

Rethinking leadership in remote work: a thematic analysis of employees' perceptions of transactional and passive-avoidant leadership on work engagement

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores how remote employees perceive transactional and passive-avoidant leadership styles in the context of their work engagement in fully remote environments. While research on these styles and their relationship with work engagement exists in traditional contexts, limited attention has been given to their impact on distributed teams, especially from a qualitative perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – A multiple case study was conducted in Ireland and the UK, drawing on nineteen remote employees recruited via purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online and were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to capture employees' perceptions of transactional and passive-avoidant leadership in relation to remote work engagement.

Findings – Transactional methods (e.g. rewards and structured feedback) offer short-term engagement and motivation benefits but can suffer without empathetic, context-aware management. Surprisingly, passive-avoidant behaviours benefit experienced, self-motivated employees if supported by trust and open communication, though less experienced or confident staff may feel neglected.

Research limitations/implications – The limited, region-specific sample (Ireland and the UK) and cross-sectional design affect broader generalisability. Future research should utilise larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal methods to track how leadership styles and engagement evolve in distributed teams.

Originality/value – This study is among the first qualitative inquiries into transactional and passive-avoidant styles in fully remote environments. It expands our understanding of how remote leaders can mitigate the global challenge of workforce disengagement by balancing autonomy, transactional methods, empathy and appropriate oversight.

Keywords Remote work, Transactional leadership, Passive-avoidant leadership, Work engagement, Reflexive thematic analysis, Employee perceptions

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The rise of remote working environments has accelerated significantly worldwide, from around 8% of the employed population working from home before the pandemic to 28% in 2023, and these numbers are growing (Sherif, 2024). However, these statistics vary across sources, and there are limited studies confirming the exact numbers. Nonetheless, this shift has

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impacted millions of remote employees, leaders, policymakers, and organisations. What made this transition possible were the technological advances, which offered opportunities for employees who value remote work for its flexibility, greater autonomy, and elimination of the daily commute. Not surprisingly, many employees have embraced remote work as their preferred mode of employment, to the extent that a substantial proportion would never return to traditional office settings. Moreover, numerous workers are willing to accept lower wages if it means retaining the flexibility to work remotely (Vij *et al.*, 2023). In fact, many organisations also view remote work as beneficial, seeing potential cost savings related to office expenses and, in many cases, improvements in employee morale (Felstead, 2022).

However, the benefits of remote work come with significant challenges, particularly in implementing remote work policies and strategic practices. One of the primary challenges is maintaining employee work engagement when managing staff outside the traditional office environment, often across different countries and time zones. Global statistics further amplify this challenge, indicating that only a small percentage of employees are actively engaged in their work. A Gallup workplace report reveals that only a small percentage (around 10–15%) of employees are actively invested in their work, with a majority (70–75%) reporting either apathy or active disengagement (Creemers, 2024). These challenges raise critical questions about leadership approaches that can effectively sustain and elevate employee work engagement, especially considering that remote work may not suit everyone (Felstead, 2022).

Prior research in traditional environments shows that transactional leadership (TRL) commonly delivers positive outcomes, including higher work engagement (Noor *et al.*, 2023). However, TRL's impact may diminish over time, which may concern remote organisations and their remote employees who generally work with minimal direct supervision (Nielsen *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, while passive-avoidant leadership (PAL) is typically linked to negative outcomes, its more autonomous, less structured nature might suit distributed work arrangements (Grill *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, we aim to explore how remote employees perceive both TRL and PAL and how they influence work engagement. Thus, given that remote work demands a higher level of autonomy and self-direction, and presents additional risks, such as isolation and loneliness, it is crucial to investigate whether the findings from traditional work environments apply similarly to remote work environments (Wang *et al.*, 2021).

The focus of the current study, therefore, is to explore the underexplored role of TRL in remote contexts, along with the often-overlooked PAL. Moreover, although previous quantitative studies in traditional work environments have provided a solid basis for this research, there is still a lack of a thorough understanding of the subjective perception of TRL and PAL by employees, especially in remote environments where physical distance or technological factors may amplify or change the leadership experience (Felstead, 2022). A qualitative approach is thus essential to explore these leadership behaviours from the employees' perception, allowing to capture the nuances of everyday remote work interactions and may help practitioners and organisations develop more effective strategies for enhancing work engagement in remote work contexts. This study seeks to answer the following question.

How do employees perceive the role of transactional and passive-avoidant leadership in influencing their work engagement in remote work environments?

This paper begins with a literature review of both TRL and PAL and their impacts in both traditional and remote work environments. It then outlines the methodology used to gather and analyse the data, followed by a discussion of the findings in the context of current literature. The paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Literature review

TRL emphasises the importance of clear expectations and accountability, primarily achieved through contingent rewards and active management. TRL ensures that performance is closely

monitored, and any deviations are corrected. In contrast, PAL represents a minimalist approach, where leaders avoid taking decisive actions and fail to provide necessary guidance and support, often resulting in a lack of direction (Bass and Riggio, 2006). Both leadership styles are part of the Full Range of Leadership (FRL) Model (Avolio, 2011). On the other hand, work engagement is “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). This literature review builds the theoretical justification for focusing on TRL and PAL to explain work engagement in remote working environments.

