# MORE PAY AND BENEFITS OR BETTER WORK-LIFE BALANCE? POST PANDEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON EMPLOYEE CENTRICITY AMONG UNIVERSITY FRONTLINE STAFF

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic forced organizations across diverse industries to redraw their business models globally. Businesses crumbled, downsized, laid off workers, streamlined and digitalized their workflow, and maintained skeletal staff to support integral business functions. Remote working and flexible schedules were institutionalized to manage service employees globally. The study compared the effects of work-life balance and employee remuneration on employee job satisfaction and loyalty intentions. The study targeted frontline staff at three public universities in Zimbabwe, and 327 valid responses were obtained. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) revealed that employee remuneration, remote working, and flexible scheduling positively and significantly influenced employee job satisfaction.

Further, the analysis indicated employee preference for remote working and flexible work scheduling over more pay and benefits. The positive impact of job satisfaction on employee loyalty intentions was also confirmed. This study flags the significant contribution of work-life balance by bringing new empirical evidence on the relative significance of remote working, flexible working arrangements, and employee remuneration on employee job satisfaction and loyalty intentions in the post-pandemic normal. The study recommends that universities should harness digital technologies to promote sustainable remote working and enhanced employee autonomy.

*Highlights*

- *Post-COVID effects of work-life balance and employee remuneration on employee job satisfaction and loyalty intentions of frontline university staff.*
- *Data was collected from 327 university staff through questionnaires and analyzed using structural equation modeling.*
- *Remote working, flexible scheduling, and remuneration positively influenced university staff job satisfaction.*
- *University frontline staff preference for better work-life balance outweighs pay and benefits.*

## INTRODUCTION

The global economy embarks on the positive trajectory as it recovers from the jaws of the COVID-19 pandemic that changed the rules of the game for most industries. As efforts to contain the pandemic became the global imperative, preventive methods such as wearing facemasks, social distancing, advanced hygienic practices, decongesting public and office spaces, and vaccination were adopted (Shitu et al., 2022; Dangaiso, Makudza, Jaravaza, et al., 2023). To stay afloat in the new normal, most industries had to re-model their operational frameworks (Puri et al., 2020; Dangaiso, Makudza, Tshuma et al., 2023). The social distancing requirement also meant that organizations had to decongest their workplaces too. Most COVID-19 regulations permitted the skeletal physical staff complement tasked with overseeing the integral functions of the business (Toscano, Bigliardi and Polevaya,

2022). Remote working and flexible working arrangements were formalized as service employees were directed to execute their duties further away from each other (Galanti et al., 2021; Kurdy et al., 2023).

The current COVID-19 prevalence reports strongly suggest that the pandemic is phasing out (World Health Organisation, 2023), and as such, social distancing requirements are no longer necessary. Universities, and other organizations alike are now operating on a continuum between models that existed pre-COVID-19 and models that were implemented at the height of the pandemic (Dangaiso et al., 2023). Notwithstanding, employee response to remote working during and after the pandemic remains an under-researched subject, especially in developing countries. As employers seem to revert to pre-COVID business models, it has also been suggested in the literature that workers gain satisfaction and hence perform better when they can equitably balance between the demands of their private, social, and family commitments and those of their professions (Pereira, 2020; Silaban and Margaretha, 2021; Boakye et al., 2023). COVID-19 provided more work-life balance by serendipity as employees could attend to the demands of their private lives whilst virtually executing their jobs (Galanti et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2022). It remains an empirical void whether or not workers would prefer to continue with remote working and flexible scheduling arrangements post the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several studies have examined the nexus between employee remuneration and job satisfaction. A positive effect of better rewards has been reported in previous studies (Naji, 2014; Akhtar et al., 2016; Mabaso and Dlamini, 2017; Anggraini, Muchtar and Masdupi, 2019). However, these studies were conducted under stable conditions, and this research investigates the interplay of the variables mediated by COVID-19. Further, underwhelming business performance during the pandemic era significantly affected employee remuneration as most businesses crumbled, and some even laid off staff (Susanto et al., 2022; Toscano, Bigliardi, and Polevaya, 2022). Thus, this merits the subject a further empirical inquiry.

Moreover, research on COVID-19-induced flexible scheduling and remote working remains unexamined in most countries. Although the effects of COVID-19-induced remote work and flexible scheduling have not yet been fully examined, prior research on work-life balance suggests that they are expected to positively influence employee job satisfaction. Studies that have conducted a comparative analysis of the effects of COVID-19-induced employee remuneration, remote working, and flexible work scheduling on employee job satisfaction and loyalty intentions are missing in the literature. This research examines the differential effect of employee remuneration, remote working, and flexible scheduling on employee job satisfaction and loyalty intentions among university frontline staff in Zimbabwe.

The findings of this study inform university service administrators, university Human Resource Management practitioners, top management, and labor consultants as they attempt to re-design service management models that yield maximum productivity, employee satisfaction, and loyalty during the COVID-19 crisis. The study may also enable them

to understand the antecedents of job satisfaction in a period where COVID-19 has distorted the business landscape. More so, the study enlightens practitioners on the relative strength of each predictor on employee job satisfaction so that strategies for managing university frontline staff can be developed from an informed viewpoint. The research also highlights how service providers can harness work-life balance and reward strategies to leverage employee satisfaction and loyalty. Further, research on employee satisfaction adds an important dimension to the management of service staff as organizational performance hinges on a satisfied workforce; hence, this research brings a key impetus for university growth. The COVID-19 context pre-mediating events on the entire global landscape also lends this study an important gap. The study also advances empirical literature on employee rewards, work-life balance, and job satisfaction from the perspective of a developing economy, where such studies are still scarce.

Succinctly, the objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine predictors of job satisfaction and subsequent loyalty intentions among university employees in the post-COVID-19 context.
2. Establish the relative importance of employee remuneration (pay and benefits), flexible scheduling, and remote working (work-life balance).

