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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### REMOTE WORKING: FROM BENEFITS TO AN OBLIGATION FOR TALENT RETENTION STRATEGY IN THE SERVICE INDUSTRY

**Tom Okot**

Researcher and Head of Business Department, Latin American University of Science and Technology, San Jose, Costa Rica.

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##### Manuscript History

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#### Abstract

**Purpose:** This research seeks to investigate whether a remote working model has become a key factor influencing talent retention strategies during the covid-19 pandemic.

**Research Methodology:** A mixed research methodology was applied following the grounded theory of conceptualization to assess data associations and explain their relationships. A situational analysis of relevant research related to the topic was conducted. Primary data collection included a total of 12 interviews issued to Human Resource personnel in the service industry and a survey to 115 people aged between 20-30 years who due to the covid-19 pandemic remain working remotely.

**Findings:** We found out that 45% of people consider remote working as key when deciding on a new job. However much remote working has rapidly picked up momentum, managers still need to work on their management skills to enhance high-quality talent retention strategies and competitive advantage.

**Research limitations:** We only focused on 17.47% of the labor force in the service industry who are between 20-30 years and due to covid-19 pandemic remain working remotely. However, most service industries had already implemented remote working models before the pandemic. Future research should include these companies as well and expand on the population scope.

**Practical Implications:** The results could be used by managers to optimize productivity, efficiency and improve company talent retention strategies. Additionally, it offers employees work-balance benefits to consider for future jobs.

**Originality/Value:** Remote working, talent retention strategies, and the service industry have been extensively researched. However, covid-19 influences a lot of these models and applicability especially in the service industry, unfortunately, it has been less explored.

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#### Introduction:-

Remote working as defined by Gulo (2021) & Klopotek (2017), is also known as working from home, with the use of technology to link businesses to clients. However, we would add the extra clarification that in several

**Corresponding Author:- Tom Okot**

Address:- Researcher and Head of Business Department, Latin American University of Science and Technology, San Jose, Costa Rica.

instances there may exist a central location where employees convene in physical facilities. Remote working has been trending lately and the pandemic has further accelerated the process. We have witnessed organizations obliged to transition jobs that historically were conducted in-person and in an office to a remote-technologically based model. On a global scale, Kemp (2017) argues that the use of the internet has increased exponentially by 82% which represents over 1.7 billion users. Also, from 2012-2017 it is estimated that in every 10 seconds, there are approximately 10 new internet users. These trends are further confirmed by Roser et al. (2020) where research indicated that the internet has been one of the most transformative and fast-growing technologies ever discovered. The study assessed active internet users globally per country, there is a significant increase of users from 413 million in 2000 to over 3.4 billion people in 2016.

This usage of the internet, along with several other supporting tools like video calls, automation of processes, cloud data, electronic printing, and digital signatures; greatly contributed to an increase in remote working in the past few years. According to Simovic (2021), the following are the ultimate list of remote work statistics:

1. 16% of companies exclusively hire remote workers.
2. There is an increase of 140% of people working remotely.
3. There is an increase of 115% in remote working since the last decade.

A recent survey by Owl Labs (2020) suggests that more than 50% of meetings were conducted through video calls more than before the pandemic. However, Lucanos (2021) suggest that even though in the future when the pandemic is over, more than half of the entire population will prefer working remotely as compared to on-site jobs. The study further demonstrates that 23% of the studied population were prepared to accept a significant reduction of up to 10% off their salary to transition to remote working. There is a high contrast on this related to tech firms, the financial services industry, and insurance companies who due to the nature of their work are obliged to invest in software for their business operations. This group can easily transition to fully remote working models.