Transactional and passive-avoidant leadership in traditional work environments

Recent research in traditional work environments shows that transactional leadership positively correlates with work engagement, although with mixed outcomes (Noor et al., 2023). Researchers suggest that TRL may lose effectiveness when leaders lack adequate resources, and that it fails to show a positive association with work engagement, along with avoidant leadership practices, highlighting the context-dependent nature of TRL (Esguerra and Padilla, 2021). Although transactional leadership may briefly alleviate stress and increase engagement, these benefits appear unsustainable over time (Nielsen et al., 2019). A meta-analysis also revealed that contingent reward processes (transactional behaviours) can reduce employees’ psychological empowerment, adversely affecting both performance and work engagement (Young et al., 2021).

On the other hand, PAL is consistently shown to be far less effective than any other leadership style in the FRL Model, with little evidence for its effectiveness towards work engagement (Grill et al., 2019). Campbell (2020) underscores that PAL is demonstrably “bad” leadership, which diminishes commitment over time and is strongly linked to employee burnout. Beyond diminishing engagement, passive-avoidant behaviours can lead to safety incidents and cyberbullying in high-risk industries (Olsen et al., 2021; Czakert and Berger, 2022). Nonetheless, Zappala et al. (2021) found a positive connection between PAL and the initiation and implementation of novel ideas, indicating that in specific contexts, the autonomy encouraged by passive-avoidant leaders can support creative output. Arguably, the increased autonomy resulting from this leadership style may suit some employees who thrive in self-directed work environments (Yang, 2015). However, Popli and Rizvi (2017) argue that PAL is unlikely to enhance performance outcomes without high levels of employee engagement, which can occasionally compensate for the lack of leadership. Not surprisingly, the literature most often points to the superiority of TRL over PAL, particularly in traditional work environments (Olabimitan and Adekoya, 2023).

When it comes to hybrid working environments, where employees divide their time between traditional offices and remote locations, the literature examining TRL and PAL in relation to work engagement remains surprisingly sparse. However, from a Human Resource Development perspective, Nagori and Lawton (2025) recommend that hybrid organisations invest in a well-equipped physical and digital workspace (e.g., ergonomic workstations, reliable connectivity) and offer flexible scheduling options to support employee autonomy and minimise the friction associated with switching between home and office. They argue that without the infrastructure and time flexibility to manage distractions, maintain healthy work-life boundaries, and collaborate seamlessly, even the most motivated remote employees risk disengagement, technostress, and burnout. In other words, their research suggests that in hybrid environments, both clear processes (TRL) and workspace flexibility (PAL) must be calibrated to sustain work engagement.

Transactional and passive-avoidant leadership in remote work environments

Within the FRL Model (Bass and Riggio, 2006), TRL’s structured exchange logic and PAL’s autonomy offer two contrasting means to meet employees’ needs (e.g., clarity vs self-direction). Each style might work better for a different set of employees, considering their age, culture, gender, or experience; however, it is equally important to explore whether these two

leadership styles show comparable results in remote working environments, similar to traditional ones. This concept is even more intriguing as remote working introduces unique challenges for organisations, leaders, and employees, such as work-home interference, ineffective communication, procrastination, and feelings of isolation (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Since remote work demands a higher degree of independence and autonomy from employees, research has unsurprisingly shown that non-supervisory employees often face heightened levels of these challenges. These factors may be related to but not limited to accessibility, relationships, or geographical factors (Andrew *et al.*, 2025).

From a leadership perspective, these employee challenges often translate into difficulties in monitoring performance, overcoming digital fatigue, maintaining team cohesion, and fostering employee engagement (Shaikh *et al.*, 2022; Dixit *et al.*, 2024). As a result, both researchers and practitioners argue that leaders must develop new competencies to overcome these obstacles. These include empowering employees, facilitating effective online communication, and motivating team members in remote environments. Additionally, leaders must address issues like workplace isolation and help employees maintain a connection to the company's culture and values (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Adapting leadership styles and implementing strategies that support remote workers is essential for organisational success in this evolving work model, especially when it comes to maintaining or enhancing work engagement beyond physical boundaries (Felstead, 2022). Thus, this is where leadership styles such as TRL and PAL may become more useful than in the traditional working environments and counteract ambiguities and isolation by reinforcing role clarity and connection through TRL and empowering self-motivated workers who need autonomy to manage home distractions through implementing PAL style and behaviours (Backhaus and Steidelmüller, 2021; Young *et al.*, 2021).

The current research suggests that TRL may have a stronger influence on organisational commitment among remote workers than in traditional work environments (Łucjan *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, a meta-analysis found that task-focused leadership (analogous to transactional style) positively correlates with virtual team performance (Brown *et al.*, 2021). Other studies have concluded that TRL is the "appropriate" style for managing in a work-from-home environment during a crisis, with a direct positive impact on employee performance (Laohavichien and Weerasai, 2025). However, research suggests that transactional leadership does not replicate such positive outcomes in remote environments, particularly in highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments (Hüttemann *et al.*, 2024).

On the other hand, PAL has shown minimal impact on virtual team cooperation and a potential increase in workplace cyberbullying (Czakert and Berger, 2022; Olsen *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, researchers found that this style was associated with poorer employee well-being, including more negative job-related emotional states (Vintilă *et al.*, 2024). Some researchers also argue that the negative impacts of PAL may be exacerbated, as the physical distance can amplify the lack of direction and support typically associated with this leadership style (Olsen *et al.*, 2023).

Despite the growing importance of remote work, there is limited research specifically focused on the connections between the studied leadership styles and work engagement and how these dynamics translate to remote environments. In other words, a significant research gap exists, especially from a qualitative perspective, as little research has explored employees' subjective experiences of these leadership styles in remote contexts. This shortfall is particularly important to address as remote work becomes a permanent fixture for many organisations. As remote work continues to grow, it will be essential to develop effective leadership strategies to maintain long-term employee engagement (Łucjan *et al.*, 2023; Makowski, 2023).