Subsequent sections of this paper cover the literature review, research methodology, results and discussion, conclusions, implications, and future research directions.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

### The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

Several theoretical frameworks have been employed in literature to explain the balance between working conditions and employee satisfaction and behavioral intentions (e.g., the equity theory (Adams, 1963), the hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1943), and the expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964). As a sequel to these foundational theoretical frameworks, the Job-Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) has emerged as a relatively more recent and useful model. The JD-R model is a well-established theoretical model in the field of occupational health psychology, which suggests that work conditions, categorized into job demands and job resources, affect employees' well-being and performance. "Job demands refer to the physical, psychological, or socio-organizational aspects of the work whose energy-depleting process induces people to experience energy loss and fatigue, leading to stress, burnout, and health impairment. On the contrary, job resources refer to the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that reduce job demands while stimulating work motivation, personal growth, and development," Galanti et al. (2021, p. 1).

The current study borrows its theoretical underpinning from the JD-R model as the research seeks to evaluate the balance between remote deployment, employee remuneration, job satisfaction, and loyalty intentions. Work

itself is inherently a physical, emotional, and psychological strain that affects employee health, especially those who occupy boundary-spanning roles (Osborne and Ballantyne, 2012; Lee and Kim, 2022). Further, the deployment model (physical or remote workstation) adds another aspect which can either be a stressor or a resource that can reduce work strain. Proponents of work-life balance argue that it seeks to reduce job stress by permitting employees to equitably manage the demands of both work and private lives (Silaban and Margaretha, 2021; Susanto et al., 2022; Boakye et al., 2023), thus it emerges a valuable resource for employers. Competitive remuneration has been traditionally viewed as worthwhile compensation for effort or work done; hence, it is a resource that reduces the strain attributed to job commitments (Anggraini et al., 2019; Aliyu et al., 2023). As such, the JD-R model underpins this research, as it examines the interplay of employee remuneration, remote working, and flexible working arrangements on employee job satisfaction and loyalty intent in Zimbabwean universities.

## Employee Loyalty Intentions

Employee loyalty has been defined as the willingness of an employee to commit to an organization for the future and a disposition to continue serving in a role defined by a mutual value exchange relationship (Trinh, Van and Nguyen, 2023). Extant literature has extensively discussed employee retention due to its perceived correlation with organizational performance and long-term success. Organizations high in employee loyalty have been earmarked to achieve long-term success due to the positive relationship between loyalty intent and financial performance, productivity, organizational harmony, internal brand advocacy, relationship commitment, and employee performance (Gebregziabher et al., 2020; Buli, 2021). Several antecedents of employee loyalty intent have been suggested in the literature, e.g., organizational growth, career development, accomplishment, promotion, remuneration benefits, job security, and job satisfaction (Putra et al., 2020; Toscano et. al., 2022; Trinh et al., 2023).

## Job Satisfaction

Satisfaction is a subjective judgment of whether or not a product, service, offer, experience, or activity meets individual expectations (Pereira, 2020). Satisfaction has been extensively researched in the literature on services marketing and human resources management (HRM) due to its correlation with the future behavioral intentions of consumers and employees. Job satisfaction defines an employee's contentment with the job they serve. Satisfied employees show affection, commitment, effort, and self-sacrificial behavior toward accomplishing the requirements of their jobs (Anggraini et al., 2019; Boakye et al., 2023). Job satisfaction is a key aspect of people management because of its association with employee productivity, organizational harmony, unity of purpose, and overall business performance (Kurdy et al., 2023; Trinh et al., 2023). In contrast, job dissatisfaction is an unwanted phenomenon because it attracts resentment, poor morale, low productivity, disregard for company performance,

turnover intentions, and labor attrition (Frempong et al., 2018; Gebregziabher et al., 2020).

## COVID-19 Mediated Antecedents of Job Satisfaction

Many researchers have suggested a plethora of factors that drive employee job satisfaction in extant literature (Costen and Salazar, 2011; Buli, 2021). This research examines the relative contribution of employee remuneration and work-life balance as the dominant factors evident amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Two main dimensions of work-life balance are conceptualized as remote working (work from home) and flexible scheduling (individualized or customized work plan in an uncontrolled setting), as these were the main strategies adopted by service providers at the height of the pandemic (Galanti et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2022). Most organizations are operating on pre and post-COVID-19 models as the pandemic shows signs of fading away (Dangaiso, Makudza, Jaravaza, et al., 2023). As such, these were modeled to predict job satisfaction in a post-pandemic context.

Employee remuneration refers to the monetary and non-monetary rewards that are awarded to an employee for a job done over a regular time interval, e.g., one month (Wambeti et al., 2020; Trinh et al., 2023). The remuneration package includes wages and salaries obtained as well as fringe benefits such as housing, healthcare coverage, transport, and education (Wambeti et al., 2020; Aliyu et al., 2023). In Zimbabwe, grocery items, mostly food hampers, have been popularized during the COVID-19 pandemic as employers' token of appreciation towards boundary-spanning employees who had the highest risk exposure to contracting the virus.

Remote working refers to a special working model that permits service employees to conduct their routine tasks from their homes (Galanti et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2022). In a remote working setup, service staff periodically report to their physical offices whilst executing most of their core duties from home. Most service providers were forced to maintain a skeletal staff complement who oversees the integral business functions on site (e.g., IT technicians, healthcare staff, drivers, management, cleaning, and security operators). Most frontline employees were deployed to work from home as efforts to decongest the workplace were globally institutionalized (Mohammed et al., 2022). Most work-related services were Internet-mediated, and all communications were conveyed through digital platforms.

Flexible scheduling is defined as work arrangements that allow service employees to individually customize their work plans without direct interference from their line managers (supervisors) (Putra et al., 2020; Galanti et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2022). Under flexible scheduling, service employees have full discretion over which tasks they will complete as a priority, and which ones are categorized as peripheral and those not bound by deadlines and the preferred working times they consider best for optimum productivity (Mohammed et al., 2022). Flexible

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153

scheduling gives employees autonomy to execute their work more freely and helps them to self-manage while still being solely responsible for the outcomes of their work plans (Putra et al., 2020; Galanti et al., 2021).

