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New Ways to Perform: Employees' Perspective on Remote Work and Psychological Security in the Post-Pandemic Era

Cătălina Radu *, Alecxandrina Deaconu, Iudith-Anci Kis, Adela Jansen and Sorina Ioana Mișu

Faculty of Management, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, 010374 Bucharest, Romania
* Correspondence: catalina.radu@man.ase.ro

Abstract: With the increasing prevalence of remote work, understanding how it impacts employee perception, psychological safety, and job performance is critical for organisations. This study aims to investigate the relationships among these variables using a cross-sectional quantitative design and a questionnaire consisting of three scales: the Worktango employee sentiment around remote work survey, the Worktango psychological health and safety survey, and Goodman and Svyantek's performance scale. Our sample included 857 participants, both managers and non-managers, from a large insurance company. Our first two hypotheses were confirmed using non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis tests: employee sentiment around remote work as part of hybrid work is more favourable in non-sales fields and among employees who actually work remotely more often. Moreover, we found that psychological safety moderates the relationship between employee sentiment around remote work and work performance. Specifically, we observed that the positive relationship between employee sentiment around remote work and work performance is stronger when psychological safety is high. Overall, our findings contribute to the understanding of how remote work is perceived by employees and its relationship and impact on their psychological safety and job performance. These insights can help organisations develop effective policies and practices for remote work that support their employees' well-being and performance.

1. Introduction

Many businesses have experienced issues with their labour force, especially behavioural changes of their employees. As they have undergone new working methods during the COVID-19 pandemic, human resources experts need to focus on the development of new policies regarding a long-term sustainable employer-employee relationship while overcoming various obstacles, including cultural ones [1].

The COVID-19 pandemic is officially over, but the disease did not disappear totally; nor did the changes brought by it in our day-to-day lives, in the way we work and do business. Post-pandemic recovery is an essential and complex process that incorporates economic and emotional reconstruction [2].

At the same time, human resources policies are based on the needs and expectations of employees regarding their work environment, work methods, level of engagement, health, and psychological security, and take into account the content of new concepts launched and investigated in specialised literature and in numerous pieces of research on these topics.

Luckily, technology made working from home possible and gave people all over the world the opportunity to continue being employed and earning money without being exposed to discontinuity of work, discontinuity of income, and other implications. Managers who organised regular one-to-one meetings, whether online or face-to-face, were able to keep a healthy connection with their team members and help them prioritise their

work and protect their work-life balance. Therefore, employees could work from their homes, be in a safe environment with less stress, and, in the end, give more attention to their work [3]. However, the pandemic, and more specifically the lockdown isolation, affected people's satisfaction [4–6], especially in the case of people who people experienced anxiety and depression or depressive symptoms, elements that affected their own self-esteem, optimism, hope, and resilience [7]. The levels of adverse effects were found at higher levels in the pandemic than before that terrible health crisis [8,9].

Making the transition to remote work was not an easy task for all companies, especially those that had not experienced this working type before, as it requires the restructuring of hierarchies and leadership styles [10]. The need to understand the quality of employees' work life from remote or home arrangements during the pandemic required higher qualitative communication. Additionally, managers had to keep feelings of belonging to the company alive, the certainty of care in case of injuries or illness [11], as well as excellent working conditions.

During the pandemic, managers had to be open and allow their teams to combine work and personal life matters, since work flexibility was mentioned by most employees as being one of the most important factors contributing to their satisfaction [12].

Working from home, especially in its hybrid form, is here to stay because, no matter how many challenges people encountered during the lockdown, they found many benefits in working partially from home. In terms of business requirements, these had to be kept at the same level of quality for stakeholders, so relevant information sharing, reporting, supervision, mentoring, or training had to continue regardless of the health crisis in order to ensure business survival and continuity. Working from home, which was in many cases the only work arrangement in the lockdown period for many companies (with the exception of vital services), was gradually replaced by a hybrid formula which includes employees' physical presence in the workplace. This new "hybrid" work arrangement is here to stay because, no matter how many challenges people encountered during the lockdown, they found many benefits in working partially from home [13].

In this unprecedented business context, human resource professionals had to find the right balance between realities, perceptions and individuals, and still go the extra mile to cover business demands. Most of this situation's expectations were linked to working time, flexibility, performance evaluation, training, communication, career progress, human connection, or mental health [14].

By putting the necessary effort into assuring the correctness of working conditions, many positive outcomes have been acquired: confidence in job safety and health care; continuous development in the new technological context; well-being due to flexible arrangements taking into account family situations; and a trust among managers, human resources and employees built on communication, self-discipline, and data security attention [11].

Post-pandemic, the main human resources processes, such as recruitment, selection, performance management, motivation of employees, or workplace redesign that integrates new remote work collaboration with the partial physical presence of employees during the week, remain the most challenging activities [15]. These all contribute to the health and safety of employees [16], and, thus, become an important pillar of sustainability. For many businesses, before COVID-19, sustainability was mostly about the environment, but after the human health crisis of the pandemic, concerns related to health and safety found a central place in business continuity [17].

In order to continue to benefit from its flexibility, human resources professionals should ensure the continuity of telework, whether from home or another place, given the advantage of technology. However, telework should not be implemented equally across teams, but should take into consideration the real needs of each team and individual [18]. For example, employees' level of trust linked to technological capabilities grew exponentially during the pandemic because companies were able to see how fast their employees

could adapt to the new technology used in working from a distance, either totally or partially, as in the hybrid mode.

