction reflects existing literature that differentiates knowledge based work from tasks requiring physical presence or direct interpersonal engagement (Kniffin et al., 2020; Heffernan et al., 2023). Within the retail sector's dual structure, this differentiation is particularly pronounced, as corporate and store based roles operate under fundamentally different task demands and performance expectations. Applying uniform remote work policies across these functions risks undermining both operational effectiveness and cultural cohesion.

Participants further emphasised that physical presence in stores signals trust, accountability and managerial visibility. Even where digital tools support discrete tasks,

in person interaction remains central to sustaining retail culture and maintaining operational control.

A strong consensus emerged among study participants regarding the varying suitability of different retail roles for remote work. Office-based or support functions were generally seen as viable for remote or hybrid arrangements. The following statements were captured:

Participant 6 said: *"Office based staff remote work will be more productive"*.

Participant 10 said: *"Remote work feasible for support staff"*.

Participant 17 said: *"Save on office space"*.

Conversely, operational roles based in stores, particularly those requiring direct customer interaction, were deemed unsuitable for fully remote work. Comments included:

Participant 2: *"Retail is a face-to-face kind of business"*.

Participant 16: *"Store operational employees needs to be visible in stores"*.

Participant 14: *"Customer service is always in person"*.

These responses highlight a clear distinction based on the nature of the role and its core requirements.

4.10 Theme 7: Future outlook and required skills

This final theme encapsulates participants' perspectives on the likely future trajectory of remote and hybrid work within the retail sector, alongside the essential skills identified as necessary for employees and leaders to thrive in these evolving work environments.

4.10.1.1 Sub-theme 7.1: Predictions for remote or hybrid work in retail

Participants generally viewed remote work not as a temporary measure but as an enduring trend within the retail industry. Sentiments included:

Participant 4: *"Will become more relevant"*.

Participant 11: *"Becoming increasingly integral to the retail industry"*.

Participant 17: *"Future-fit necessary redesign"*.

Hybrid models, blending remote and on-site work, were widely predicted to become the dominant approach, particularly for management roles.

Participant 11 described: *"Retail management roles will likely blend remote work with on-site"*.

Participant 17 described: *"Structured hybrid approach"*.

Anticipation of further technological integration was also noted, with mentions of advancements like AI and virtual assistants becoming more prevalent.

4.10.1.2 Sub-theme 7.2: Essential skills for remote effectiveness

Participants identified a broad range of skills crucial for success in remote and hybrid work settings. Foundational skills for all employees included adaptability to changing work structures, strong computer and digital literacy, effective communication, particularly in digital formats, robust time management abilities, self-discipline and the capacity for autonomous work, and a clear results-orientation. For those in leadership positions, additional critical skills highlighted were high emotional intelligence, strong problem-solving capabilities, the ability to delegate effectively, fostering collaboration remotely, and building trust within distributed teams.

Participant 17 emphasised: *"a fundamental mental shift is required for successful adaptation"*.

4.11 Discussion of findings

4.12 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this research titled *Assessing the management of remote work post-lockdown: Leveraging technology for effective integration in retail general management* was to offer valuable contributions to theoretical and practical understandings of remote

work management for general managers in HR, marketing, accounting, IT support, and logistics sectors of in the retail sector. Therefore, the primary research question was how general managers, in the retail sector, can effectively integrate technology to manage remote work in the post-pandemic era? The study addressed the challenges and opportunities of incorporating technology in management of remote work within the retail sector by evaluating how digital tools and platforms could enhance operational efficiency, productivity, and employee engagement in a remote work setting within the retail sector. The secondary objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of technology integration on operational efficiency, employee well-being, and business performance of general management within the retail sector.

4.13 Linking key findings to research questions

The primary research question of the current study was how can general managers in the retail sector effectively integrate technology to manage remote work in the post-pandemic era? This section will address this question by linking it to identified themes and subthemes.

Theme 2 identified benefits and challenges of technology adoption in remote work for managerial positions in the retail sector of South Africa. In particular, Sub-theme 2.1 identified the tools that can be utilised for effective integration of technology. By possessing a wide knowledge and understanding of the tools available, managers can make it easy for their employees to connect, work, and communicate in a collaborative fashion. Zoom, Workday, and Yoobic were highlighted by Participant 10, 3, and 6 respectively as tools that increases connectivity.

Not only can connectivity be improved with the correct choice of technological integration, but also productivity. Theme 3 highlighted the impact on operational efficiency and productivity that can be achieved through remote work. In particular, Sub-theme 3.1 identified that remote work, with correctly functioning tools, can increase productivity through lack of distraction. This was highlighted specifically by Participant 4, 5, and 11.