## Employee Remuneration and Job Satisfaction

The relationship between employee earnings and job satisfaction is well grounded in literature. The main premise underlying the theory is that employees perform better when there is a satisfactory balance between the inputs (labor) and the outputs (wages and salaries) in their exchange relationship with their employers (Adams, 1963; Vroom, 1964). Employees are, therefore, expected to attain high job satisfaction when they receive remuneration commensurate with their efforts (Anggraini, Muchtar and Masdupi, 2019). A positive relationship between remuneration package and job satisfaction has been suggested in previous research (Naji, 2014; Mabaso and Dlamini, 2017; Anggraini et al., 2019; Wambeti et al., 2020; Trinh et al., 2023). However, the effects of remuneration strategies remain unexamined in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which business performance dwindled, and remuneration packages were significantly affected. However, cognizant of the support from studies conducted pre-COVID-19, this study proposed that;

H1: Attractive employee remuneration positively influences employee job satisfaction among university frontline staff in the post-COVID-19 era.

## Remote Working and Employee Job Satisfaction

The VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) concept has often been used to describe unpredictable environmental circumstances that befall corporate organizations (Putra et al., 2020). Concurrent with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), the flexible firm theory (Atkinson and Hall, 2011) also espouses that firms are receptive to flexible employment models to navigate through the volatile business circumstances. As such, the flexible firm model also envisages organizations succeeding through disruptive innovation, radical transformation, and venturing into untested business propositions (Galanti et al., 2021). Research has shown that adventurous and risk-taking businesses have found success by serendipity (Morris et al., 2002; Hacioglu et al., 2012). Although the relationship between remote working and job satisfaction remains unexamined in the COVID-19 context, prior studies on work-life balance suggest that employees are likely to be satisfied when they can equitably navigate between social, private and family commitments and their job commitments (Putra et al., 2020; Silaban and Margaretha, 2021; Toscano et al., 2022; Boakye et al., 2023; Kurdy et al., 2023). Thus, university frontline employees are expected to embrace remote working models that award them more discretion to attend to both sides of their commitments. As a result, this study also predicted that;

H2: Remote working positively influences employee job satisfaction among university frontline staff in the post-COVID-19 era.

## Flexible Work Scheduling and Employee Job Satisfaction

Flexible work scheduling, also conceptualized as flexi-time, encompasses that individual service employees are given the autonomy to tailor, plan, schedule, and organize their daily obligations such that they meet departmentally or functionally set objectives (Putra et al., 2020; Boakye et al., 2023). The conventional work schedule implies more direct interference of the line managers in the planning and execution of routine tasks (Mohammed et al., 2022). However, under flexible work arrangements, more discretion rests with the service employee as they operate from a remote workstation. Home offices have been popularized during the COVID-19 pandemic (Putra et al., 2020; Galanti et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2022). The influence of flexible work scheduling on job satisfaction remains under-researched in most economies. However, prior research on employee autonomy, self-managing, and decentralized workflow models suggests that employees are more adaptive, productive, and satisfied with a sense of trust and belief that they are able to perform without interference or direct supervision (Putra et al., 2020; Mohammed et al., 2022; Laß, et al., 2023; Trinh et al., 2023). Given this perspective, this research also proposed that;

H3: Flexible work scheduling positively influences employee job satisfaction among university frontline staff in the post-COVID-19 era.

## Job Satisfaction and Employee Loyalty Intentions

Extant literature identifies satisfaction as a key proxy of future behavioral intentions (Frempong et al., 2018; Dhir et al., 2020; Trinh et al., 2023). In support of the JD-R model, the disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980) 17 (4 suggests that satisfaction is achieved whenever conditions or performance meets individual expectations, that satisfaction is a positive feeling towards a product, service, event, person, or object, and its conditions an individual's future disposition towards that entity. Job satisfaction epitomizes the condition where an employee has positive feelings towards their job, work environment, and employer (Dhir et al., 2020; Silaban and Margaretha, 2021).

Proponents of the internal marketing paradigm support that employee satisfaction is a key antecedent of corporate success. A satisfied employee is expected to have a positive attitude toward the employer whilst demonstrating favorable future behaviors towards the employer (Benjarongrat and Neal, 2017; Frempong et al., 2018). The positive effect of job satisfaction on loyalty intentions has been reported in a number of empirical studies (Frempong et al., 2018; Gebregziabher et al., 2020; Buli, 2021; Trin het al., 2023). In a work environment where significant changes have been made at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that employers evaluate employee job satisfaction, as well as its influence on future employee behavioral intentions. Job satisfaction has been shown to trigger a positive effect on employee turnout, organization harmony, individual motivation,

peer support, employee performance, financial performance, and loyalty intentions in most studies (Frempong et al., 2018; Dhir et al., 2020; Buli, 2021; Trinh et al., 2023). In the light of the foregoing, this study also predicted that;

H4: Employee job satisfaction positively influences employee loyalty intentions among university frontline staff in the post-COVID-19 era. Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized research model.
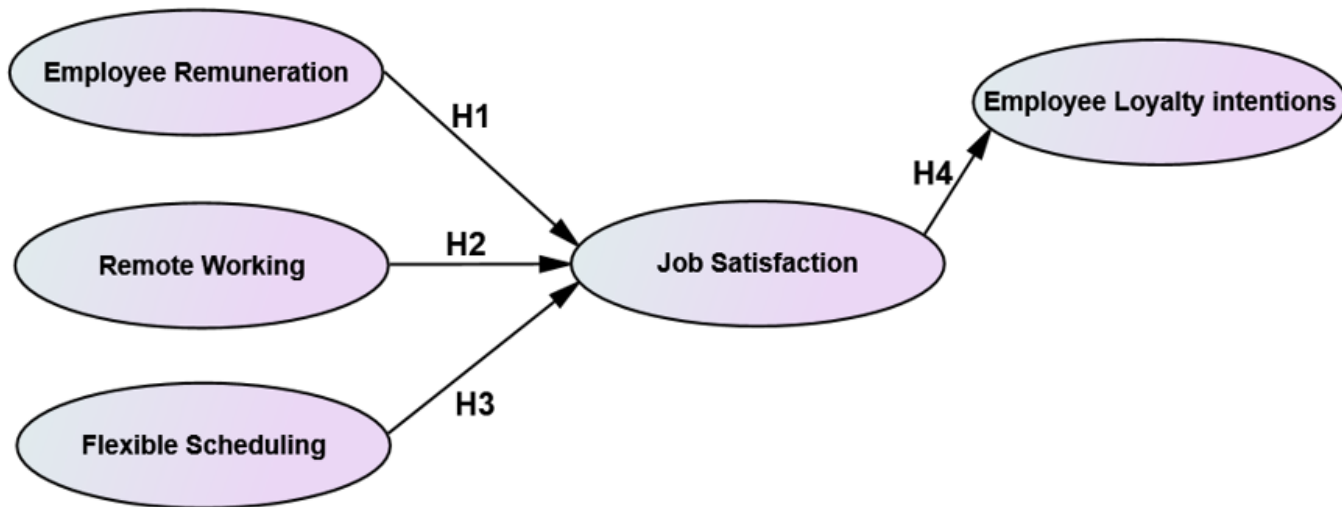