Various aspects of hybrid work have been analysed by previous researchers, such as how a team's work performance is impacted by different elements such as personality traits and the leader's gender [19], or job design and self-efficacy [20]. Even though these are a few examples, and although we have discerned increasing academic interest, we consider that this paper offers a significant contribution to the understanding of how remote work contexts impact employees' work performance and psychological security when dividing their work time between presence at the workplace and doing the job from elsewhere.

In this paper, we examine the relationship among three variables: psychological security, psychological well-being, and work performance. To achieve this goal, we organise the paper in the following way. In Section 2, we provide an in-depth discussion of the key concepts that are directly related to our research, namely psychological security, psychological well-being, and work performance. At the end of this section, we present our hypotheses. Section 3 describes the materials and methods used in our study. In Section 4, we present the results of our research, while in Section 5, we discuss our findings in light of the existing literature. Finally, in Section 6, we provide our conclusions, the theoretical and practical implications of our findings, the limitations of our study, and some suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Psychological Security and Well-Being within a Workplace

Nowadays, there is a revitalisation of interest in employee psychological security, a subject with ancient origins and which has recently experienced a justified evolution, if we consider that the need for security is the mainstay of an individual's well-being and mental health [21,22]. Employees with poor psychological security may feel rejected and isolated and perceive the outer world and people as threatening, untrustworthy, and uncontrollable [23]. These negative perceptions and feelings can generate frustrations and undesirable behaviours [24–26]. From a psychological perspective, security is both a feeling and a reality. Psychological security refers to the feelings of safety and belongingness, as well as a sense of control over the social environment and confidence in being free from fear [27]. This explains situations in which the perception of security is far from reality and the fact that risk perception does not match risk reality. [28]. When considering psychological security, the false perception of risks means that the attention given is not proportional to their severity and that employees do not correctly assess the magnitude of different risks, as agreed by several scholars [22,26,28].

According to the literature mentioned above, the characteristics of psychological security can be summarised as follows: psychological security is an emotional experience perceived by the individual; the expression of psychological security is mainly the certainty, control, and risk premonition felt by the individual; psychological security will affect physical and mental health. People with high psychological security will experience more confidence and freedom, while people with lower psychological security will be prone to anxiety, fear, or depression. Differences in personality and the perception of the environment determine an individual's level of trust in the external world, their level of self-centeredness, and the extent to which they rely on the objective environment [29].

Mental self-assurance is critical in challenging situations, and has been studied in relation to positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap) through two perspectives, equally important for HR strategists [30]. The first is positive organisational behaviour [31], and the second is positive psychology with four positive psychological resources: self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience [32]. These guarantee one's capability to fruitfully maintain a good well-being balance and reduce negative stressors, contributing to higher resilience.

Psychological security is directly affected by social and environmental factors [33]. Some studies demonstrate that negative interpersonal contexts will cause individuals to hold negative beliefs about the world and themselves, and about their psychological security needs [21,34]. In addition, emotional security theory highlights that negative contexts threaten the individuals' psychological security, which in turn leads to various unsatisfactory outcomes [25,35].

In Human Resources Management, psychological security and psychological well-being are premises that favour work engagement and, indirectly, individual performance.

Many authors consider that work engagement is an indicator of employees' intrinsic motivation [36], which is in entire agreement with the theory of self-determination [37] and the psychological climate aspect of organisational culture [38]. Moreover, employees' engagement in their work provides a positive energy boost and a feeling of pride and fulfilment [37,39,40]. However, people's lives inevitably extend beyond their work. In this context, a key factor in employee engagement is the ability to psychologically detach from the workplace during non-work time, refreshing one's own perspectives [41].

By contrast, when employees cannot detach from their work, they experience a corresponding decrease in their efficiency and engagement, as an effect of a long-standing work culture [41–44]. Further, another study has found that negative work-home interaction can affect job performance, yet organizational support has an important role in diminishing this negative impact [45]. The previously highlighted opinions are not surprising. Any discussion about engagement and its relationship with performance refers to serious research on the relationship between satisfaction and performance, which has been studied for a long time with similar results. Researchers have previously found that job satisfaction is a good predictor of employees' intentions to stay; it is also associated with low turnover and rates of absenteeism [46,47].

2.2. Work Performance in the Context of Post-COVID Work Arrangements

The confinement measures of COVID-19 pushed many employees and employers to deliver the work remotely overnight, [48] without any preparation, planning, training or anything that could help with this new way of working. Surprisingly, even in these conditions, managers and their teams sensed an improved productivity [49] which made them feel the need to continue working remotely after COVID-19 as well. Still, remote work is not a good choice for everyone, as some may experience loneliness, stress, and ultimately lack of performance; this is why, in the long term, the balanced solution is hybrid work which incorporates both remote and office work, in various combinations [49].

The hybrid work concept is not new; however, it has gained popularity after the COVID-19 pandemic. A quick review of the literature shows that there is not a generally accepted definition of the concept, but rather, scholars use a variety of concepts in order to approximately define the same notion, such as: remote work, virtual work, distance working, work from home, telework, or work from anywhere [13,50].

Nevertheless, despite inconsistencies in pointing out a generally accepted definition, it is widely accepted that hybrid work encompasses remote work, as hybrid work consists of a mix of office and remote work [51], whereas remote work features two main characteristics: it is done from home or some other place, and it implies the usage of technology [13,51]. Hybrid work can also be described as a branch of telework, as hybrid teams work using virtual and digital tools as well as meeting face-to-face from time to time [52].