4.14 Comparison of findings with literature

4.14.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Transition ease and challenges

Some individuals found it beneficial to transition to remote work, which aligns with literature confirming that the pandemic forced a rapid, often unprepared, shift to remote work (Shirmohammadi & Beigi, 2022; Lyzwinski, 2024). This necessitated swift adaptations by HR in areas like performance management and well-being, alongside overcoming technological hurdles related to infrastructure and security. Communication shifted heavily to digital means, and managing well-being amidst disruption became paramount. Successful transitions often involved flexibility, infrastructure investment, clear protocols, and employee support. People with prior experience of working remotely experienced the adjustment more positively. In South Africa, pre-existing infrastructure limitations (that is, connectivity and cost) and a lack of prior experience of culture of remote work created significant hurdles, especially for small-to-medium enterprises (Zahari *et al.*, 2024).

4.14.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Isolation and connection

The literature consistently highlights increased social isolation and reduced team cohesion as common outcomes of remote work (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020; Liang *et al.*, 2024). This is largely attributed to the lack of spontaneous, informal interactions typical of shared workspaces, which are vital for building rapport and trust among colleagues and peers. This disconnect can negatively impact well-being, job satisfaction, and the sense of belonging, which are linked to engagement and productivity (Chen, 2024). Strategies recommended to mitigate this include, virtual team-building, regular check-ins, fostering an inclusive remote culture, and creating opportunities for social interaction outside of work (Badrinarayanan, 2024). Managers thus play a key role connecting employees on a social level. Hybrid models offer a potential solution for the occurrence of feelings of isolation but require careful planning to maximise in-person time.

4.14.1.3 Sub-theme 1.3: Work structure and routine adjustments

The broader literature suggests that work structure adjustments are not uniform across individuals; rather, they depend on personal discipline, domestic circumstances, and organisational support (Storm *et al.*, 2023:). Without clear organisational policies reinforcing work-life balance, individual efforts to maintain boundaries may be insufficient, leading to increased stress and decreased job satisfaction over time (Berger Ploszaj *et al.*, 2025). The findings from this study thus underscore the structural challenges of remote work environments, where individual coping strategies are essential but must be complemented with organisational efforts to clearly define expectations, encourage regular breaks, and normalise digital disconnection practices to support employee wellbeing.

4.14.1.4 Sub-theme 2.1: Tools utilised

The literature confirms the pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital collaboration tools (Zoom®, Teams®, Slack®, etc.), making them essential for remote or hybrid team functioning (Aulia & Lin, 2025). These tools are vital for communication, collaboration, and project management. However, challenges, colloquially termed tool overload and Zoom fatigue are common. Ensuring integration, equitable access, and digital literacy are significant concerns, especially given digital divides. Establishing clear communication protocols (that is, the purpose of the tool and response times) is crucial. Strategic tool selection, training, and regular evaluation are recommended, with potential future integration of immersive technologies like virtual reality or augmented reality.

4.14.1.5 Sub-theme 2.2: Perceived effectiveness and benefits

Digital technologies played a clear enabling role in supporting remote work. Collaboration platforms and cloud-based systems facilitated communication, coordination and continuity during periods of restricted physical access to stores or offices. Many managers reported improved task tracking and workflow continuity in the absence of face-to-face meetings. These experiences align with the Technology Acceptance Model, which emphasises perceived usefulness as a key driver of sustained technology use (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2021).

The potential for dashboards and self-service platforms to enhance access to information and streamline processes was highlighted as a significant benefit in the current study. According to Hjelle *et al.* (2024), dashboards provide real-time data visualisation, allowing employees at all organisational levels to make faster, evidence-based decisions without needing to rely on intermediaries. Similarly, research by Mudau *et al.* (2024) emphasised that self-service business intelligence tools empower users by giving them direct access to data analytics and reporting functionalities, which reduces bottlenecks, enhances operational efficiency, and promotes data-driven cultures. These platforms not only increase transparency but also enable decentralised decision-making, ultimately contributing to improved organisational agility. In the context of remote work, the ability to independently retrieve, analyse, and act upon information through dashboards and self-service platforms becomes even more critical for maintaining productivity and ensuring seamless collaboration (Henke *et al.*, 2022).

4.14.1.6 Sub-theme 2.3: Infrastructure and technical hurdles

While literature addresses digital infrastructure (that is, broadband services and devices), studies on developing nations emphasise fundamental issues like the digital divide of unequal access to reliable and affordable internet, devices, and suitable workspaces (Makamu *et al.*, 2025). Connectivity issues are pronounced in rural and lower socioeconomic areas. South African sources specifically highlight poor connectivity, expensive internet services, the need for company-provided data, initial lack of firm preparedness, difficulties for disadvantaged employees lacking resources, and cybersecurity risks (Rawindaran *et al.*, 2023; Kariuki *et al.*, 2024).