**Figure 1: Hypothesized research model**

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

### Research Design

The study's purpose was to examine the effects of employee remuneration, remote working, and flexible scheduling on employee job satisfaction and subsequent loyalty intentions. An explanatory research design through a quantitative research approach was employed. Model assessment enrolling Structural Equation Modeling in AMOS enabled estimation of parameters within prior hypothesized causal effects.

### Population and Sampling

A cross-sectional survey employed convenience sampling to select 392 academic and non-academic frontline employees at three public universities in Zimbabwe. Due to challenges in obtaining a sampling frame, random sampling techniques could not be used. Sampling was conducted using a staged approach where the first batch of boundary spanners were physically sought to complete person-administered questionnaires whilst the second batch of respondents working in remote environments was contacted through an online monkey survey. The sample size was based on data analysis methods, sizes used in similar studies, resource constraints, and completion rates. The item to response should range from 1-4 to 1-10 for each set of observed variables (Chepchirchir and Leting, 2015). Thus, for this study, 100-250 samples were considered sufficient. From a sample of 392 respondents, 327 cases were deemed valid for conclusive analyses.

### Measures

The measurement scales used in this study were adopted from previous research. These were measured on a 7-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These were conceptualized as employee remuneration (Wambeti et al.,

2020; Trinh et al., 2023), remote working (Toscano et al., 2022; Kurdy et al., 2023), flexible scheduling (Putra et al., 2020; Boakye et al., 2023), employee job satisfaction (Silaban and Margaretha, 2021; Trinh et al., 2023) and employee loyalty intentions (Gebregziabher et al., 2020; Trinh et al., 2023). A pilot study was used to refine the instrument based on 16 students from the sampled universities.

### Data Collection Procedures

The study obtained ethical clearance from the Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Ethics Committee. The permission to collect survey data from the employees of the three universities was also granted. Further, the purpose of the research was shared with participants, who were also educated that participation was voluntary. More so, the participants rights of confidentiality and privacy were observed before and after data collection. The participants were also instructed not to submit any personally identifiable information.

### Data Analysis Methods

A two-step procedure was followed to estimate model parameters following the guidelines of Anderson and Gerbin (1988). This was Confirmatory Factor Analysis followed by Structural Equation Modelling. The assessment of the measurement model ensured that validity and reliability requirements were met. The model fit indices used in this research belong to absolute, relative, and parsimony-adjusted model fit indices. Convergent validity was based on the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), whilst the comparison between the square of the AVE and construct correlations was the criteria for examining discriminant validity. Based on the maximum likelihood estimation, hypotheses tests were done using path estimates ($\beta$), $t$-values (C.R) (>1.96), and $p$-values (<0.05) at the 95% confidence interval.

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Female | 163 | 49.8 |
| | Male | 164 | 50.2 |
| | Total | 327 | 100.0 |
| Age | 18-25 years | 64 | 19.6 |
| | 26-34 years | 61 | 18.7 |
| | 35-43 years | 108 | 33.0 |
| | 44-52 years | 56 | 17.1 |
| | 53-65 years | 38 | 11.6 |
| | Total | 327 | 100.0 |
| Education | Ordinary level | 21 | 6.4 |
| | Diploma | 58 | 17.7 |
| | Bachelor's degree | 119 | 36.4 |
| | Master's degree | 99 | 30.3 |
| | Doctorate degree | 30 | 9.2 |
| | Total | 327 | 100.0 |
| Experience with the university | 0-5 years | 83 | 25.4 |
| | 6-10 years | 91 | 27.8 |
| | 11-15 years | 110 | 33.6 |
| | 16-20 years | 37 | 11.3 |
| | 21 years plus | 6 | 1.8 |
| | Total | 327 | 100.0 |
| Staff Category | Academic staff | 131 | 40.1 |
| | Nonacademic staff | 196 | 59.9 |
| | Total | 327 | 100.0 |
| Income | $1-500 | 170 | 52.0 |
| | $501-1000 | 135 | 41.3 |
| | $1001-1500 | 22 | 6.7 |
| | Total | 327 | 100.0 |

**Table 1: Demographic profile (Source: Survey data)**

## RESULTS

### Demographic Profile of Respondents

The major highlights were that gender was evenly distributed among males (50.2%), slightly surpassing their female counterparts (49.8%) by one respondent. The 35-43 age group had the highest frequency (108; 33.0%) whilst the 53-65 group had the least participants (38; 11.6%). Further, bachelor's degree holders dominated the sample (119; 36.4%) and the doctorate degree holders had the lowest frequency (30; 9.2%). University employees between 11-15 years of service had the highest frequency (110; 33.6%), followed by those in the 6-10 years category (91; 27.8%). In terms of income, 170 (52%) employees confirmed that their monthly earnings were between $1 to $500, and 135 (41.3%) showed that they were in the $501 to $1000 category. 131 (40.1%) academic and 196 (59.9%) non-academic staff participated in the study. Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

### Assessment of the Measurement Model

The results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis procedure confirmed that uni-dimensionality was satisfied with all standardized factor loadings greater than 0.7 (Kline, 2023), except RW5 (0.588), JS4 (0.610), and ELI3 (0.699). These were removed from further analysis save for ELI3 because

it did not affect the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (Hair et al., 2019). Inspecting the modification indices and the standardized residual covariance matrix did not suggest any further model re-specifications. Given that, the fit of the measurement model was examined. The normed Chi-square ($x^2/df$) = 2.98, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .07, Root Mean Residual (RMR) = .06, and Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = .912. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .943, Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = .943, and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .932. These absolute and relative fit indices, respectively, provide evidence of the good fitting model (Byrne, 2013; Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2023).