Currently, many roles can be performed from anywhere if employees had the right technology and technical expertise. According to Analytics (2020), 56% of people employed agree that there are portions in their duties that can easily be done remotely. Furthermore, 62% of these people accept and are willing to work remotely. This new world order has been greatly triggered by the 4th industrial revolution but exploded with the pandemic (Okot et al. 2021). Even with the rapid increase in remote working models, corporate executives still believe that a hybrid model is the most appropriate as proposed by Hatfield & Volini (2021) from Deloitte company. This same ideology is also shared by Vassel (2020) from Unilever company, whereby a four-day work model is being implemented.

Research by Lund et al. (2020) from McKinsey & Company, found out that the hybrid model was being used by most executives. Their research suggested that 38% of executives anticipate that their employees can work from the office for two or more days weekly. This is an important increase compared to the 22% before the pandemic. In this research, we elaborate more insights into these new work models and how remote working is affected by the pandemic.

Nowadays employees prefer more flexible working environments where team goals are a priority versus individual ones. Employees want to deliver better and faster results which will allow companies to be successful as well. A study by Beauchene & Cunningham (2020), discovered that employees from the West prefer a manager who is team-oriented and looks forward to developing new skills.

With the advancement in technology because of the industrial revolution and covid-19 pandemic, work-life balance has become a key factor in establishing high-quality talent retention strategies especially for the service industry (Deery & Jago, 2015). Their sustainability in business operations greatly depends on their strategies to meet customers' needs and flexibility to maneuver through dynamic markets. There are so many service-based companies globally and the labour market is almost as many as the offers. This makes both offers very competitive as talent retention of the quality labour force. In the long run, it becomes very complex to retain quality talent for a long period (Atiku & Fields, 2020).

However, Dubai has gone further to redesign its policy instruments related to talent management by enacting operational laws related to the virtual labour market. The mechanisms applied to imply that companies can offer

both paid and unpaid leave, salary modifications, and offer remote working modalities as a mechanism to retain both national and international expertise (Haak-Saheem, 2020).

However much a lot has been researched about talent retention and service industry before the pandemic about strategies, policies, and organizational culture Oludayo et al. (2018); Tlaiss et al. (2017); Kontoghiorghe & Frangou, (2009). There is limited research related to talent retention and management during the covid-19 pandemic. This research seeks to investigate whether a remote working model has become a key factor influencing talent retention strategies during the covid-19 pandemic and how will companies face this new “mandatory” requirement.

## Literature Review:-

### Remote Working in Covid-19 Pandemic and Talent Retention in the Service Industry

Remote working as a model is not a new concept, it is however gained popularity in many companies during the covid-19 pandemic where the intent is to apply both remote and on-site models thus, a hybrid model. This model comes along with benefits such as increased productivity, flexibility, low costs, and high talent retention capacity as suggested by Alexander et al. (2020); Molino et al. (2020) & Wang et al. (2021). However, remote working environment faces a series of challenges that companies, nor employees were faced with before the physical office work model indicated by Connor et al. (2021); Wang et al. (2021) & Ferreira et al. (2021). Based on an article from Forbes magazine by Rochard (2021), identifies the following challenges:

1. Building new habits: the research confirms that there are no one-size-fits-all because business models are different among companies. However, there is a big difference between remote working in a pandemic and non-pandemic scenario e.g., social distancing measures and health safety issues are major concerns to remote working in a pandemic.
2. Requires an organizational shift: while some managers are reluctant to implement this, others might see remote working as a solution to issues of connectivity, productivity, and low costs related to office buildings.

However, according to Alexander et al. (2020), there are 6 models which reflect a mix of remote working and on-site models (Figure 1). This model is based on working norms concerning performance and cultural effects.



Figure 1:- 6 models which reflect a mix of remote working and on-site models. (Source, adapted from Alexander et al. (2020).

The ideal model to use will depend on which factors you wish to optimize. However, the effects on other factors must be considered as well to achieve positive results. The discourse of the pandemic is still unprecedented, and its impact has shuttered most businesses especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In addition to the massive loss of life, it has caused anxiety and anguish among people and business operations (Marjański&Sulkowski, 2021). Nevertheless, companies must adapt and adopt innovative strategies to sustain their business operations. According to Sytch & Greer (2020), most companies must implement remote working models during the pandemic, but the future of work will transition fully to hybrid work models. This is evidenced by major tech companies like Twitter and Facebook who have offered their employees to opt for remote working.