Rolling scheduled power outages presents a particularly unique South African challenge, disrupting connectivity and work capability. At the same time, participants identified notable limitations including system overload, inconsistent platform integration and reliance on stable infrastructure. These issues reduced perceived ease of use and contributed to frustration and inefficiency. The findings reinforce that technology adoption alone does not guarantee improved outcomes, as effectiveness depends on usability, organisational support and contextual conditions.

4.14.1.7 Sub-theme 2.4: Training and support gaps

Insufficient resources could hinder participation in company requirements. This observation aligns with findings by Abbas and Miller (2025), who argue that fragmented or inadequately integrated platforms can disrupt communication flows, impede collaboration, and create frustration among users. Moreover, Ribeiro *et al.* (2024), emphasise that the success of remote work arrangements heavily depends on the robustness, accessibility, and user-friendliness of technological resources. When tools are insufficient or poorly integrated, employees may experience reduced efficiency, lower engagement, and barriers to participation (Awan *et al.*, 2020). Thus, investment in seamless, user-centric digital infrastructure is critical to supporting effective remote work environments.

4.14.1.8 Sub-theme 3.1: Individual productivity and focus

Literature presents mixed findings on remote work productivity, though many studies suggest it can be maintained or increased, especially for focus-intensive tasks (Al Mohamed *et al.*, 2024). Gains in productivity and focus are linked to eliminated commutes, fewer office interruptions, schedule flexibility, and autonomy. However, productivity can suffer due to work-home interference (that is, for caregivers), home distractions, isolation impacting motivation, technological issues, unclear tasks, and burnout from blurred boundaries (Shankar, 2021). A disconnect often exists between employee self-reports (that is, neutral or positive outcomes) and manager perceptions (that is, "productivity paranoia"). Productivity can improve with adaptation, and aggregate economic data shows minimal negative impact (Kalkuhl & Wenz, 2020).

4.14.1.9 Sub-theme 3.2: Operational flow and bottlenecks

Remote work can create operational bottlenecks due to altered communication dynamics, including delays from asynchronous communication, potential misunderstandings without non-verbal cues, and information silos (Urrila *et al.*, 2025). Time zone differences add complexity for global teams. Integrating new tools and adapting workflows initially causes friction. In retail, bottlenecks occur in functions needing physical product interaction (that is, product or store development, or merchandising) (Khan & Sarkar, 2024). Remote

setups can worsen supply chain visibility issues. Cybersecurity and data privacy for distributed networks are also operational hurdles.

Remote work supported focused and autonomous tasks and enhanced individual productivity for many managerial and administrative activities. However, operational flow was occasionally disrupted by delayed communication, coordination challenges and reduced real time oversight. While technology increased individual efficiency, it did not fully replace the immediacy of in person coordination required for complex and interdependent retail operations.

This pattern, where productivity gains are offset by coordination costs in interaction intensive settings, has been identified in prior research on remote work and task interdependence (Golden & Gajendran, 2019; Kniffin et al., 2020).

4.14.1.10 Sub-theme 3.3: Customer interaction challenges

Retail roles that depend heavily on direct, in-person interaction such as sales assistance, visual merchandising, and customer service often require physical presence to maintain service quality and customer satisfaction (Reinartz *et al.*, 2019). Remote work, while offering flexibility, cannot fully replicate the immediacy and emotional engagement that face-to-face encounters provide, which are critical for building customer trust and loyalty (Henke *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, van Zoonen *et al.* (2021) suggest that jobs requiring lots of human interactions and real-time problem-solving are less amenable to remote arrangements. In the retail context, physical presence is not only about service delivery but also about embodying the brand experience, an aspect difficult to sustain remotely. Consequently, while remote work models may be effective for support functions, customer-facing retail roles continue to necessitate an on-site workforce to meet experiential expectations.

4.14.1.11 Sub-theme 4.1: Work-life balance in terms of flexibility versus boundaries

Work-life balance is a central paradox in remote work literature, offering both benefits and challenges. Benefits include flexibility, autonomy, and no commute, often increasing satisfaction (Shirmohammadi & Beigi, 2022). However, blurred boundaries are common, leading to difficulty in switching off from work, longer hours, work intensification, and work-home interference (Elshaer *et al.*, 2024). These factors all contribute to stress and an increased risk for burnout. Challenges can be worse for women, or those with caregiving duties or inadequate workspaces (Hosseini *et al.*, 2024). Achieving balance depends on both employee efforts and organisational factors like supportive policies, manager expectations, and a culture respecting personal time.