On the other hand, one of the most widely accepted understandings of telework points to the accumulation of several factors, such as work being done somewhere else than the physical location of the company, and the usage of technical devices and software equipment [53]. A 14-year span analysis [54] shows that the chronology of concepts related to telework includes terms such as teleworking, homeworking, virtual work, telework, distributed work, telecommuting, and remote working.

The concept of work performance is a well-researched one. Much has been said on this topic, but in a fast-changing world, it is worth constantly updating the knowledge on

this matter. Even though the concept of telework was not born with the COVID-19 pandemic [50], it has undoubtedly increased its popularity. The race to gain understanding and knowledge on the various aspects of this concept has begun. Hence, we consider it worth putting into this research the concept of work performance and telework.

Many aspects of an employee's work can be objectively quantified, and thus, performance can be accurately pinpointed; however, this leaves a significant number of aspects of a subjective nature that require a more careful approach.

One of the simplest methods to understand the nature of work performance is to analyse task performance, that is, anything related to the job description's core of activities, separately from contextual performance, indicated by a broader inclusion of activities supporting the organisational environment [55,56]. This classification is of great use to our study because, in the context of working from a distance, sometimes employees lose contact with the ancillary activities of their job descriptions, so they need additional abilities such as autonomy and flexibility. Nevertheless, remote and hybrid work performance have begun to be interesting study topics with promising results [54,57].

2.3. Objectives and Hypotheses

Remote and hybrid work arrangements are aligned with the principles of sustainable development, as they contribute to reducing costs and pollution associated with commuting. By allowing employees to work from home or from alternative locations, companies can optimize space utilization, minimize the use of resources, and decrease their carbon footprint. However, it is crucial to recognize that implementing such arrangements should not be imposed on employees by force, as this may raise concerns and challenges for them. Therefore, it is essential to take into account the perspectives and preferences of employees and ensure that they have the necessary resources and support to work effectively and productively in these new work arrangements. Therefore, we formulate the objectives of our research and their subsequent hypotheses.

Objective O1. *Identifying employees' perceptions regarding remote work as part of a hybrid work arrangement.*

The latest studies [13] show that undoubtedly employers from all over the world have experienced diverse effects of remote work on a personal level, on their career perspectives, or in matters concerned to health, well-being, and safety. Furthermore, literature shows that employers belonging to industries or business areas where face-to-face contact is required experienced higher levels of impact [58]. One of these areas is represented by sales departments. Sales employers across the globe have witnessed dramatic changes over the last years, whether they were generated by changes in technology, competition, or consumer behaviour [59]. In light of these findings, we formulate the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis H1. *Employee sentiment around remote work is more favourable in fields other than sales.*

Employees' sentiment about remote work was investigated during and after COVID-19 in order to understand people's attitudes and experiences towards this way of working [60]. Scientific literature shows that people have a favourable sentiment about remote work, and most employees declare that they would want their organisation to offer them the possibility to work remotely 2 or 3 days per week, and that otherwise they would be likely to change their job if work would return to being fully on-site [61]. Additionally, after the pandemic lockdown, employees with jobs that can be performed remotely have increased expectations about flexibility with respect to time and place of work [62]. It can be appreciated that employees design their professional lives by choosing the flexibility given by remote work [63]. Taking into account all these observations, and also the fact

that we consider the analysed company has taken an appropriate hybrid work policy, we suggest the second hypothesis in our study:

Hypothesis H2. *Employee sentiment around remote work is more favourable in the case of employees who actually work remotely more often.*

Objective O2. *Identifying the relationship among perceptions of remote work, work performance, and psychological safety.*

A quick search of the scientific literature shows that there is high interest among fellow scholars in understanding the various facets of the remote work–psychological safety relationship. Some of the studies [51] explore employees' attitudes and behaviours that indicate psychological safety in different work models, as well as the ability to keep it, while others [64] attempt to identify the factors influencing remote work and to investigate which of these are the most important from the perspective of the employee's psychological safety. Additionally, it has also been investigated which of the elements of remote work an organisation should focus its efforts on in order to provide its employees with the highest level of comfort and take into consideration various aspects of psychological safety [61].

While employee sentiment around remote work might influence performance, psychological safety might moderate this relationship. Many studies have investigated the moderators of relations among psychological safety and its outcomes, while there were also many in which psychological safety is treated as a moderator [65]. Psychological safety was proven to be a moderator in a series of similar relationships: between socio-emotional wealth separation and decision-making quality [66], between high-performance work systems and the promotive voice [67], and between process innovativeness and profitability [68]. Therefore, we put forth our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis H3. *Psychological safety moderates the relationship between employee sentiment around remote work and work performance.*

More precisely, we expect that the positive relationship between employee sentiment around remote work and work performance is stronger when psychological safety is high than when it is low.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants

The present research was designed in order to get the feedback of employees of a large international insurance company in Romania, in March 2022, after two years of pandemic-linked remote work as part of a hybrid work arrangement. The population for our study consisted of all employees, both managers and non-managers, from this company. The company has hundreds of locations throughout the country. It employs a diverse workforce in terms of gender, culture, ethnicity, and religion, with varying levels of experience, education, and job functions.

We drew a sample of 857 participants from the population using a convenience sampling method, which involved selecting participants who were easily accessible and willing to participate in the study. The sample included both managers and non-managers with various job titles and responsibilities.

While the sample was not randomly selected, it was diverse and representative of the larger population in terms of job function and organisational level. We took steps to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible, including selecting participants from different departments and locations within the company.

Regarding the gender of respondents, 522 (60.9%) are female, and 335 (39.1%) are male, which is in line with the organisation's structure. In Tables 1 and 2, we present data

referring to our participants' age and seniority, on the one hand, and function within the organisation, on the other.