Therefore, this paper aims to assess the applicability of underexplored TRL and PAL in remote contexts, exploring how these leadership styles can be optimised to enhance remote work engagement. By focusing on the perceptions and experiences of remote employees across various organisational levels, the research seeks to identify the leadership behaviours

most closely associated with fostering an engaged remote workforce. Additionally, by focusing on employee narratives, this study seeks to fill the gap in understanding how remote employees interpret and respond to TRL and PAL behaviours in the absence of face-to-face interactions with their leaders.

Methodology

Design

This study is framed within a qualitative, interpretive approach to understand how employees experience leadership behaviours and work engagement in remote contexts (Braun and Clarke, 2019). We selected a qualitative approach because our research question necessitated rich, contextualised interpretations of individual experiences that cannot be captured through surveys alone. Thus, we adopted a multiple-case study strategy, treating each participant as a separate case within a broader examination of remote organisations in the private sector in Ireland and the UK (Yin, 2018). This design allowed for an in-depth exploration of real-life scenarios and participant experiences through a flexible, participant-driven lens. By focusing on the complexities of transactional and passive-avoidant leadership, the study highlights the detailed accounts of those immersed in remote working environments.

Participants and recruitment

Drawing on participants from a wider study consisting of 212 participants (82 male and 128 female), at the end of our quantitative survey, each respondent was asked to indicate, by ticking a box, whether or not they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview. Those who agreed represented our target population's volunteer sample. All participants had at least six months of remote work experience and were at least 18 years old or older. Hybrid workers, freelancers, and those new to remote work were excluded. All participants were initially emailed an interview schedule, a consent form, and a participant information sheet. In total, 19 online semi-structured interviews were conducted (with 13 male and 6 female) via Zoom from Ireland and the United Kingdom (Table 1). Data collection was conducted from June to December 2023.

Procedure

We developed and employed a semi-structured interview protocol organised into six sections: Participant background, Remote leadership, Autonomy and work scheduling, Remote adaptation and tenure, training and professional development, and Any other business (AOB).

Each section was designed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in that domain, and probing questions were used throughout to deepen and clarify the discussion. Participants were given the option to use alternative video conferencing platforms and could conveniently schedule their interviews using Calendly. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of anonymous ID numbers, and informed consent was obtained for recording the interviews. Three pilot interviews were conducted to refine the research process. We continued recruitment and data collection until we reached thematic saturation, at which point no new concepts were emerging, thereby ensuring our sample size adequately met the study's objectives (Figure 1). All interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min and were transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Ethical approval was obtained for this study by the home university.

Data analysis

We used NVivo v14 software for data organisation and management. While all initial coding was conducted reflexively using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), we triangulated our analysis by cross-checking semantic and latent codes with NVivo's cluster analyses and matrix outputs to verify consistent patterns and data meaning.

Table 1. Participant profiles

ID	Gender	Age	Location	Type	Status	Tenure	Industry
P1	Female	30–39	UK	Full-time	FL staff	1–2 y	Journalism
P2	Male	50–59	Ireland	Full-time	Upper Mgmt	5+ y	IT
P3	Female	40–49	UK	Full-time	Mid Mgmt	5+ y	Telecom
P4	Male	30–39	UK	Full-time	FL staff	4–5 y	Renewables
P5	Female	30–39	Ireland	Full-time	Lower Mgmt	2–3 y	IT
P6	Male	50–59	Ireland	Full-time	Upper Mgmt	5+ y	IT
P7	Male	40–49	Ireland	Full-time	Upper Mgmt	3–4 y	Business Ser
P8	Male	40–49	Ireland	Full-time	Upper Mgmt	3–4 y	IT
P9	Female	30–39	Ireland	Full-time	Mid Mgmt	5+ y	E-commerce
P10	Male	40–49	UK	Full-time	Upper Mgmt	5+ y	Clinical Trials
P11	Female	50–59	UK	Part-time	FL staff	5+ y	Cosmetics
P12	Male	40–49	Ireland	Full-time	Upper Mgmt	3–4 y	IT
P13	Male	19–29	Ireland	Full-time	Executive	3–4 y	Cosmetics
P14	Male	19–29	Ireland	Full-time	FL staff	5+ y	Entertainment
P15	Male	19–29	Ireland	Full-time	FL staff	2–3 y	IT
P16	Male	40–49	Ireland	Full-time	Upper Mgmt	5+ y	Finance
P17	Female	19–29	UK	Part-time	FL staff	3–4 y	Business Ser
P18	Male	40–49	UK	Full-time	Lower Mgmt	5+ y	IT
P19	Male	19–29	Ireland	Full-time	FL staff	1–2 y	IT

Source(s): Authors’ own work



Figure 1. Thematic saturation. Source: Authors’ own work

Finally, all authors acted as critical reviewers, engaging in open discussions on theme development and write-ups to challenge assumptions and deepen reflexivity.

Phase 1 (familiarisation) involved preparing the interview transcripts and repeatedly reading through them to understand the data. We created memos and took notes during this stage to capture early insights and emerging patterns. For instance, we noted frequent

references to “recognition” and “lack of feedback,” which hinted at potential rewards and performance oversight issues in remote contexts.