4.14.1.12 Sub-theme 4.2: Stress, motivation, and mental health

There exists a broad recognition that remote work, while offering flexibility, can also contribute to increased feelings of isolation, stress, and burnout if not properly managed (Wells *et al.*, 2023). Providing accessible mental health resources, such as webinars, counselling services, and stress management programs, is increasingly seen as a critical factor for sustaining employee wellbeing in remote and hybrid work environments (Kokt & Seqhobane, 2024). Research by Wu *et al.*, (2021) further emphasises that proactive mental health interventions can enhance employees' resilience, productivity, and engagement, particularly during periods of organisational change. Thus, employer initiatives that offer psychological support outside of traditional working hours demonstrate an important commitment to addressing the evolving mental health needs of a remote workforce.

4.14.1.13 Sub-theme 4.3: Remote engagement and recognition strategies

Maintaining engagement of employees working in a remote or hybrid setting is crucial yet challenging. Engagement, in terms of employee involvement and enthusiasm, links strongly to business outcomes like productivity, profit, loyalty, and employee retention (Gede & Huluka, 2024). Key drivers include clear expectations from the organisation, availability of necessary resources, feeling cared for or supported, being connected to the

company mission, ample growth opportunities, regular feedback or check-ins, appropriate recognition, team belonging, and trust or autonomy (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). Technology can centralise resources, aid communication, and gather engagement data (for example, pulse surveys). Effective strategies include virtual team building, clear communication, tailored remote recognition, and well-being support. Notably, overall engagement declined post-pandemic peak, with hybrid workers reporting less clarity on expectations (McPhail *et al.*, 2024).

4.14.1.14 Sub-theme 5.1: Shifts in communication frequency and style

Teams that were geographically dispersed before the wider shift to remote work, experience minimal changes in communication dynamics, which aligns with findings by Greimel *et al.* (2023), who noted that distributed teams often develop robust virtual communication practices long before remote work became mainstream. Such teams are typically more adept at leveraging digital tools and asynchronous communication methods, reducing the disruption caused by transitioning to fully remote operations (Larson & DeChurch, 2020). Moreover, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz (2020) found that teams accustomed to geographic dispersion often report higher levels of virtual collaboration competence, resulting in a smoother adjustment to remote work environments compared to traditionally co-located teams.

4.14.2 Sub-theme 5.2: Collaboration effectiveness

Henke *et al.* (2022) argue that successful remote collaboration requires access to appropriate technological platforms and supportive organisational practices, strong leadership, and effective communication norms. Similarly, Al-Habaibeh *et al.* (2021) emphasised that without the necessary cultural, managerial, and relational adaptations, even the most advanced technologies cannot fully mitigate the challenges associated with remote work environments. Therefore, while digital tools are essential enablers, their effectiveness is contingent upon broader structural and human factors.

4.14.2.1 Sub-theme 5.3: Maintaining team cohesion

Research by van Zoonen *et al.* (2024) supports this view, emphasising that visual presence during remote interactions enhances trust, reduces feelings of isolation, and fosters stronger interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, leadership actions including effective delegation and actively fostering a collaborative environment were highlighted as critical for maintaining team unity. According to Abson *et al.* (2024), leaders who adopt inclusive communication practices and empower team members through shared leadership approaches are more likely to sustain high levels of team cohesion and performance in remote work settings. Thus, maintaining open lines of communication and proactive leadership behaviours emerged as central elements in promoting an effective remote working culture.

4.14.2.2 Sub-theme 6.1: Tangible benefits

Existing literature suggest that remote work models can significantly widen recruitment opportunities, enabling companies to attract diverse and highly skilled candidates from a global workforce (Braesemann *et al.*, 2022). By removing the need for physical relocation, organisations are better positioned to fill critical roles with the best talent available, promoting both innovation and competitiveness in a rapidly changing market.

4.14.2.3 Sub-theme 6.2: Cultural challenges and trust issues

Trust is a foundational element for enabling autonomy, accountability, and sustained productivity in remote work settings, which is consistent with broader literature, which highlights that in virtual work environments, where direct supervision is limited, mutual trust between managers and employees becomes critical to maintain engagement and performance (Badrinarayanan, 2024). Without trust, remote teams may experience breakdowns in communication, reduced collaboration, and lower overall morale, ultimately hindering organisational effectiveness.