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was above the recommended threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2023). They ranged from 0.527 (Employee loyalty intentions) to 0.805 (Employee remuneration). Thus, convergent validity was present. The comparison between the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the construct correlations provided the basis for examining discriminant validity. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the square roots of the AVE (squared extracted variances) should be higher than the construct correlations (shared variances) between the corresponding variables. The results in Table 3 confirm that this condition

was met on all constructs; hence, there were no discriminant validity problems. Construct reliability was examined using composite reliability. These ranged from 0.770 (Employee loyalty intentions) and 0.954 (Remote working). A threshold of 0.7 was recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), thus construct reliability was present. In line with recommendations given by Hayes and Coutts (2020), McDonald's omega was used to test internal consistency since it is more robust than the widely used Cronbach's alpha. The internal consistency threshold is 0.7 or higher. Hence, all constructs had internal consistency as they were greater than the stipulated threshold. Table 2 shows the psychometric properties of the measurement model, and Figure 2 illustrates the measurement model.
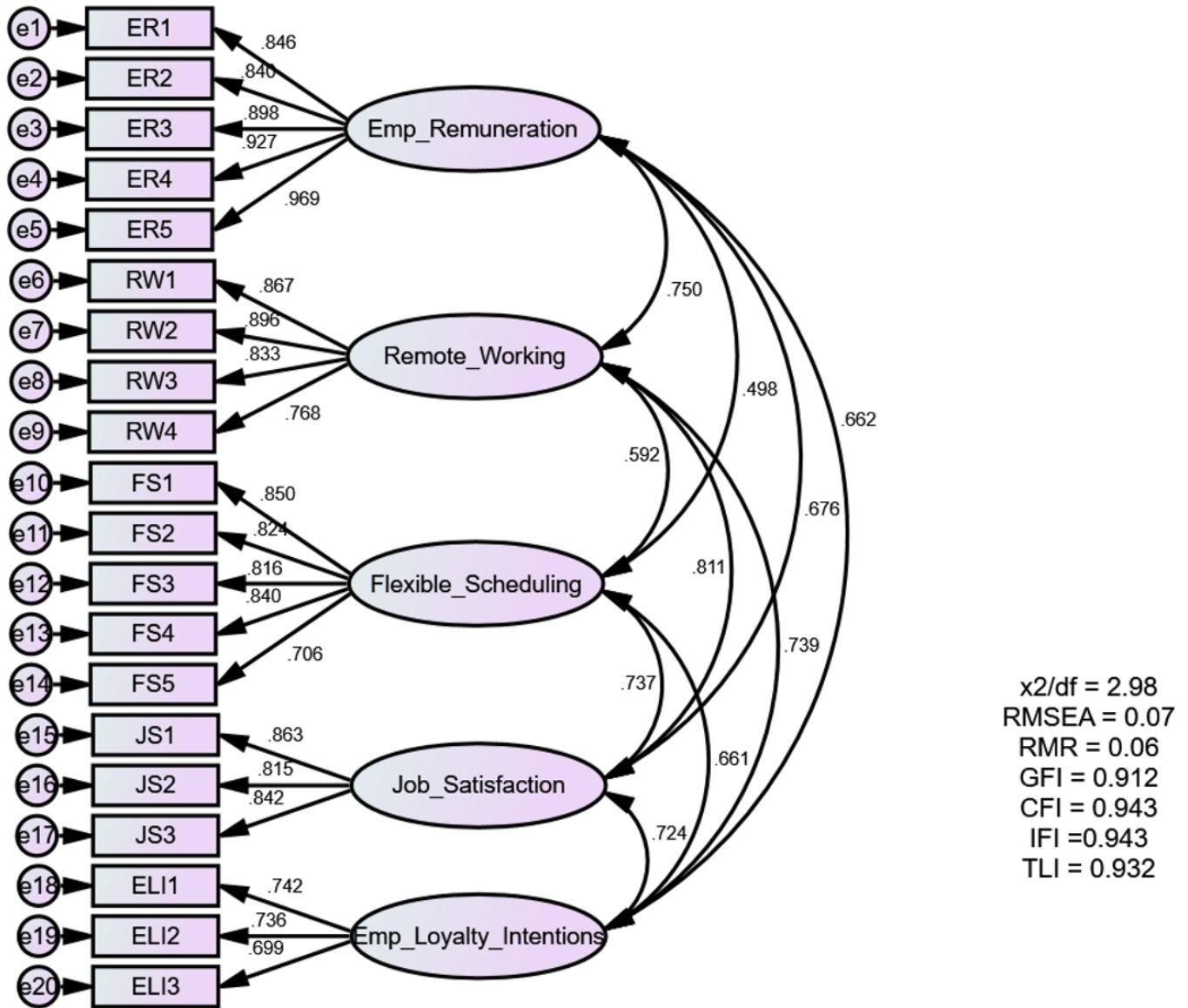