During Phase 2 (generating initial codes), initial codes were systematically applied to the data, labelling relevant segments. We employed both surface-level (semantic) and deeper (latent) coding techniques to capture a wide range of insights (Braun and Clarke, 2019). For example, explicit mentions of “financial rewards,” “public recognition,” or “performance reviews” were coded at a semantic level, while implicit mentions such as “feeling left in the dark” or “unequal treatment” reflected deeper latent meanings. A total of 294 initial codes were generated in this phase. All initial codes were constantly revisited and refined as needed.

In Phase 3 (generating themes), we grouped related codes into broader categories, laying the foundation for our initial themes. We used mind maps to visualise how codes interlinked, thereby clarifying transactional and passive-avoidant leadership patterns. For instance, recurring mentions of “rewards,” “recognition,” and “performance tracking” cohered under a prospective theme focused on recognition and performance management. Likewise, references to “lack of oversight,” “freedom,” and “trust” pointed to passive-avoidant behaviours. Through iterative review, codes were clustered into logical and broad groupings that reflected participants’ experiences rather than predetermined assumptions.

During Phase 4 (reviewing potential themes), the themes were thoroughly reviewed and refined to ensure they were coherent, distinct, and directly relevant to the research question. For instance, we initially identified “lack of oversight” as a broad category for passive-avoidant leadership. However, this broad category was split into more precise concepts, such as “experience” and “conditional trust,” to better reflect participants’ nuanced experiences.

Phase 5 (defining and naming themes) involved carefully defining the core boundaries and scope of the themes. For example, references to “feedback” and “recognition” initially appeared in multiple codes; we consolidated them into a single theme focusing on “Remote Recognition and Performance Management.” This iterative process involved returning to the original transcripts to verify that each theme accurately represented participants’ perceptions, ensuring both descriptive accuracy and alignment with our research objectives.

Finally, Phase 6 (writing the report) involved a detailed narrative, presenting the themes logically and involved continuous movement between phases 5 and 6. This final report integrated the findings and interpretation, incorporating direct quotes from participants to highlight key insights and maintain the authenticity of their perspectives.

Findings

Online semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants (Table 1) to delve deeper into their experiences of the perceived impact of TRL and PAL on their work engagement. A rigorous RTA revealed two primary themes and their corresponding sub-themes. Table 2 presents these themes alongside representative codes.

Theme 1: remote recognition and performance management

This initial theme addresses how employees perceive an organisation that maintains a sense of employee value and progress when face-to-face oversight is not feasible. Two sub-themes emerged to reflect employee perceptions under transactional leadership: Recognition and reward systems (sub-theme 1.1), which illustrate how tangible and intangible incentives can reinforce employee motivation and engagement levels, and performance assessment and feedback practices (sub-theme 1.2), focusing on structured evaluations and supportive communication processes. By foregrounding these employee experiences, the data underscore the importance of ensuring fairness, clarity, and empathy in how leaders acknowledge accomplishments and track employee contributions in remote contexts. The following sections elaborate on each sub-theme, revealing how the interplay between recognition and performance management can either support or undermine engagement when physical proximity is absent.

Table 2. Key themes and sub-themes of the reflexive thematic analysis

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Codes
Theme 1: Remote recognition and performance management	1.1 Recognition and reward systems	“Public and private recognition”, “diverse rewards”, “rewards vs. flexibility”, “compensation concerns”, “tangible rewards”, “intangible rewards”, “equity and fairness in rewards”, “reward preferences”
	1.2 Performance assessment and feedback	“Performance tracking”, “constructive feedback”, “performance reviews”, “frequency of feedback”, “public vs. private feedback”, “personalised feedback”, “limited feedback”
Theme 2: The effects of minimal and excessive oversight on remote work engagement	2.1 Balancing passive-avoidant approach and trust	“Accessible leadership”, “mutual trust”, “experience”, “conditional trust”, “potential for abuse”, “psychological safety”, “self-management”, “freedom”
	2.2 Consequences of excessive oversight	“Micromanagement”, “isolation”, “trust issues”, “stress”, “loss of talent”, “diminished autonomy”, “loneliness”, “oversight and experience”, “responsibility concerns”

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Sub-theme 1.1: recognition and reward systems. During the interviews, participants revealed their perceptions about the extent to which rewards and recognition were explicitly linked to specific accomplishments in their remote work environment, including enhanced work engagement. This line of inquiry highlighted how organisations attempt to foster a sense of value and commitment among their remote workforce, from financial incentives to more intangible benefits like workplace flexibility. Most participants underscored the critical role of recognition in remote environments, highlighting its significance in conveying to remote employees that their contributions are seen and appreciated and how such mechanisms reinforce employee motivation and commitment:

I think that recognition is an amazing way to let people know they are valued team members. People feeling valued whilst working remotely is extremely important. (P1)

Because of the extra effort you put in, your expertise or your dedication or accuracy in how you do things, we win the business, right? I can then send a kudos to you. Kudos will go to HR, who will announce it during the monthly meeting. So it’s a public recognition of people doing something successful. I think it works very effectively. (P2)

I suppose when you give financial recognition or indirect benefits, people will be more committed. (P6)

Also, employee perceptions revealed that wider recognition is more important than financial rewards. These findings highlight the diversity in how different employees perceive and value recognition. In other words, participants highlighted a shift in priority from purely financial incentives to more holistic benefits like flexibility, which is especially important for those well-established in their careers or at certain income levels. Their perceptions reflect the growing significance of workplace flexibility as a critical reward in remote settings:

I don’t think it’s terribly important for me [rewards], but it has been more important for others I’ve worked with. For me, it’s enough to be like, I did a good job on that, or my team said I did a good job on that. You know, wider recognition. (P3)

Financial rewards are always the most important for many people. I think they will stay that way regardless of new working environments. But on some level, if your salary is quite good, it might not be as important to earn another few euros and work in a company where you’re not feeling well or earn

a little bit less. So I think financial rewards are very important, but intangible things like flexibility are more important once you reach a certain salary level. (P18)

I value the possibility of working remotely more than having more money. I will move for exactly the same money to that company just because they offer the possibility of having up to four days of working from home. (P9)

However, some participants raised significant concerns about potential future inequities in remote work and compensation structures. This concern underscores the need for leaders to carefully consider equity and the evolving perceptions of rewards as remote and hybrid work models become more prevalent:

In the future, I think companies really want to have employees in the office. And I worry that you will have a double-tier salary expectation where those willing to stay close to the office will eventually earn more than those who will insist on being more remote. (P16)

Sub-theme 1.2: performance assessment and feedback. During the interviews, most participants described various experiences in how leaders communicate expectations and provide feedback, highlighting the various strategies employed and their effectiveness in remote work environments. Participants shared an example where structured performance assessment practices help employees be seen by linking performance assessment and feedback to tangible rewards and recognition. Likewise, participants expressed their perceptions about the importance of tracking performance over time, highlighting the value of continuous performance tracking in maintaining employee motivation and engagement:

On a weekly basis, we have a team-oriented, tactical view and check-ins of where we are against performance. (P3)

We would have twice-yearly reviews of everybody in the company to see their performance. And then that's linked to rewards and opportunities for promotion, etc. So, there are recognition programmes for good work. If you do a good job, you could highlight it and get rewarded for it. So, very sophisticated processes are in place to ensure that people are on the right track and feel motivated and rewarded appropriately. (P2)

Sometimes you can be doing something, and it could be getting progressively better, but you don't notice it as much because you're doing it all the time. So seeing that and how it tracks over time, I find very motivating. (P18)

Unfortunately, a small number of participants reported the absence of performance assessment and feedback structures in their workplaces. They noted and underscored a deficiency in active leadership. They perceive the lack of performance assessments to result in disengagement and a lack of clarity among employees about their contributions and standing, as one participant expressed:

Let's put it that way. Not the right company. And that's one of the problems. In the past, I've had managers who really didn't give a [censored] as long as the money came rolling in. No feedback whatsoever. (P2)

However, understanding performance issues goes beyond the presence or absence of feedback. Participants point out that circumstantial challenges often significantly influence the need for empathetic performance management. This understanding is particularly true in remote environments, where employees perceive remote leaders to be less aware of employees' struggles:

People normally don't perform not because they don't want to, but because they feel their circumstances make it harder for them. For the past 20 years, I've hardly seen anyone actually resisting and just don't know why. (P12)

To overcome these issues, participant 16 shared a personal approach that combines timely feedback with positivity:

My management style is to subtly throw a little bit of praise or constructive feedback on the floor in the live moment. I'm very good at making people feel rewarded on the go, and it works very well. (P16)

However, the same participant emphasises delicacy and respect even when delivering constructive criticism, showing that constructive criticism should be framed to preserve dignity and encourage improvement rather than discouragement:

Those of us with egos need to be seen as brilliant. But when you're giving negative feedback to anyone, it's always private, it's never public. (P16)

Concluding reflections on theme 1. While financial rewards remain a significant motivator for some employees, most participants' experiences suggest that feeling valued is especially important in remote environments, with a growing preference for non-monetary benefits like flexibility, particularly among more experienced employees. This shift highlights the need for organisations to adapt leadership practices to meet the evolving expectations of remote workers. Additionally, structured performance assessments, continuous feedback, and recognition were seen and experienced by remote employees as the key to maintaining motivation and engagement, contributing to a transparent and developmental organisational culture. Conversely, the absence of feedback or the insensitive delivery of constructive criticism was perceived by remote employees as detrimental to morale and performance. These employee perceptions emphasise the importance of empathy and personalised feedback, as these approaches help address the unique challenges faced by remote employees, ensuring they feel supported and understood. Thus, as remote and hybrid work models become more prevalent in today's societies and organisations, leaders must design recognition, reward, and performance management systems that prioritise fairness and transparency to prevent potential inequities.

Theme 2: the effects of minimal and excessive oversight on remote work engagement

This second theme arose from participants' varying leadership experiences, highlighting how remote employees navigate a balance between minimal and intense levels of control to shape their engagement. Two sub-themes emerged from the data. Sub-theme 2.1 focuses on balancing a passive-avoidant approach with trust and availability, illuminating why some employees prefer less managerial involvement in remote environments. Sub-theme 2.2 explores the downsides of excessive oversight, emphasising potential emotional and performance-based repercussions when leaders adopt intrusive or micromanaging approaches. Taken together, these sub-themes depict a broad continuum of leadership behaviours (e.g., from hands-off to authoritarian) and illustrate how remote employees respond differently depending on their experience levels, self-confidence, and need for guidance.