Most businesses strive hard to achieve and maintain the high-quality labour personnel for a successful business operation which enables an increased client portfolio base. This is entirely based on practices, company culture, and policies as instruments used to enhance high talent retention. It goes beyond high salary compensation for labour. According to Ott et al. (2018); Pandita & Ray (2018), people will stay in an organization if they offer training opportunities, career development, dynamic engagement platforms, and shared values. However much these factors have enabled companies to retain a high-quality labour force for a long period, the covid-19 pandemic has included other factors such as empathy and transparency which have become a priority. The HR departments also must transition their talent retention strategies aimed at the psychological safety of personnel (Bui, 2020).

## **Methodology:-**

### **Investigation type**

The proposed investigation in this study is descriptive. Applying a mixed methodology using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This approach was used by Jick (1979), and it allows triangulation of data. Using more than one method reduces errors and validates the data collected. A qualitative approach is considered more appropriate for collecting data that is relatively unexplored (Bryman & Emma, 2007).

The research was conducted using grounded theory by Glaser (2002), to establish a logical framework from general data. This method was applied by Urquhart et al. (2010); Miller & Fredericks (1999) to collect and systematically analyze data explaining behavior and relationship especially in unexplored fields of research. The quantitative approach involves collecting numerical data generalizing it among segments to explain a phenomenon. A descriptive statistics method was used to assess associations between data and to explain their relationships (Labaree, 2010).

### **Interviews to experts**

We conducted interviews with experts in HR with 9 semi-structured open-ended questions to understand and complement the research on remote working impact, engagement, and motivation of the workforce. The interview was comprised of segments such as status of the company, personal perception, expectations for managers and the new future employees look forward to. A total of 12 interviews were completed with HR managers working in the services industry. Each interview data was recorded, coded in segments related to corresponding topics, transcribed, and analyzed as soon as the interview was completed.

### **Survey**

We also complemented this research with a cross-sectional survey consisting of 18 structured and open-ended questions to a sample of 115 people, who due to the COVID 19 pandemic remain working remotely. The sample obtained was heterogeneous, on gender, age, and work experience. The questionnaires were issued online through Google forms to university peers and service industry companies between January-April 2021. However, the results presented include responses from industries like financial, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, tourism, and food with the intent of focusing more on services-related activities. The questionnaires contained the following segments: demographics to understand the context and commitment on the workforce; timeline, perception on benefits, needs, values of remote working, and suggestions for improving the remote interaction with managers.

The total population target, according to INEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo de Costa Rica, acronym in Spanish) data between November 2020 and January 2021 showed that the service sector represents 178,445 workers. We narrowed our focus to the age group between 20-30 years (17.47%) who due to the covid-19 pandemic remain working remotely and this represents approximately 31,174 employees (INEC, 2021). We intend to focus on resolving the questions: 1) whether the remote working model has become a key factor

influencing talent retention strategies during the covid-19 pandemic. 2) how will companies face this new “mandatory” requirement.

## Results:-

### Survey

The segmentation by the industry as shown in Figure 2 demonstrate a significant contribution for the service industry to Costa Rica’s economy. This sector represents 40% of the entire economic activity followed by finance at 27%.