**Figure 2: Measurement model (Source: own analysis)**

| Construct/Observed | Loading | AVE | CR | Omega |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Employee remuneration | | .805 | .954 | .938 |
| ER1: My current salary is commensurate with my abilities | .846 | | | |
| ER2: the university's allowances and commissions are reasonable | .840 | | | |
| ER3: I am perfectly fine living with my current salary | .898 | | | |
| ER4: the payment of wages to the employees is fair and transparent | .927 | | | |
| ER5: Pay and benefits packages are pleasant | .969 | | | |
| Remote Working | | .710 | .907 | .881 |
| RW1: I am pleased to work from home | .867 | | | |
| RW2: Working from home allows me to look after my personal needs, too | .896 | | | |
| RW3: Working from home allows me to execute my duties with comfort | .833 | | | |
| RW4: Working from home is the best decision my employer ever made for our welfare | .768 | | | |
| Flexible Scheduling | | .654 | .904 | .902 |
| FS1: I am given the discretion to decide all the work in my area of responsibility | .850 | | | |
| FS2: I am trusted by my superiors and empowered to make decisions | .824 | | | |
| FS3: I make my own work plan for my routine duties | .816 | | | |
| FS4: I get assigned work by my superiors and can improve it in my own way. | .840 | | | |
| FS5: I set my own priorities and timelines without the help of my supervisor | .706 | | | |
| Job Satisfaction | | .706 | .878 | .839 |
| JS1: I am happy with my job selection | .863 | | | |
| JS2: Taking this job was the best career decision I ever made | .815 | | | |
| JS3: I will choose this position again, given another chance | .842 | | | |
| Employee Loyalty Intentions | | .527 | .770 | .792 |
| ELI1: I recommend this university to job seekers | .742 | | | |
| ELI2: I intend to stay in my job for the future | .736 | | | |
| ELI3: I will not switch to another employer in the future even if I am offered a higher salary | .699 | | | |

Notes: Loading = standardized loading, AVE = Average Variance Extracted, CR = Composite reliability, Omega = McDonald's omega
**Table 2: Psychometric properties of the measurement model (Source: own calculations)**

| Construct | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Employee Remuneration (1) | .897 | | | | |
| Remote Working (2) | .750 | .842 | | | |
| Flexible Scheduling (3) | .498 | .592 | .809 | | |
| Job Satisfaction (4) | .676 | .811 | .737 | .840 | |
| Employee Loyalty Intentions (5) | .662 | .729 | .661 | .724 | .736 |

**Table 3: Assessment of Discriminant validity (Source: own calculations)**

## Structural Equation Modeling and Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesized model was evaluated on three criteria: the model fit, significance of path estimates, and its explanatory power. The model fit of the structural model was as follows; $x^2/df$ = 3.1, GFI = .910, RMSEA = .08, and RMR = .07, CFI = .948, TLI = .938 and IFI = .948. The thresholds for absolute and incremental fit indices were satisfied.

Secondly, the path estimates were examined. The study predicted the positive effect of employee remuneration on employee job satisfaction. The study's results confirmed this positive causal relationship ($\beta$ = .126, $t$ = 2.274 and $p$ = .023). Given these results, the hypothesis (H1) was supported, and the study confirms that attractive remuneration packages positively impact the job satisfaction of university frontline staff in Zimbabwe. However, the study also sought to investigate the relative strength of each predictor of employee job satisfaction. On this dimension, remuneration had the least impact compared to remote working ($\beta$ = .509, $t$ = 7.721 and $p$ < 0.001) and flexible scheduling ($\beta$ =.394, $t$ = 7.128 and $p$ < 0.001). The SEM path diagram is shown in Figure 3.

Furthermore, the study also hypothesized that remote working positively impacts the job satisfaction of university frontline staff in H2. The results of the analysis also confirmed this positive causal relationship ($\beta$ = .509, $t$ = 7.721, and $p$ < 0.001). Hence, the hypothesis gained empirical support. This confirms the positive impact of work-life balance on job satisfaction in a post-pandemic context in Zimbabwe. Interestingly, the comparative analysis through SEM estimates revealed that remote working was the strongest predictor of employee job satisfaction among frontline employees in Zimbabwean universities compared to employee remuneration ($\beta$ = .126, $t$ = 2.274 and $p$ = .023) and flexible scheduling ($\beta$ = .394, $t$ = 7.128 and $p$ < 0.001).

**158**

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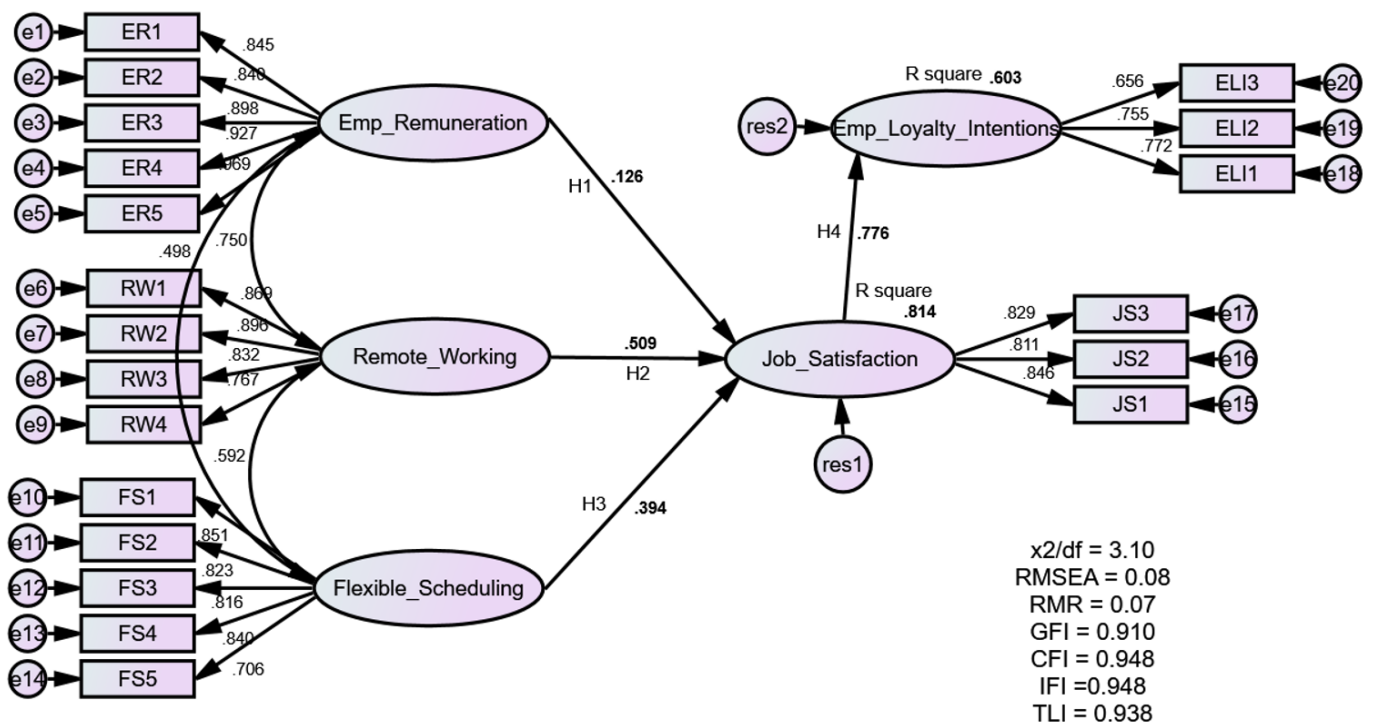ERIES Journal
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**Figure 3: The structural model (Source: own calculations)**