Table 1. Participants' age and seniority.

		Seniority				
		<5 Years	**5–10 Years**	**11–15 Years**	**>15 Years**	**Total**
	<25	30	0	0	0	*30*
	25–30	41	4	1	0	*46*
	31–35	43	15	20	0	*78*
	36–40	41	30	42	15	*128*
Age	41–45	43	37	44	77	*201*
(years)	46–50	27	13	38	51	*129*
	51–55	26	27	35	55	*143*
	56–60	13	9	14	33	*69*
	>60	2	3	14	14	*33*
Total		*266*	*143*	*203*	*245*	*857*

Table 2. Participants' function within the organisation.

	Sales	**Other Departments**	**Total**
Managers	110	90	*200*
Non-managers	261	396	*657*
Total	*371*	*486*	*857*

We chose to have a large proportion of participants from the sales department in our study for several reasons.

First, the insurance field is heavily dependent on sales. The sales department is typically the largest and most important department in insurance companies, which is also the case for the organisation we analysed. Therefore, by including a larger number of participants from the sales department, we were able to capture a more representative sample of the organisation and gain a complete understanding of the experiences and perspectives of employees in this field.

Second, our research objectives specifically focused on understanding the experiences and perceptions of employees who are involved in the sales process in contrast to the others since we considered the specificity of their work that requires more interaction with others and more physical presence. Given the central role that sales play in the insurance industry and the specific focus of our research objectives, it was important to include a larger number of participants from the sales department in order to ensure that our findings were robust and informative.

3.2. Measures

This study aimed to investigate the perception of employees with respect to remote work, their psychological safety, and job performance, and also the relationships among these variables. To achieve this aim, a questionnaire was developed that comprised three scales:

- the Worktango employee sentiment around remote work survey;
- the Worktango psychological health and safety survey;
- Goodman and Svyantek's performance scale.

All these scales are presented in the next sub-sections of the paper; they have been validated in previous research and have shown good reliability and validity.

We also collected information about participants' demographic characteristics (gender, age, seniority, function within the organisation, and the number of days per week of

remote work). This information was collected to provide a demographic profile of the sample and to examine whether demographic factors were related to the analysed variables.

Finally, the questionnaire also included a series of open-ended questions that were not directly related to the objectives of this paper, such as participants' opinions about what in particular they appreciated from the organisational support for the transition to more remote work during the COVID-19 period, additional resources that would help them work effectively while remote, and ideas to improve the company's policies.

3.2.1. The Worktango Employee Sentiment around Remote Work Survey

The Worktango employee sentiment around remote work survey consists of 6 items that assess various aspects of employees' perception of working from home, such as accessing the needed resources and work productivity. Participants rated their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The possible range of scores on this scale is 6 to 30, with higher scores indicating a more positive perception of working from home. This scale is presented in the Appendix A, together with the other two instruments used.

3.2.2. The Worktango Psychological Health and Safety Survey

The Worktango psychological health and safety survey consists of 15 items that represent one of the methods to gauge employees' feeling of psychological security by looking at trust in the managerial team, understanding of expectations, confidence in expressing one's opinions, amount and quality of work, etc. Participants rated their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The possible range of scores on this scale is 15 to 75, with higher scores indicating a higher level of perceived psychological safety. This scale is presented in the Appendix A.

3.2.3. Goodman and Svyantek's Performance Scale

Goodman and Svyantek's performance scale consists of 16 items (seven of them measuring contextual performance and the other nine measuring task performance). Participants rated their level of agreement with each statement on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), as kept from the original study [56] and presented in the Appendix A. The possible range of scores for contextual performance is 7 to 28, and for task performance, 9 to 36. As suggested by the name, higher scores indicate a higher level of perceived work performance.

3.2.4. Reliability of the Measures Used

In order to ensure the validity of our research findings, it is essential that our instruments are reliable, as unreliable measures can produce inaccurate or inconsistent results.

To assess the reliability of our research instruments, we used McDonald's omega coefficient. This method is a widely used and recommended approach for evaluating the internal consistency of multi-item scales and has been shown to provide more accurate estimates of reliability compared to other methods, such as the widely-used Cronbach's alpha [69].

Therefore, we computed McDonald's omega coefficient for each of our research instruments and found that they all had high levels of internal consistency, indicating that the items in each scale were measuring the same underlying construct. Specifically, we obtained omega coefficients ranging from 0.821 to 0.948, which are considered to be very good levels of reliability. These coefficients and the confidence intervals are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Reliability of the scales used.

No.	Scale/Sub-Scale	McDonald's ω	Confidence Interval (95%)
1	The Worktango employee sentiment around remote work	0.932	Lower bound = 0.925, Upper bound = 0.939
2	The Worktango psychological health and safety	0.948	Lower bound = 0.943, Upper bound = 0.953
3	Contextual performance (Goodman and Svyantek)	0.821	Lower bound = 0.803, Upper bound = 0.840
4	Task performance (Goodman and Svyantek)	0.858	Lower bound = 0.843, Upper bound = 0.872
5	Performance–total (Goodman and Svyantek)	0.897	Lower bound = 0.887, Upper bound = 0.907

By using McDonald's omega coefficient we were able to ensure that our research instruments were reliable and that our findings were robust and trustworthy.

3.3. Design and Procedure

This study used a cross-sectional quantitative design to investigate the relationship between employees' perceptions of remote work and psychological safety and their work performance. The study was conducted with employees from a large insurance company in Romania.