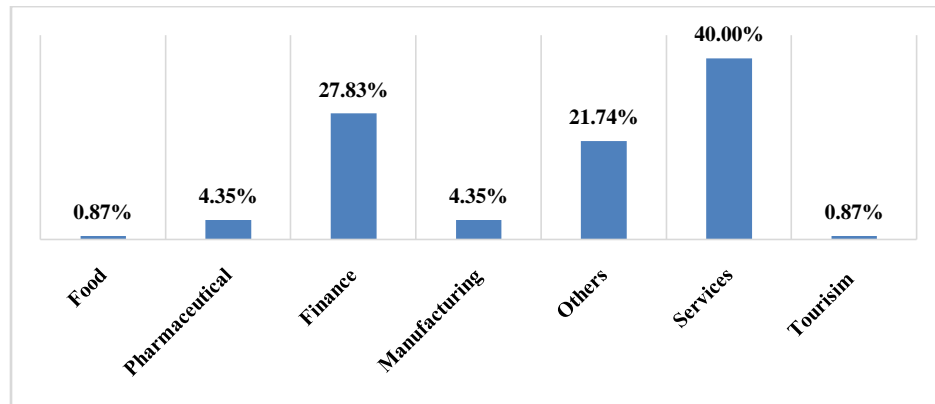


Figure 2:- Segmentation by industry (source: developed by the author).

Segmentation by role’s type: the option “other” might be perceived as people with a more individual type of role in a company, this relates to a non-people manager position in the organization as seen in Figure 3.

1. 30% of the responders are part of the “other” category.
2. Mid-level managers represent (combined supervisors and managers) 50% of the entire data population.

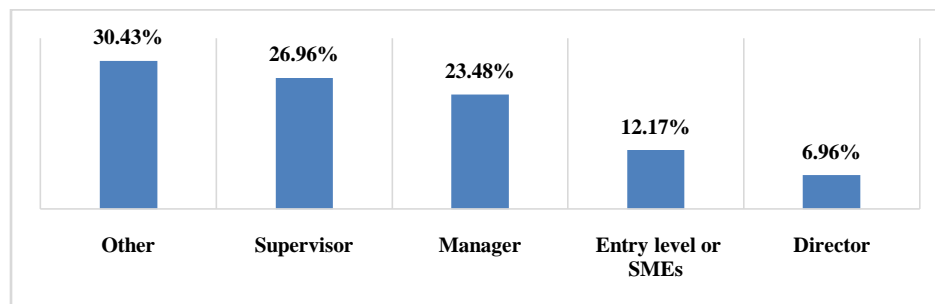


Figure 3:- Segmentation by role’s type (source: developed by the author).

The time frame spent within a job: there is clear evidence in our research that over 65% of the 115 people surveyed have been working for more than 10 years in any of the above industries, Figure 4.

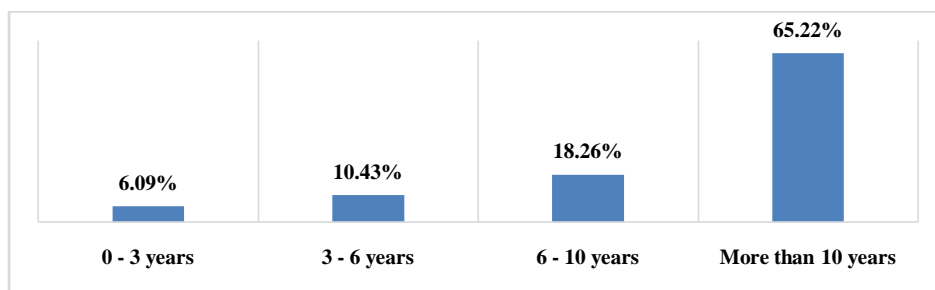
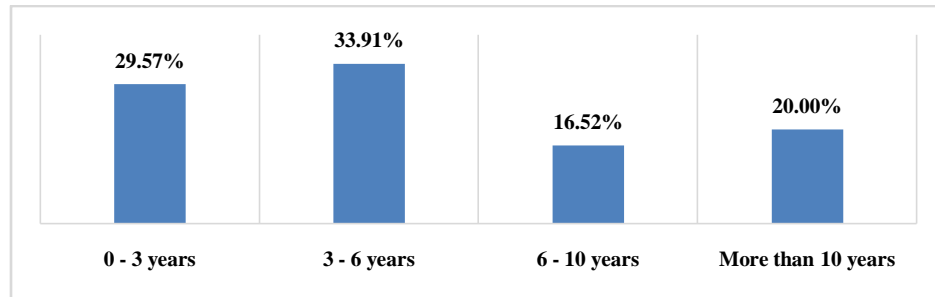