The study also predicted that flexible scheduling positively influenced employee job satisfaction in H3. The findings of SEM also confirmed this positive causal effect ($\beta = .394$, $t = 7.128$ and $p < 0.001$), hence the H3 was confirmed. The results support the idea that the autonomy to plan and self-organize work schedules and set individual priorities, goals, and performance targets has positively impacts employee satisfaction. Relatively, flexible scheduling was second in strength, just between remote working ($\beta = .509$, $t = 7.721$ and $p < 0.001$) and employee remuneration ($\beta = .126$, $t = 2.274$ and $p = .023$).

The ultimate hypothesis predicted that employee job satisfaction positively influences employee loyalty intentions in H4. The findings from SEM also confirmed this positive causal influence ($\beta = .776$, $t = 10.238$ and $p < 0.001$); hence the hypothesis (H4) was supported. The findings support that

delighted employees have the greatest propensity to stay with their current employers. Satisfied employees have been shown to surpass performance goals and are more likely to stay longer than those who are not satisfied.

The last criterion that was used to evaluate the structural model was the explanatory power of the model. The model explained 81.4% and 60.3% of the variance in employee job satisfaction and loyalty intentions. The predictors (employee remuneration, remote working, and flexible scheduling) explained 81.4% of the variability in employee job satisfaction. More so, employee job satisfaction also explained the 60.3% variability in employee loyalty intentions (Figure 3). Models that explain at least 50% of the variance have been suggested to have significant power of prediction (Hair et al., 2019). Table 4 shows the outcomes of hypothesis testing.

| Hypothesized relationship | Estimate (β) | C.R | p-value | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1: ER→JS | .126 | 2.274 | .023 | Supported |
| H2: RW→JS | .509 | 7.721 | *** | Supported |
| H3: FS→JS | .394 | 7.128 | *** | Supported |
| H4: JS→ELI | .776 | 10.238 | *** | Supported |

*Notes: ER = Employee Remuneration, RW = Remote Working, FS = Flexible Scheduling, JS = Job satisfaction, ELI = Employee Loyalty Intentions, C.R = Critical Ratio/t-statistic, a 95% confidence interval was used, and \*\*\* denotes p<0.001.*

**Table 4: Outcomes of hypothesis testing (Source: own calculations)**

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study aimed to examine the differential effects of employee remuneration, remote working, and flexible scheduling on employee job satisfaction and, subsequently, loyalty intentions. Structural relationships that were hypothesized in the proposed model were confirmed. In H1, the study predicted that employee remuneration would positively affect employee job satisfaction. The results ($\beta = .126$, $t = 2.274$, $p = .023$) confirm this relationship and H1 gained empirical

support. Although most organizations were unable to operate at their full productive capacity, there is still evidence that attractive remuneration leads to job satisfaction. University frontline employees indicated that they value pay and benefits awarded to them by their employers. These results have been supported in related studies (Naji, 2014; Mabaso and Dlamini, 2017; Anggraini et al., 2019; Wambeti, Waweru and Mwaura, 2020; Trinh et al., 2023). However, in our comparative analysis based on the strength of path coefficients and $t$-statistics,

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**volume 17 issue 2**

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**159**

employee remuneration had relatively the weakest impact on job satisfaction. The findings pinpoint that university boundary-spanning staff preferred remote working ($\beta = .509$, $t = 7.721$, $p < 0.001$) and flexible scheduling of work ($\beta = .394$, $t = 7.128$, $p < 0.001$) to employee remuneration.

In H2, the positive effect of remote working on employee job satisfaction was hypothesized. Findings confirmed this relationship, leading to the confirmation of H2. Mediated by the COVID-19 circumstances, remote working was evidently important for university frontline staff ($\beta = .509$, $t = 7.721$, $p < 0.001$). Prior research on work-life balance also supports the positive effect of remote work on job satisfaction. Concurrent with the Job Demands-Resource model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), the remote working arrangement reduces job stressors because it promotes more balance between work and life, thus reducing job stress. These results have been reported in related studies (Putra et al., 2020; Silaban and Margaretha, 2021; Toscano et al., 2022; Boakye et al., 2023; Kurdy et al., 2023). Further, the statistical results in the structural model elaborated on the importance of remote working (working from home). Amongst the COVID-19-mediated antecedents of job satisfaction, remote working had the strongest impact as compared to employee remuneration ($\beta = .126$, $t = 2.274$, $p = .023$) and flexible scheduling ($\beta = .394$, $t = 7.128$, $p < 0.001$).