The questionnaire was sent to all 1295 employees through the platform Lime Survey. The answers were collected over two weeks with a 66% completion rate after also sending out a reminder. The questionnaire contained an opening letter which encouraged and explained the reasons why to complete the questionnaire.

Therefore, in the end, there were 857 participant employees from the insurance company. Most of them had quite a lot of experience with remote work, as they were already working in a hybrid format. Participation was voluntary, and participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity.

After giving their informed consent, participants were directed to the online questionnaire (Google Forms) via a link provided in the invitation email. Participants completed the questionnaire in their own time and at their own pace. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test, and moderation analysis to examine the relationships among the variables.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptives

In Table 4, we present a series of descriptive statistical data for the analysed variables (sentiment around remote work, psychological health and safety, contextual performance, and task performance).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics.

	Sentiment Around Remote Work	Psychological Health and Safety	Contextual Performance	Task Performance
N	857	857	857	857
Mean	25.748	61.468	29.354	38.145
Median	27.000	60.000	29.000	38.000
Std. Dev.	4.810	9.267	3.735	4.625
Skewness	−1.282	−0.569	−0.385	−0.478
Kurtosis	1.429	0.647	0.092	0.491

Shapiro-Wilk p	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Min	6.000	20.000	14.000	18.000
Max	30.000	75.000	35.000	45.000

The Shapiro–Wilk test was used to check for normality of the data, and the *p*-value obtained was lower than 0.01, which suggests strong evidence of non-normality of data. Also, it can be noted that as the data is not normally distributed, it is not appropriate to use parametric statistical tests, and therefore non-parametric tests are used in the next section.

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

4.2.1. Hypothesis H1. Employee Sentiment Around Remote Work Is More Favourable in Fields Other than Sales

To test for differences in employee sentiment around remote work across different functional groups within the organisation, we chose to use the Kruskal–Wallis test.

This non-parametric test is well-suited to our data, which consists of ordinal ratings of employee sentiment on a Likert scale, and is appropriate when comparing the medians of three or more independent groups (in this particular case, there are four groups). Additionally, as mentioned when looking at the descriptive statistics, the assumption of normality is violated, and as our sample sizes are relatively small for some of the functional groups (managers in contrast to non-managers), the Kruskal–Wallis test provides a robust alternative to the parametric ANOVA test.

By using the Kruskal–Wallis test, we aim to determine whether there are significant differences in employee sentiment around remote work among the different functional groups within our organization, and more precisely to test at the same time for differences between two categories (sales and non-sales), as well as between managers and non-managers. The test summary is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Kruskal–Wallis test summary—REMOTE across function.

	Independent-Samples Kruskal–Wallis Test Summary
N	857
Test statistic (adjusted for ties)	99.256
Degree of freedom	3
p–asymptotic significance (2-sided test)	0.000

This hypothesis is confirmed since the scores for the REMOTE variable, which indicates a positive perception of working from home as part of hybrid work, are considerably higher for non-sales (both for managers and for non-managers), as can also be seen in Figure 1:
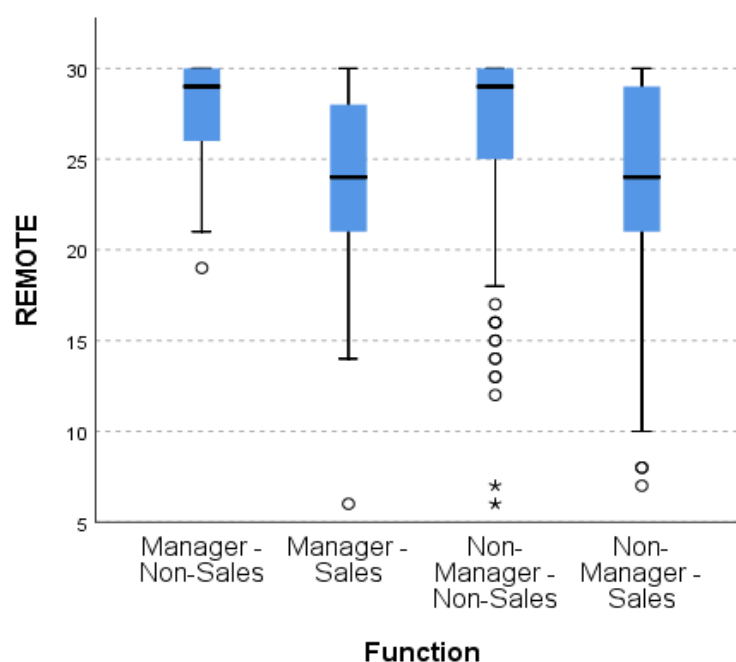
Figure 1. Independent-samples Kruskal–Wallis test—REMOTE across function. (° = mild outliers; * = extreme outliers).

The pairwise comparisons are presented in Table 6. For Adj. *p*, significance values have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests.

Table 6. Pairwise comparisons of function.

Sample 1–Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	*p*	Adj. *p*
Manager–Sales – Non-Manager–Sales	−16.253	27.582	−0.589	0.556	1.000
Manager–Sales – Non-Manager–Non-Sales	−170.921	26.151	−6.536	0.000	0.000
Manager–Sales – Manager–Non-Sales	202.420	34.487	5.870	0.000	0.000
Non-Manager–Sales – Non-Manager–Non-Sales	154.668	19.345	7.995	0.000	0.000
Non-Manager–Sales – Manager–Non-Sales	186.166	29.660	6.277	0.000	0.000
Non-Manager–Non-Sales – Manager–Non-Sales	31.498	28.334	1.112	0.266	1.000

The results of the pairwise comparisons showed that there was a significant difference in employee sentiment around remote work scores between sales and the other departments. In contrast, there were no differences between managers and non-managers in the same type of department (sales or others).