4.14.2.4 Sub-theme 6.3: Role suitability in terms of remote versus in-store employees

Role suitability for remote work varies based on tasks, industry, and individual traits (Ferrara *et al.*, 2022). Roles requiring physical presence, manual labour, specific equipment, or face-to-face interaction are less suitable. Knowledge work (that is, positions that are responsible for analysis, writing, and programming) is often highly suitable (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025). The retail sector shows a clear split in whether roles are suitable for remote work. Corporate or support roles are often adaptable, while front-line store roles are location-dependent (Teece, 2018). Even within corporate retail, creative roles (that is, design and merchandising) face challenges without physical product interaction. Management roles present remote complexities regarding supervision, culture, collaboration, and ensuring productivity without oversight. Hybrid models are common for mixed-requirement roles but need careful design.

4.14.2.5 Sub-theme 7.1: Predictions for remote or hybrid work in retail

Literature consensus indicates remote or hybrid work approached are a permanent feature. Employee preference strongly favours flexibility (that is, hybrid or fully remote), with many willing to change jobs or take pay cuts to retain the ability to remain flexible in terms of employment (Waldrep *et al.*, 2024). Hybrid models are thus seen as the likely compromise. Future trends include refining hybrid policies, integrating AI, virtual reality, or augmented reality, using data analytics for workforce strategy, focusing on digital well-being, and potential for global collaboration or talent sourcing (Rashid & Kausik, 2024). In the retail sector, growth of e-commerce was sustained using remote & hybrid customer support roles, while corporate roles adapted to hybrid structures.

4.14.2.6 Sub-theme 7.2: Essential skills for remote effectiveness

The shift to remote or hybrid work requires specific skills for both employees and managers (Allen *et al.*, 2024). Essential employee skills include digital literacy, adaptability and resilience, self-discipline and time management, proactive communication, and autonomy (Huu, 2023). For managers, crucial competencies continually evolve. These competencies include mastering virtual communication (that is,

in terms of clarity, active listening, and channel choice), intentionally building trust, demonstrating empathy or supporting well-being, strong digital literacy, coaching for outcomes, fostering inclusivity across locations, managing hybrid dynamics, promoting psychological safety, and actively facilitating social connection or team cohesion. Literature strongly advocates for targeted leadership development to cultivate these virtual leadership skills (Badrinarayanan, 2024).

4.15 Implications of Research Themes and Findings

The study's results carry a range of implications — theoretical, practical and industry-wide and they help close several of the research gaps flagged in Chapter 1. Below I discuss these implications in relation to the principal themes that emerged from the empirical work.

4.15.1.1 Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to theory by showing that TAM, POS and the JD-R model are most illuminating when used together to understand technology-enabled remote and hybrid management in retail. Each framework explains part of what's happening, but their explanatory power increases when they're integrated rather than applied in isolation. Firstly, we reaffirm key TAM propositions: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use shape managers' willingness to adopt digital tools. The nuance here is that those perceptions rarely exist in a vacuum they are filtered through concrete constraints such as unreliable infrastructure, cybersecurity concerns and constant operational pressure. In short, TAM captures a slice of the picture, but in a high-intensity sector like retail you must also account for environmental and organisational conditions. Secondly, this study expands thinking about perceived organisational support. POS research has often focused on frontline employees; our data indicate that managers' sense of backing through relevant training, straightforward communication and dependable systems strongly affects their engagement and commitment in remote and hybrid setups. Managers' beliefs about support turn out to be a pivotal ingredient in effective technology-enabled leadership. Thirdly, the JD-R model gains depth from our finding that digital technologies can function simultaneously as resources and as demands. Technology can boost coordination, visibility and efficiency, yet it can also increase workload, extend the

working day and create technostress. Think of digital systems as a double-edged tool: whether they relieve strain or add to it depends heavily on how implementation, support and expectations are managed.

4.15.1.2 Practical Implications

For retail general managers leading dispersed teams, the lessons are concrete. Success with remote management is seldom about simply buying software; it's about choosing tools that fit operational reality and backing them with thorough rollout, training and day-to-day support. Managers found the most value in systems that were intuitive, reliable and closely tied to everyday tasks for example, rostering that mirror actual shift patterns, inventory alerts calibrated to store realities, or simple channels that ease shift-to-shift handovers. Practical steps include structured onboarding, regular refresher training and clear usage protocols. Deliberate communication routines scheduled check-ins, timely feedback and plain-language update protocols help reduce isolation and sustain accountability when face-to-face contact is limited. The findings also stress the need to manage workload expectations in digitally enabled settings. Without guardrails, tools can intensify work and blur the boundary between home and store. Managers should balance responsiveness with sustainability: set realistic response windows, model healthy digital habits and agree on norms for after-hours messaging.