Sub-theme 2.1: balancing passive-avoidant approach and trust. The discussions followed on the benefits of a more relaxed leadership approach in guiding remote work. Participants shared experiences with this leadership style, offering insights into potential benefits and challenges within a remote work context. Most participants revealed a surprisingly positive perception of the PAL style. These participants underscored how a hands-off approach can reduce stress and increase autonomy in their work while providing essential support despite its passive nature. According to these employee experiences, clear communication and reliable availability are critical in allowing remote teams to thrive, even under minimal oversight:

The freedom, the no pressure from someone telling me to do something super fast. Things like that drop my anxiety and allow me to be more free. (P1)

It's hands-off but also very informative at the same time. Anything we need to know, we know. If we need anything from her [manager], she's always available. (P9)

However, some participants emphasised that the effectiveness of a PAL style often depends on employee experience. In other words, remote employees perceive that newer team members may require more guidance and support than experienced employees.

I've been doing this job probably longer than her [manager]. So she's very hands-off with me, which is fine for me. It's fine for her. I know what I'm doing. She knows what I'm doing. So I think we get away with it because of that and our experience. People who are graduates, it's probably different. (P8)

We don't need supervision, really. Of course, we must ask him [manager] if there are any issues. He's always available in Slack, and that is where we communicate constantly. We're not micromanaged because we're all very experienced in what we do. (P14)

To make it work, the participants argued that a foundation of trust is essential; without it, minimal oversight could breed uncertainty and disengagement. The participants' experiences also highlighted that trust extends beyond job performance and is more about employees feeling secure and valued. Moreover, they perceive trust to be imperative in highly structured or monitored work environments, where the physical distance of remote work can make fostering a sense of psychological safety more challenging:

I think one of the critical things is trust between the manager and the employee, absolutely critical. (P6)

I think if you're working remotely with the kind of trust relationship that needs to be there for that to work, it also means that it needs to provide the appropriate amount of physical and emotional safety. Highly regulated workplaces have, in my view, always had a higher risk of feeling less safe. (P12)

Participant 19 shared a balanced view to illustrate integrating passive-avoidant behaviours with an element of trust in order for it to work and the potential risks if it is absent:

I think for a manager not to micromanage, you must trust your team fully. You have to know they're going to deliver. You need to know, especially working remotely, that they are working rather than going for a walk or watching TV downstairs. You need to know their experience. You need to know that you can give them a project, and they will run it without making mistakes. (P19)

Sub-theme 2.2: consequences of excessive oversight. Remote employees' experiences revealed a strong resistance towards excessive oversight, i.e. micromanagement, often associated with TRL, mainly when participants discussed the disadvantages of remote work environments. In other words, participants' personal experiences vividly illustrated the emotional toll of constant monitoring, leading to feelings of demotivation and disrespect. They described that such feelings often lead to the risk of talent loss organisations face when implementing micromanagement with skilled and experienced professionals. Moreover, some participants viewed remote work as a way to escape such harmful leadership practices, believing it provides more flexibility and less oversight:

If somebody, after 23 years, micromanaged me, I would probably leave the company. (P6)

If you don't like being micromanaged, remote working is a much better place for you. (P14)

Therefore, the participants suggest that leaders must find ways to support and monitor employees without stifling their autonomy and sense of competence. They suggest that one way to do it is to place more supervisory emphasis on less experienced employees and give more freedom and flexibility to more experienced ones:

It's very difficult to have a kiddo working remotely who has just finished college as a junior developer. They're going to need constant supervision. (P7)

Nonetheless, while some employees might thrive under greater flexibility in remote work, participants' experiences suggest that achieving this freedom can still be complex. They highlight the challenge of finding the right balance in remote leadership: neglecting employees is harmful, but so is excessive oversight:

I generally dislike being micromanaged. It's not a style of management I've ever appreciated. So, it wouldn't be a style of management I would have ever applied. However, I think when somebody is very hands-off, it can be suffocating as well. (P9)

Participants perceive this challenge to be further complicated by the reality of remote work, where isolation remains a significant issue. They suggest that the loneliness that is caused by the isolation can then have a detrimental effect on employee performance:

I know a lot of people feel very, very lonely working remotely all the time. (P3)

The disadvantages of remote work, I think, are lower productivity. This is not going to apply to everyone, but it definitely applies to me. I guess there's some of that social isolation. (P1)

Remote employees also suggest that rather than mitigating these feelings, micromanagement intensifies them. They perceive this phenomenon as an environment where employees feel scrutinised and disconnected, undermining their well-being and performance:

I think there's probably a stronger sense of loneliness because you are generally in one place in your home office all day long. If you're lucky, you have your partner, someone to talk to, or you may have kids or a dog. But for people that don't have that, I would imagine it can be quite depressing for them. (P15)

What I often think about remote working is that it would be terrible, absolutely terrible, for something bad to happen and you're just sitting in your house alone and you don't have anyone to turn to. You can't even look at someone. There's no sharing this moment with you. I'm forever trying to get them to call and video call each other more, but no one likes to do that. There's definitely less connection happening when people aren't motivated to do that. So I worry that sometimes someone has a 60 million euro trade bearing down on them, and you could get fired if you don't get this right. Are they just going to sit there and fail, and, you know, the pressure gets to them? Compared to a situation where they're in the office, and they have real people they can share that problem with. (P12)

Concluding reflections on theme 2. The data show how employees' experiences of minimal and excessive oversight impact their remote work engagement, highlighting the need for a balanced leadership approach. They perceive passive-avoidant style to foster autonomy, reduce anxiety, and increase job satisfaction, especially when trust and clear communication are present. However, employees suggest this approach is less suitable for less experienced employees who require more guidance and support. On the other hand, participants perceive excessive oversight or micromanagement as leading to feelings of demotivation, disrespect, and heightened stress, contributing to talent loss as skilled professionals seek environments that offer greater autonomy and trust. While remote work offers the potential for increased flexibility and independence, the participants underscore the importance of striking a careful balance between providing support and avoiding overbearing supervision. Otherwise, micromanagement can exacerbate isolation and loneliness, negatively affecting employee well-being and performance. The employees' experiences also highlight the importance of leaders adopting a flexible and empathetic approach tailored to individual needs and experience levels to provide the right balance of support and freedom (see [Figure 2](#)).