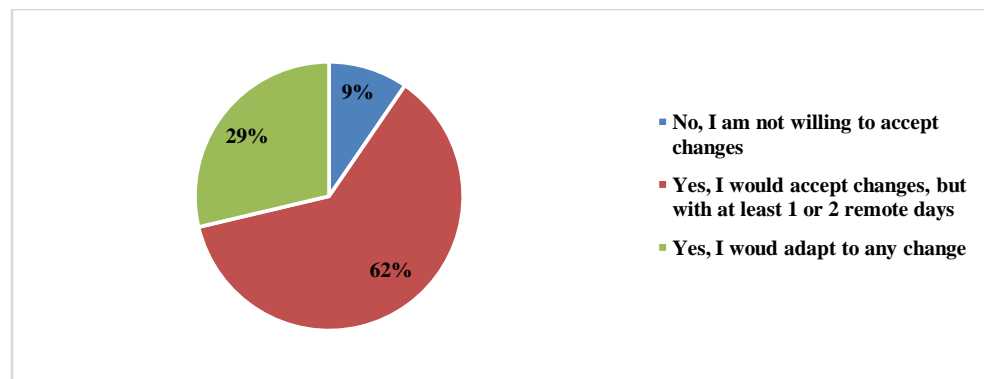
Figure 4:- Current employee’s tenure (source: developed by the author).

Tenure with the current employer: there is an important segment of the population who have less than 6 years in the current company, this represents almost 34% of the entire population surveyed (Figure 5).



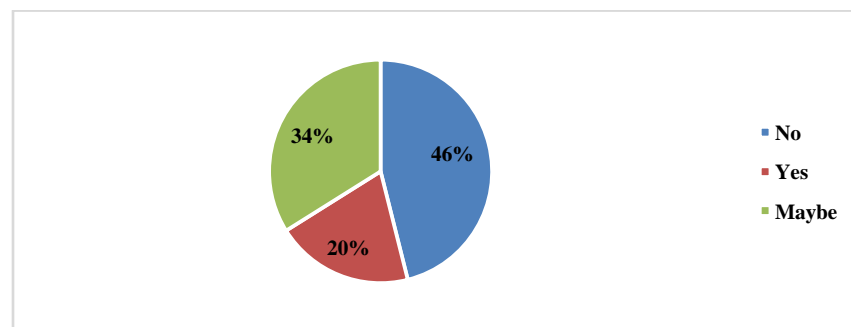
**Figure 5:- Employee's tenure with the current company (source: developed by the author).**

Willingness to accept and transition to remote working modality, fully or partially when offered by an employer. Employees tend to like the fact of spending one or two days at home (Figure 6) while 9% prefer to work in an office.



**Figure 6:- Willingness to accept changes on telecommuting schedule (source: developed by the author).**

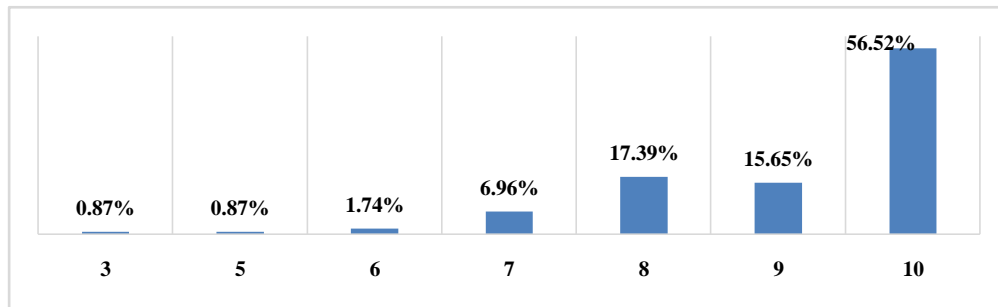
The surveyed population indicated that when faced with a non-flexible manager who declines to offer remote working, this would demotivate them to continue working with that organization (Figure 7).