4.15.1.3 Industry Implications

At the industry level particularly within South Africa's uneven digital landscape the study points to pragmatic approaches. Hybrid models generally prove more viable than fully remote arrangements for retail: they offer flexibility while preserving necessary on-site oversight and customer-facing activity. Retail organisations would benefit from investing in internal coordination tools dashboards for reporting, collaboration platforms, secure remote access not just customer-facing tech. But tech spending on its own won't do the job; it must be matched by organisational readiness: stronger cybersecurity, responsive technical support and leadership development that equips managers to operate in hybrid modes. Importantly, industry-wide digital strategies must reflect contextual realities such as unstable connectivity, high data costs and uneven digital skills. Ignore these

constraints at your peril, doing so risks blunting the gains from hybrid work and widening inequalities across the retail workforce.

4.15.1.4 Implications on Research Gaps

The study addresses several gaps identified in Chapter 1. First, it helps close the sector-specific gap by supplying empirical evidence from retail, a context often overlooked in remote-work research that tends to focus on professional or knowledge-intensive settings. Second, it tackles the integration gap by linking technology adoption, organisational support and managerial well-being through the combined application of TAM, POS and JD-R. This integrative approach yields a fuller explanation of remote and hybrid management outcomes than any single theory could provide. Third, the study narrows the contextual gap by embedding remote-work management within the South African retail environment, showing how structural inequalities in digital access and organisational capacity shape managers' experiences. These context-specific findings push back against international literature that sometimes assumes uniform digital infrastructure. Finally, the research fills a managerial perspective gap by centring retail general managers rather than focusing solely on frontline staff. By foregrounding managerial experience, the study sheds light on leadership challenges, accountability mechanisms and strategic decision-making in digitally enabled retail settings.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter presented and discussed the findings derived from thematic analyses of participant experiences regarding remote work integration for general management within the retail sector. Seven key themes emerged, exploring adaptation experiences, technology adoption, impacts on efficiency and productivity, employee well-being and engagement, team dynamics, business performance and culture, and the outlook for remote work in this context. The current chapter presents a summary of the major findings related to these themes. Furthermore, this chapter draws conclusions based on the analysed data and provides actionable recommendations for implementation by retail organisations navigating remote and hybrid work models. Where applicable, suggestions for further research are also briefly considered, aligning with the structure observed in the comparator document.

5.2 Summary of findings

The study explored experiences, perceptions, and challenges associated with remote work integration in the retail general management sector. The key findings are summarised below according to the seven identified themes:

5.3 Experiences adapting to remote work

The transition to remote work produced varied experiences among participants. While some managers adapted with relative ease and reported benefits, such as reduced workplace interruptions and improved concentration, others encountered substantial challenges during the change process. These mixed experiences suggest that adaptation to remote work was not uniform but strongly influenced by contextual and organisational conditions. A key issue emerging from the findings was the absence of formal organisational support structures, particularly in relation to remote leadership training, clearly articulated expectations, and comprehensive remote work policies. As noted in prior studies on pandemic-induced remote work, insufficient organisational preparedness

often shifts the burden of adaptation to individual managers, increasing inconsistency and uncertainty in management practices (Shirmohammadi & Beigi, 2022).

Social and professional isolation was another prominent theme in the findings. Participants consistently indicated that, although digital communication platforms enabled operational continuity, virtual interactions could not adequately replace the relational value of face-to-face engagement. Existing literature on remote work highlights that losing informal, spontaneous workplace interactions limits opportunities for trust building, collaboration, and social exchange, which are important in people-centred and customer-facing environments such as retail (Golden & Veiga, 2005; Gilson et al., 2015). In this study, reduced informal engagement weakened managerial visibility and team cohesion, reinforcing concerns raised in earlier research on digitally mediated work arrangements (Toscano & Zappalà, 2020).

Difficulties in managing work–life boundaries also featured strongly in participants' accounts. Managers described blurred boundaries between professional and personal responsibilities, often resulting in extended working hours, difficulty disengaging from work, and reduced opportunities for rest and recovery. Research grounded in the Job Demands–Resources model suggests that when remote work arrangements are not supported by clear organisational norms and boundary-management expectations, job demands may intensify rather than diminish, increasing the risk of strain and exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Despite attempts by participants to establish structured routines or use dedicated workspaces, these efforts frequently did not counterbalance increasing workload intensity.