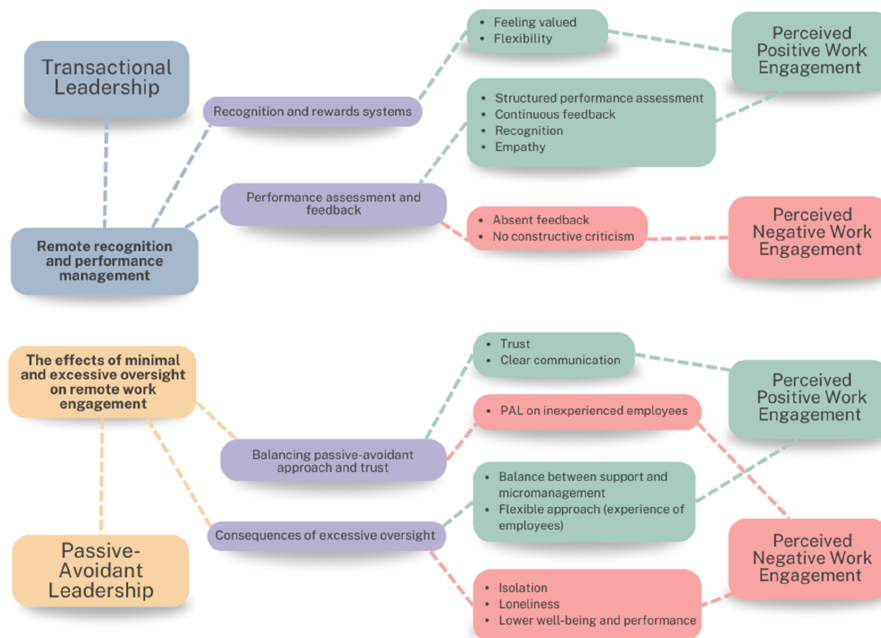


Figure 2. Thematic map. Source: Authors' own work

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore remote employees' perceptions and experiences of transactional and passive-avoidant leadership styles in the context of their remote work engagement. Our study suggests that remote TRL must pivot from traditional "in-person" exchanges to regular, empathetic digital check-ins. That is, contingent rewards and performance assessments still drive engagement, but only if delivered via channels that preserve clarity, empathy, and timely connection. These digital check-ins reinforce employees' sense of support, aligning with [Yuan and Wang's \(2025\)](#) study, which suggests that effective digital leadership enhances life satisfaction and promotes work engagement. In contrast, PAL's hands-off logic emerges as a form of autonomy support when trust and communication channels are strong. In other words, TRL's structured mechanisms become vital "engagement anchors" to reduce ambiguity in dispersed teams, while PAL's autonomy becomes a "motivational resource" for experienced remote workers who can self-manage, which aligns with past discourse on PAL ([Yang, 2015](#); [Zappala et al., 2021](#)). Together, these insights suggest that transactional leaders must be cautious of overbearing micromanagement through video calls and analytics dashboards, while passive-avoidant leaders must be cautious against isolation by maintaining reliable avenues for support. These novel findings enrich the FRL Model ([Bass and Riggio, 2006](#)) by specifying how TRL and PAL operate (and sometimes flip roles) in remote environments where physical proximity is absent.

This study demonstrated that while recognition and financial rewards motivate employees, most participants placed greater importance on feeling valued and appreciated in remote environments. This preference was especially pronounced among more experienced employees, favouring non-financial benefits, such as flexible work arrangements. These perceptions suggest that traditional leadership practices focusing solely on financial incentives may be less effective in remote environments, a point supported by prior work showing that non-financial incentives significantly impact motivation, satisfaction, and engagement

(Altassan, 2024). Thus, due to remote work's more flexible and autonomous nature, we argue that non-financial benefits have a greater effect on employees working in these environments than traditional ones, as revealed in this study. Of course, this may be subject to the economic or individual factors that drive these motivations (Chatzoglou *et al.*, 2024).

This study also revealed the vital role of structured performance assessments and feedback mechanisms in enhancing employee work engagement in remote environments. Existing research supports our findings, highlighting the importance of fairness in regular feedback and performance appraisals to achieve positive work-related outcomes. Conversely, a lack of active employee involvement in feedback mechanisms or poorly delivered criticisms can harm morale and performance (Naga, 2023; Vassilev *et al.*, 2024). Thus, our findings align with conventional contexts, and by addressing the unique challenges of remote employees, we suggest personalised feedback, support, and empathetic communication to ensure that employees feel valued and understood to sustain high engagement and performance.

Another key finding of this study is that in remote environments, employees perceive the PAL style as enhancing autonomy, reducing anxiety, and increasing employee job satisfaction, especially when trust and effective communication are present. Participants perceive this style to work well for more experienced employees who can manage their tasks independently. However, it becomes less effective for less experienced employees who need more guidance and support. These results align with prior research showing that PAL can reduce anxiety and improve well-being when combined with high autonomy and a supportive team climate, but risks job dissatisfaction and reduced commitment when guidance is insufficient and more active leadership is required (Berger *et al.*, 2019; Ekmekci *et al.*, 2021; Specchia *et al.*, 2021). This contrast underscores the importance of carefully considering when and how to apply a PAL style to align with the workforce's needs and expectations.