4.2.2. Hypothesis H2. Employee Sentiment around Remote Work Is More Favourable in the Case of Employees Who Actually Work Remotely More Often

As in the case of the first hypothesis, the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test was chosen for testing for differences in employee sentiment around remote work across

groups with different physical distancing practices for their work. The test summary is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Kruskal–Wallis test summary—REMOTE across physical distancing.

	Independent-Samples Kruskal–Wallis Test Summary
N	857
Test statistic (adjusted for ties)	173.536
Degree of freedom	2
p—asymptotic significance (2-sided test)	0.000

This hypothesis is also confirmed. It seems that, at the company level, the right decisions regarding remote work have been made, considering that those who do more remote work seem to have a better sentiment around remote work compared to those who work more from the office, as can be seen from Figure 2:
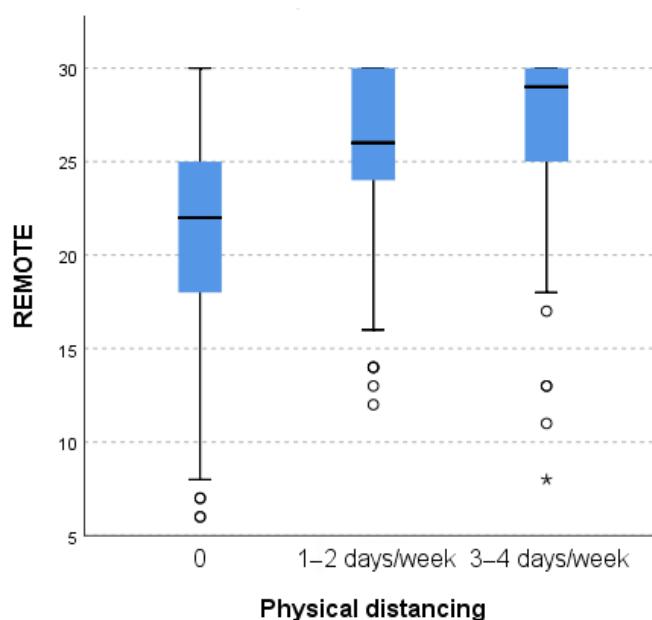
Figure 2. Independent-samples Kruskal–Wallis test—REMOTE across physical distancing. (° = mild outliers; * = extreme outliers).

The pairwise comparisons are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Pairwise comparisons of physical distancing.

Sample 1–Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	*p*	Adj. *p*
0– 1–2 days/week	−189.365	24.451	−7.745	0.000	0.000
0– 3–4 days/week	−276.902	21.030	−13.167	0.000	0.000
1–2 days/week– 3–4 days/week	−87.537	20.260	−4.321	0.000	0.000

In order to further emphasise the idea of a properly implemented hybrid work policy in the analysed company, we can also come up with Spearman's rho correlation coefficients.

Thus, the whole sample has been split into three groups based on current physical distancing, and Spearman's rho correlation coefficients for each of the three groups have been calculated.

From Table 9, we can observe that the correlation between employee sentiment around remote work and task performance is stronger for those who work remotely 3–4 days per week and very weak for those who do not work remotely at all, which shows once more that the analyzed company has taken into account the flexibility needed from each employee when designing the policy regarding hybrid work.

Table 9. Correlations between employee sentiment around remote work and task performance.

Physical Distancing			REMOTE	Task_Perf
1–2 days/week	Spearman's rho	REMOTE — Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.393 **
		REMOTE — *p* (2-tailed)	.	0.000
		REMOTE — N	208	208
		Task_Perf — Correlation Coefficient	0.393 **	1.000
		Task_Perf — *p* (2-tailed)	0.000	.
		Task_Perf — N	208	208
3–4 days/week	Spearman's rho	REMOTE — Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.406 **
		REMOTE — *p* (2-tailed)	.	0.000
		REMOTE — N	462	462
		Task_Perf — Correlation Coefficient	0.406 **	1.000
		Task_Perf — *p* (2-tailed)	0.000	.
		Task_Perf — N	462	462
0	Spearman's rho	REMOTE — Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.197 **
		REMOTE — *p* (2-tailed)	.	0.007
		REMOTE — N	187	187
		Task_Perf — Correlation Coefficient	0.197 **	1.000
		Task_Perf — *p*. (2-tailed)	0.007	.
		Task_Perf — N	187	187

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.2.3. Hypothesis H3. Psychological Safety Moderates the Relationship between Employee Sentiment Around Remote Work and Work Performance, Such That the Positive Relationship between Employee Sentiment Around Remote Work and Work Performance Is Stronger When Psychological Safety Is High than When It Is Low

The moderation estimates are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Moderation estimates.

	Estimate	SE	Z	*p*
Sentiment around remote work (REMOTE)	0.2844	0.04881	5.83	<0.001
Psychological health and safety (p_SAFETY)	0.3361	0.02465	13.63	<0.001
REMOTE x p_SAFETY	0.0140	0.00437	3.21	0.001

Table 11 shows the effect of the predictor (REMOTE—employee sentiment around remote work) on the dependent variable (PERFORMANCE—work performance) at different levels of the moderator (P_SAFETY—psychological health and safety), while in Figure 3, we can visualise this moderation effect.

Table 11. Simple slope analysis.