These findings reflect broader challenges associated with the abrupt and unplanned shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior research has shown that rapid transitions, limited HR capability, uneven access to digital infrastructure, and insufficient attention to employee well-being significantly shaped remote work experiences during this period (Aleem et al., 2023). Within the South African context, such challenges were further compounded by infrastructural inequalities, unreliable connectivity, and the absence of an established remote work culture prior to the pandemic, all of which influenced how managers experienced and sustained remote work arrangements

(Ribeiro et al., 2024). Collectively, the findings emphasize that individual adaptability, but also, and more critically, by the degree of organisational readiness and structural support available, shapes remote work outcomes not only during periods of rapid change.

5.4 Technology adoption: benefits and challenges

Digital tools, particularly Microsoft Teams® and Zoom®, were essential for maintaining communication and collaboration during remote work. Workflow tools like Workday® and Yoobic® facilitated HR processes, scheduling, and access to SOPs. These tools were perceived as effective in enabling operations, such as remote check-ins and approvals, and enhancing transparency. However, significant challenges arose from unreliable infrastructure, specifically poor network connectivity and the pervasive impact of rolling scheduled power outages, which disrupted work and necessitated personal investment in backup solutions. This resonates with findings reported in the literature that emphasises technology's centrality, but also challenges, including tool overload and the digital divide. Such challenges are particularly acute in South Africa due to connectivity costs, reliability, and rolling scheduled power outages (Chisango & Marongwe, 2021; Makamu *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, participants reported gaps in formal training for remote work practices and leadership, along with inadequate company support for necessary equipment like data dongles.

5.5 Impact on operational efficiency and productivity

Many participants reported increased individual productivity, attributing it to fewer distractions, saved time on commuting, and improved focus. This challenged the notion that physical presence equates to productivity. These findings align with prior reported research that suggested that remote work can maintain or boost productivity of employees for focused tasks, be linked to fewer interruptions, and contribute to saving on commuting, although manager perceptions may differ. However, the impact on overall operational flow of the organisation was mixed. While some processes were streamlined via technology, bottlenecks occurred due to remote personnel unavailability and infrastructure issues (that is, connectivity or power outages). Reports in the literature

support that remote work can introduce bottlenecks via asynchronous communication delays and integration challenges. A critical challenge identified was maintaining prompt customer interaction remotely, particularly for roles requiring store visits, with participants noting delays and inability to engage effectively.

5.6 Employee well-being and engagement

Work-life balance emerged as a major challenge, characterised by blurred boundaries, a tendency towards overworking to demonstrate productivity and difficulty in 'switching off'. While the flexibility offered by remote work was highly valued, clear policies and boundary-setting strategies were deemed essential. This reflects the paradox highlighted in literature where flexibility benefits coexist with risks of burnout due to blurred lines. Remote work reduced commuting stress for many, but isolation and pressure to always be available introduced new stressors. Motivation was linked to recognition, trust, and flexibility. Maintaining engagement required deliberate effort, including regular check-ins (balanced against micromanagement concerns), virtual recognition strategies, and continuous feedback. Consistent culture and aligned leadership were seen as vital, aligning with research emphasising intentional engagement strategies and key drivers like support, connection, recognition, and autonomy in remote settings.

5.7 Team dynamics and communication patterns

The concept of working remotely work shifted communication patterns within organisations. While often increasing in frequency, communication relied heavily on scheduled virtual meetings and digital messages. While efforts were made to maintain connection (for example, encouraging camera use), the quality of interaction was perceived as different from in-person, sometimes becoming more formal, towards strict professionalism, along with persistent feelings of isolation. Collaboration effectiveness was aided by tools enabling simultaneous work and screen sharing, but challenges included uncertainty about colleague availability and perceived tool limitations. Proactive measures like regular check-ins, virtual team building, open communication norms, and supportive leadership were seen as necessary to maintain team cohesion.

5.2.6 Conclusions: Business Performance and Cultural Considerations

This study concludes that remote and hybrid work arrangements can contribute positively to business performance in retail general management when applied selectively and supported. The findings demonstrate that tangible benefits, such as reduced operational costs, improved individual productivity, enhanced employee commitment, and broader talent access, are achievable, particularly in office-based and support functions. These outcomes directly address the study's primary and secondary objectives regarding operational efficiency, productivity, and business performance.

However, the study concludes that remote work presents significant cultural challenges within the retail sector. Maintaining a traditional high-energy, relational, and presence-driven retail culture in remote environments is difficult. Trust between management and employees has emerged as a decisive factor influencing the effectiveness of remote work arrangements. Where trust was perceived to be low, managers reported increased monitoring behaviours and reduced confidence in performance outcomes, undermining both engagement and efficiency.