Furthermore, the participants in our study experienced that excessive oversight or micromanagement in remote environments can lead to demotivation, feelings of disrespect, and increased stress among employees. They perceived that such conditions often drive talented professionals to leave in search of work environments valuing autonomy and trust. Although remote work offers greater flexibility and independence, our findings align with prior work demonstrating that overbearing management exacerbates isolation and loneliness, harming well-being and engagement and leading to a toxic workplace (Wang *et al.*, 2021; Vintilă *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, leaders must adopt a flexible, trust-driven, and empathetic approach to achieve an optimal balance between support and autonomy (Lacey *et al.*, 2021; Lundqvist and Wallo, 2023; Ryan and Cross, 2024). Consequently, leaders must strike a balance between offering support and avoiding intrusive supervision to prevent amplifying feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can negatively impact employee well-being and work engagement.

Theoretical and practical implications

To date, no qualitative inquiry has explored how TRL's structured exchange logic and PAL's hands-off approach function within remote environments. Prior to this study, we already knew that remote leaders frequently face challenges in monitoring performance, maintaining team cohesion, and fostering employee engagement (Shaikh *et al.*, 2022; Dixit *et al.*, 2024). However, we had limited knowledge about how to address these challenges, particularly when using less common leadership styles. Our findings clarify that TRL's traditional logic requires adaptation into regular, empathetic digital check-ins, serving as crucial engagement anchors that reduce ambiguity in dispersed teams. However, PAL's hands-off stance emerges as a conditional motivational resource under high trust and experience. This perspective contributes to the further development of the FRL Model by specifying how structured exchange and autonomy logic operate and sometimes reverse roles when face-to-face cues are absent.

Our study showed the growing importance of non-financial recognition over traditional financial incentives, particularly among more experienced employees. Previous studies demonstrated similar results, but not in remote environments (Altassan, 2024). Hence, we recommend that organisations implement flexible work arrangements, such as guaranteeing at least two days per week of fully flexible remote work, especially for more experienced staff. Additionally, prioritising non-financial recognition, such as monthly virtual awards published on digital noticeboards, can help ensure the visibility of achievements. In addition, leaders should schedule regular one-on-one video check-ins with every team member and conduct frequent performance reviews via video calls to reinforce structured feedback and performance assessment mechanisms to drive development and engagement to higher levels.

These findings are important because our study reinforces the risks of excessive oversight and micromanagement, which can lead to increased employee demotivation, feelings of disrespect, and stress, ultimately resulting in a decrease in overall work engagement. Theoretically, this deepens our understanding of remote leadership by showing that the same micromanagement behaviours known to harm in-office teams may also damage engagement in virtual teams (Ryan and Cross, 2024). Consequently, we advocate for a balanced approach that promotes the implementation of social initiatives, such as “virtual coffee” sessions to discuss non-task topics, demonstrate empathy by acknowledging individual circumstances, and build flexibility by empowering employees to choose the communication medium (e.g., Slack vs. email) that best suits their workflow.

On the other hand, our study challenges the “PAL is always negative” assumption (Campbell, 2020; Olsen *et al.*, 2021; Specchia *et al.*, 2021). Instead, we argue that PAL should be viewed not from the perspective of a “bad” style but rather as a style whose effectiveness depends on employee experience, individual employee needs, and contextual factors. Thus, we recommend applying PAL selectively, especially for team members with less than one year of tenure or those working on high-complexity projects, with an appropriate balance and more active leadership styles (e.g., a more active TRL approach with weekly task-tracking meetings), until those employees demonstrate the autonomy needed to thrive.

Limitations and future directions

The first limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of 19 participants, all based in Ireland and the UK. While this allowed for an in-depth exploration of remote work engagement and leadership styles within a specific geographic context, the findings may not be fully representative of broader populations (Aritz and Walker, 2014). Additionally, this study integrated samples from across multiple industries, which could obscure sector-specific dynamics. Future research should address this limitation by including a larger and more diverse sample across multiple countries and industries to better understand how leadership styles interact with varying cultural norms, economic conditions, and organisational structures, thereby increasing the generalisability of the findings.

The second limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which captures data at a single point in time, providing only a snapshot of the relationship between leadership styles and work engagement in remote environments. While this approach offers valuable insights into current dynamics, it does not account for how these relationships may change or evolve over time. For example, the impact of TRL or PAL might shift due to external factors, such as economic conditions or technological advancements. Hence, future research should adopt longitudinal designs to explore how changes in leadership strategies, organisational policies, or external circumstances affect work engagement and leadership effectiveness over time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the shifting priorities of remote employees, with non-financial recognition, such as flexible work arrangements and feeling valued and appreciated, emerging as more important than traditional financial incentives. The findings emphasise the critical role of structured, personalised feedback and performance assessments in fostering work engagement and suggest that PAL, which is often viewed negatively, can be effective for experienced employees in remote environments when paired with trust and effective communication. Additionally, the study warns against the dangers of excessive oversight and micromanagement, which can harm employee well-being and work engagement due to decreased autonomy and increased loneliness and isolation. Instead, we advocate for adaptive leadership strategies that balance autonomy, support, and empathy to meet the unique needs of remote workers.

Informed consent

Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and consent was received from all the participants.

Declarations

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, PM. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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