	Estimate	SE	Z	*p*
Average	0.2844	0.04881	5.80	<0.001
Low (−1SD)	0.155	0.0560	2.76	0.006
High (+1SD)	0.414	0.0704	5.88	<0.001
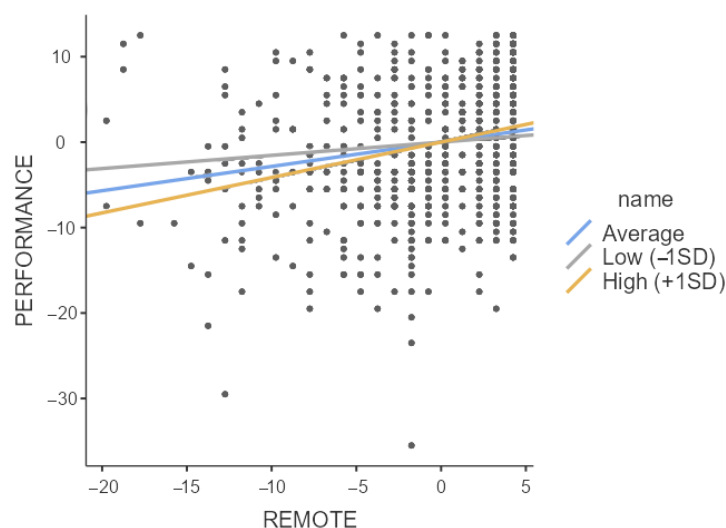
Figure 3. Simple slope plot.

The third hypothesis is also confirmed. Psychological safety moderates the relationship between employee sentiment around remote work and work performance.

5. Discussion

Our study found that employee sentiment around remote work is more favourable in other fields than in sales. This suggests that employees in sales may face unique challenges when it comes to working remotely. It is possible that the nature of the work in sales, which often involves building relationships with customers and closing deals, may make it more difficult to work remotely. This is in line with some previous studies [13,58], and thus our first hypothesis was confirmed. Additionally, the culture in sales may be less supportive of remote work, which could contribute to lower levels of employee sentiment around remote work driven by the fear of missing out on relationships with clients and their results. The understanding of "remote work" might also be an issue, as in the pandemic lockdown the sales employees were among the most affected groups, with changes in the interaction with customers. Despite the fact that, before COVID-19, they had regular meetings with customers, which were not considered work "at the office", the lockdown changed their perception of the concept of "working remotely" as part of a hybrid work; thus, after COVID-19, this concept might still be linked in their minds to staying and working from home, similar to the lockdown experience, rather than acknowledging that part of their job was already being done remotely before 2020. There are important implications for companies in the sales field. Our results suggest that companies in sales may need to take additional steps to support their remote sales teams, such as providing additional resources for remote communication and collaboration or offering more opportunities for training and development. By doing so, companies may be able to enhance the positive effects of remote work on employee satisfaction and productivity.

It is important to note that there were differences in employee sentiment around remote work scores between sales and the other departments, yet there were no differences between managers and non-managers in the same type of department (sales or others).

Therefore, the differences in sentiment are related to specific job tasks or work processes rather than managerial status.

Also, our study found that employee sentiment around remote work is more favourable in the case of employees who actually work remotely more often. This suggests that employees who have more experience with remote work are more likely to have a positive attitude toward it. Furthermore, our results suggest that the company has implemented a good policy from this point of view, as employees who work remotely more often have a more positive sentiment around remote work. These findings follow the results of previous literature that have suggested employees should be able to choose the flexibility level in their work [62,63].

These findings have important implications for organisations that are considering transitioning to remote work or expanding their remote work policies. Our results suggest that providing employees with more opportunities to work remotely could lead to a more positive attitude toward remote work, which could, in turn, lead to higher levels of job satisfaction, productivity, and work-life balance.

Another result of this study is that psychological safety moderates the relationship between employee sentiment around remote work and work performance. Specifically, we found that the positive relationship between employee sentiment around remote work and work performance is stronger when psychological safety is high than when it is low. These findings follow others that shave shown psychological safety is a moderator in similar relationships [65–68] and have important implications for organisations that are transitioning to remote work environments, which has happened a lot in the last three years, in and after the COVID-19 period.

Our results suggest that it is important for organisations to foster psychological safety in remote work environments. This could be achieved by providing training on how to build trust and psychological safety in virtual teams, for example. By doing so, organisations may be able to enhance the positive effects of employee sentiment around remote work on work performance.

Beyond all our results presented in the previous section, we found interesting the fact that there is a positive correlation between employee sentiment around remote work and psychological safety, since the feeling of safety might also increase their desire to be more physically present and really connected to their colleagues and organisation. However, to be sure, there are several different factors that could help explain the positive correlation between employee sentiment around remote work and psychological safety.

First, it is important to note that remote work can actually enhance psychological safety in some ways. When employees work from home, they may feel more comfortable expressing their opinions and ideas, as they do not have to worry about potential negative social consequences or judgment from coworkers. In this sense, remote work can create a psychologically safe environment for employees to share their thoughts and feelings.

Additionally, remote work can actually foster stronger connections among employees. By relying on technology to communicate and collaborate, remote teams may be forced to be more intentional about their interactions, which can create a stronger sense of teamwork and trust. This can further contribute to feelings of psychological safety.

That being said, it is also true that some employees may prefer to work in a physical office, as they may feel that face-to-face interactions are essential for building relationships and creating a sense of belonging. However, it is important to recognise that not all employees feel this way, and many may actually prefer the flexibility and autonomy that comes with remote work.