In addition, the study concludes that role suitability is a critical determinant of successful remote work implementation in retail settings. Office-based, managerial, and support roles were consistently identified as suitable for remote or hybrid work, whereas customer-facing and store operational roles requiring physical presence were deemed unsuitable for fully remote arrangements. This distinction reflects the dual operational structure of the retail sector and confirms that remote work strategies must be differentiated rather than universally applied.

5.2.7 Conclusions: Future Outlook and Required Skills

The study concludes that remote and hybrid work arrangements are likely to remain permanent features of the retail management landscape, with hybrid models emerging as the most viable long-term approach. Hybrid work is viewed as offering an optimal balance between flexibility, collaboration, and operational control, particularly for general management roles.

Furthermore, the study concludes that continued technological integration will play an increasingly central role in enabling effective remote retail management. Emerging

technologies, including artificial intelligence and digital automation tools, are expected to further support coordination, decision making, and operational oversight.

The findings also lead to the conclusion that effective remote work is contingent on developing specific skill sets. For employees, adaptability, digital literacy, effective communication, time management, self-discipline, and results orientation are essential competencies. For managers, this study concludes that emotional intelligence, trust-building, delegation, problem-solving, and the ability to foster collaboration and inclusion in dispersed teams are critical leadership capabilities. Without these skills, the sustainability of remote and hybrid work arrangements in retail is likely to be compromised.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn from this study and in direct response to the research objectives, the following recommendations are proposed for retail organisations seeking to integrate remote and hybrid work effectively Exam copy (1).

5.3.1 Infrastructure and Technology Support

Retail organisations should invest in reliable digital infrastructure to support remote and hybrid work. This includes providing support for stable Internet connectivity and, where feasible, mitigation measures for power disruptions that affect critical remote roles. Organisations should also rationalise digital collaboration platforms to reduce tool overload, ensure system integration, and provide clear guidance on the appropriate tool usage for specific communication and operational purposes.

5.3.2 Training and Development

Organisations should implement structured training programmes focused on remote work effectiveness. These programmes should address time management, boundary setting, digital communication, and effective use of collaboration tools. In addition, targeted leadership development initiatives should be introduced for managers, with an emphasis on virtual leadership, trust-based performance management, coaching for outcomes, fostering inclusion, and supporting employee well-being in hybrid environments.

5.3.3 Policy Development and Communication

Retail organisations should develop and formalise clear remote and hybrid work policies aligned with role suitability. These policies should define eligibility criteria, availability expectations, communication norms, and performance management approaches in remote contexts. Policies promoting work–life balance should be actively enforced, with managers expected to model appropriate boundary-setting behaviours. A shift from activity monitoring to outcome-based performance measurement is also recommended to reinforce trust and accountability in the industry.

5.3.4 Fostering Culture, Engagement, and Well-being

To address cultural and relational challenges, organisations should implement intentional strategies to sustain engagement and cohesion in remote and hybrid teams. These include structured team interactions, regular informal check-ins, recognition mechanisms suitable for remote contributions, and planned in-person engagements, where appropriate. Access to mental health and well-being resources should be prioritised and actively promoted to mitigate isolation and boundary-related stress.

5.3.5 Role-Specific Strategies

Remote and hybrid work models should be designed based on detailed analysis of role requirements rather than a uniform organisational approach. In-office time should be purposefully structured around collaboration, relationship building, and strategic activities, whereas remote time should support focused, independent work. For roles unsuitable for full remote work, technology should be leveraged to enhance operational support without attempting to replace essential in-person interactions.

5.3.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should explore the long-term effects of infrastructural instability on remote work sustainability in South Africa, evaluate the effectiveness of remote leadership training programmes within retail contexts, and examine optimal hybrid work configurations across different retail functions. Additional research is recommended to

investigate strategies for mitigating digital inequality and enhancing inclusion within remote and hybrid retail work environments.

Final remarks

This study examined how retail general managers in South Africa integrate technology into the management of remote work in the post pandemic environment. Using a qualitative interpretive approach, the research demonstrates that remote and hybrid work arrangements are no longer temporary crisis responses but enduring features of retail management that require deliberate strategic, technological and human centred planning.

Effective integration of remote work extends beyond the deployment of digital tools. It requires alignment between technology, managerial capability, organisational support and local contextual realities. In the South African retail sector, infrastructural constraints, unequal access to resources and continued reliance on in person interaction significantly shape this alignment. These realities highlight the importance of flexible and differentiated approaches to remote work rather than uniform organisational policies.

By centring the lived experiences of retail general managers, this study contributes a context sensitive perspective to the remote work discourse and extends existing theory into a sector and setting that remain under explored. The insights generated offer a foundation for future research, inform managerial practice and support retail organisations in developing sustainable, inclusive and resilient remote and hybrid work models in an evolving world of work.

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