More so, H3 proposed the positive effect of flexible scheduling of university work on employee job satisfaction. The results ($\beta = .394$, $t = 7.128$, $p < 0.001$) confirm the positive and significant impact, and hence H3 gained empirical support. Job autonomy emerged as a significant predictor of employee satisfaction in a COVID-19-induced deployment model. In support of the underlying theory, the more employees are free to plan, execute, and coordinate their work without direct interference from their line managers, the higher the propensity to achieve job satisfaction (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Flexibility and job autonomy reduce job stress by allowing the incumbent employee to freely use their initiative to perform their duties. Thus, the findings are aligned with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). The more work (stressor) an employee has, the more autonomy (cognitive resources) they need to accomplish. These findings have been confirmed in earlier studies (Putra et al., 2020; Mohammed et al., 2022; Laß, Vera-Toscano and Wooden, 2023; Trinh, Van and Nguyen, 2023). In terms of relative strength, flexible scheduling had the second strongest impact on job satisfaction in the model. Altogether, remuneration benefits, remote working, and flexible scheduling explained 81.4% of the variability in employee job satisfaction of university frontline staff in Zimbabwe. In terms of priority ranking of the three predictors of university frontline staff job satisfaction, remote work had the strongest impact, followed by flexible work scheduling, and the least was employee remuneration. These results were in tandem with Barrero, Bloom, and Davis (2021), where employees literally favored working from home and would start to actively consider other job offers at the same remuneration but with an option to work from home if remote working and flexible work scheduling are removed.

The ultimate hypothesis, H4, predicted that employee job satisfaction would positively influence employee loyalty intentions. The results from SEM indicate that a positive and significant relationship was evident, which influenced the support for H4. The findings extend the existing literature supporting the key role of employee satisfaction on loyalty intent. Similar findings have been reported by previous researchers (Frempong, Agbenyo and Darko, 2018; Gebregziabher et al., 2020; Buli, 2021; Trinh, Van and Nguyen, 2023). Boundary-spanning roles are naturally stressful and relatively low-paying jobs across service industries; hence, employee satisfaction is a priority in a service context. Given the high staff attrition that has been reported in the Higher Education sector in Zimbabwe in recent years (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2022), employee job satisfaction occupies critical space in the survival and future growth of universities. This research confirms that 60.3% of the variability in employee loyalty intent of university frontline staff was explained by job satisfaction. The current research, therefore, suggests that continuous evaluation of employee job satisfaction is an imperator in the university service setting.

## CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to determine and compare the antecedents of job satisfaction and employee loyalty intentions in a COVID-19-mediated employee deployment model. The findings inform the conclusion that although employee remuneration positively influences employee job satisfaction, remote working, and flexible scheduling have a stronger positive impact. Further, the study concludes that employee job satisfaction positively impacts employee loyalty intentions in the context of university frontline staff.

### Theoretical Implications

The study makes key contributions to literature in the domain of services marketing and human resources management by adding to studies that evaluated the impact of employee remuneration, remote working, and flexible scheduling on employee job satisfaction and, subsequently, loyalty intentions. The research was grounded in the Job Demands-Resources model and the equity and flexible firm theories. This research advances theory by confirming the key positive role of work-life balance on employee job satisfaction, and further, the study confirms that in the mediation of the COVID-19 context, work-life balance has a much-outsized positive effect on job satisfaction compared to employee remuneration. This presents a key contribution to the literature, given the over-emphasis on wages and salaries that dominate conventional job satisfaction literature. Moreover, the research adds that, comparatively, remote working, flexible scheduling, and employee remuneration positively contribute to employee job satisfaction. In the age of digitalization, service employees are best productive utilizing digital platforms to execute their duties whilst also having oversight on their private family engagements and social communities. The study challenges the theory that

confines work to physical corporate workstations, thereby disenfranchising frontline service staff from overseeing their social and private affairs that affect their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

## Practical Implications

Management of frontline staff is critical to organizational success, especially in the domain of service providers. The negative effect of job dissatisfaction, emotional burnout, employee job stress, and workplace fatigue on employee productivity is well established in the literature. The nature of emotional stress and labor endured by frontline employees implies that managing job satisfaction and loyalty intentions is critical, especially for service providers. This research provides important nuggets for universities and other service providers alike as they rework post-COVID-19 business models for deploying and managing their service staff. Most non-specialist service managers, especially in developing economies, have been fixated on the view that employee remuneration is the sole source of job satisfaction; however, this perspective has been challenged in literature. Current findings imply that service providers have key considerations to make in the digital era for work-life balance. Given that employees indicated that remote working arrangements have the strongest impact on job satisfaction, service providers should review their policy towards supportive and inclusive employee management policies. This could present a huge opportunity to harness employee loyalty through employee job satisfaction.

## Recommendations

To enhance employee job satisfaction and loyalty, the study recommends that service providers design flexible work schedules and foster remote work and electronic job design. Although most managers view employee remuneration as the important antecedent to job satisfaction, this study recommends that service providers should consider augmenting remuneration with work-life balance to enhance job satisfaction.

Research evidence suggests that employees perform better when they can multitask between all essential facets of their lives. Organizations should allow service employees to work at home whilst overseeing the needs of their families and also being able to plan and set out their assignments without much interference from their line managers. To enable this, service providers should fully digitalize their workflow to expedite routine tasks, meetings, group engagements, service inquiries, and other official correspondence using digital enterprise management systems and enhanced e-communication platforms. To enhance productivity and job satisfaction, service providers should work against employee micro-management by promoting more autonomy, trust, responsibility, and authority.

## Limitations and Future Study

Human satisfaction is a subjective construct and varies due to a range of contextual or peculiar environmental circumstances; therefore, the findings of this research may not be reproduced in other unique organizational settings, given that a limitation on the generalizability of the findings, future studies may explore determinants of job satisfaction in the contexts of their environments. Factors such as organizational culture, leadership style, and organizational success may be important determinants of job satisfaction in other contexts.

Further, the study employed a mono-quantitative design suited to examine causal relationships in structural models. However, a limitation is that this design does not allow participants to give in-depth accounts of their lived experiences. Future studies may explore qualitative designs to discuss findings from different perspectives. Moreover, the sample size was small, involving 327 students and three universities due to budget constraints.

Lastly, contextual factors such as COVID-19 fears and health factors could have probably explained employee opinions on remote working arrangements. As such, future researchers may re-evaluate this model under entirely stable conditions to examine the replicability of findings.

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