Overall, the relationship between remote work and psychological safety is complex and can vary depending on individual preferences and organisational culture. In the case of the analysed organisation, remote working options had been implemented years before the lockdown, which helped employees and managers adjust quickly to working totally from home in the lockdown, and then continue their work in a hybrid form in a natural way. The culture is open, supportive, and very oriented towards people; therefore, it has

a positive impact on psychological safety. Therefore, there are many ways in which remote work can enhance psychological safety and create a more positive work environment for many employees.

6. Conclusions

Our study provides valuable insights into the unique challenges that remote work may pose for employees in sales and highlights the importance of considering the specific needs of different fields when designing remote work policies. Also, it looks at the relationship between remote work experience and employee sentiment, and highlights the importance of considering employees' attitudes and preferences when designing remote work policies. Companies should listen to the real need of their people and avoid implementing a uniform policy for all employees, even if their unions are pushing for "equal treatment". We believe that in this type of situation, "equal treatment" is not beneficial for the company or the employee because it leads to losses in business opportunities and talent. The best thing to do would be to design different types of policies for different areas of the business, for example by taking into consideration their need to interact or not with external or internal clients.

Since psychological safety moderates the relationship between employee sentiment around remote work and work performance, it is important to consider the social and emotional aspects of remote work when designing organisational policies and practices. By taking psychological safety into consideration, companies lower their risk of having confused and uninformed people, who end up becoming low performers.

Besides its academic value consisting in highlighting, once again, the role of psychological safety, our study has an even more important practical value because it had been used by the human resources team and the management of the company to better understand what is the perception of people about remote work in order to take the best decisions for a future hybrid work model. The initial aim was to implement a unique working model at the company level, but after seeing the outcomes, it became clear that one solution cannot fit all, and a hybrid working model has to be implemented differently in sales and in other non-sales teams.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of our study. First, it is important to note that the results of our study are specific to the population and sample used and may not generalise to other regions or countries, to other populations, and not even to other companies in Romania. However, we believe that our sample was appropriate for the research questions and objectives of the study and provided valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of employees in the insurance field in Romania. While we strongly believe results in other companies in the insurance field in Romania would be very similar, we cannot generalise to them either because of our non-probability sampling method.

Also, our study was conducted immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which many employees were forced to work remotely due to lockdown measures. As such, it is possible that the results may not be fully generalisable to non-pandemic situations. Moreover, as explained in the discussion of the first hypothesis, employees in sales were greatly impacted by the pandemic lockdowns, resulting in changes in their interactions with customers, and their perception of "remote work" may still be associated with working from home instead of acknowledging that part of their job was already being done remotely before COVID-19. Future research could explore how employee sentiment around remote work changes over time.

The fact that we used self-reported data is another limitation of our study. As we know, self-reported data may be subject to bias and errors, such as social desirability bias. Therefore, we are aware that the results of a study may not perfectly reflect the actual experiences and perceptions of respondents.

Additionally, our study did not explore specific factors that may be driving the differences in sentiment across fields.

For future research, it would be interesting to explore other potential moderators of the relationship between employee sentiment around remote work and work performance. For example, organisational culture may also play a role in this relationship. Other interesting ideas for future research would be to assess the way remote work impacts the work-life balance of employees and to explore other potential factors that may influence their positive perception of remote work that were not taken into account for this paper. Further, future research could use a longitudinal design instead of a cross-sectional one in order to explore how employee sentiment around remote work changes over time.

Appendix A

The scales used for this study are presented below.
The Worktango Employee Sentiment around Remote Work Survey
5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

1. I have access to the things I need to succeed at work when working remotely.
2. I am able to be just as productive while working remotely when compared to my usual work location.
3. I have the materials and equipment I need to perform effectively at home/remotely.
4. I have the technology I need to help me stay connected to my team when working remotely.
5. While working remotely, I have a space where I can focus on work.
6. Our organisation welcomes new methods of working and communicating to improve team productivity.

The Worktango Psychological Health and Safety Survey
5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

1. I know what's expected of me at work.
2. I am confident in the abilities of our senior leadership team.
3. I am informed about important changes at work in a timely manner.
4. I receive useful and timely feedback from my leader.
5. Our organisation provides clear, effective communication.
6. All people in our workplace are held accountable for their actions.
7. I feel comfortable voicing my opinion, even when it differs from the group's opinion.
8. Difficult situations at work are addressed effectively.
9. It really feels like everybody is on the same team at my organisation.
10. There is an atmosphere of trust at my organisation.
11. The amount of work I am expected to do is reasonable for my position.
12. The environment at this organisation supports a balance between work and personal life.
13. I have the materials and equipment needed to do my work right.
14. My work is free from unnecessary interruptions and disruptions.

15. I have the freedom to make decisions about my work.

    Goodman and Svyantek's Performance Scale
    4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)

1. I help other employees with their work when they have been absent. CON1
2. I achieve the objectives of my job. TASK1
3. I volunteer to do things not formally required by the job. CON2
4. I meet the criteria for performance. TASK2
5. I take initiatives to orient new employees to the department even though this is not part of my job description. CON3
6. I demonstrate expertise in all job-related tasks. TASK3
7. I help others when my workload increases (assist others until they get over the hurdles). CON4
8. I fulfil all the requirements of the job. TASK4
9. I assist my colleagues with their duties. CON5
10. I can manage more responsibility than is typically assigned. TASK5
11. I make innovative suggestions to improve the overall quality of the department. CON6
12. I appear suitable for a higher-level role. TASK6
13. I willingly attend functions not required by the organisation but help in its overall image. CON7
14. I am competent in all areas of the job and handle tasks with proficiency. TASK7
15. I perform well in the overall job by carrying out tasks as expected. TASK8
16. I plan and organise to achieve the objectives of the job and meet deadlines. TASK9

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