**Figure 7:- Potential changes with lack of flexibility by management (source: developed by the author).**

Approximately half of the employees would not consider another job if managers were not flexible to keep current remote working models. The other half is indecisive.

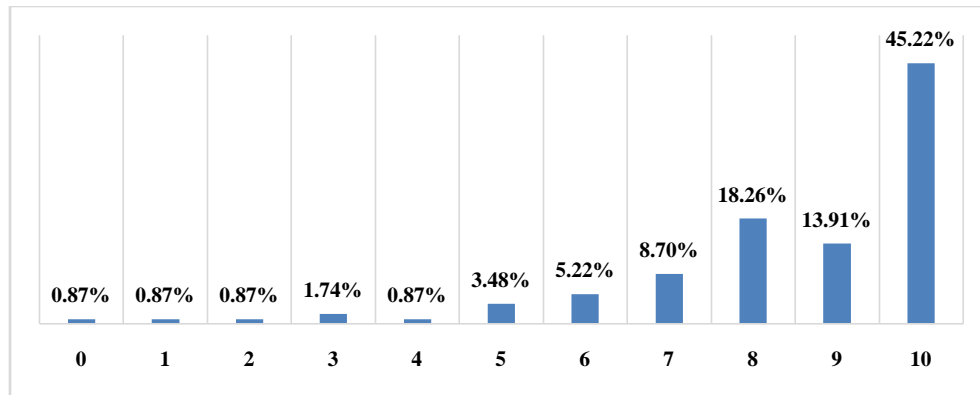
Employee engagement with the current company; over 56% of the surveyed population identified themselves as engaged with their managers and operational processes (Figure 8).



**Figure 8:- Employee engagement with a current company (source: developed by the author).**

**Note:** scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. The engagement average is 9.11, which based on the benchmark it is high compared to 8.0 as an industry standard.

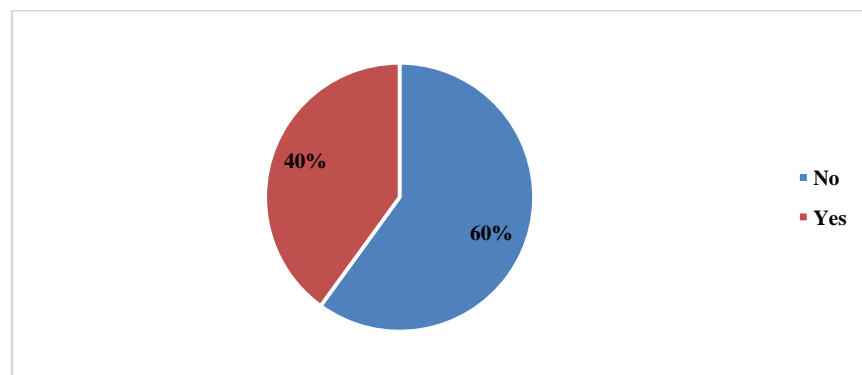
The study shows that 77% of people consider remote working as a highly important factor when applying for a new role in another company (Figure 9).



**Figure 9:- Importance of remote working benefits when applying for another role (source: developed by the author).**

**Note:** scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest.

60% of the surveyed population confirmed that remote working modalities influenced their decision to select a job (Figure 10).



**Figure 10:- Decision on accepting a job offer with/without remote work as a benefit (source: developed by the author).**

**Note:** 4 out of 10 people consider this as not relevant and they lean more towards other aspects, Figure 9.

Over 18% rank economic proposition thus high paying jobs as a condition to consider in a new job (Table 1).

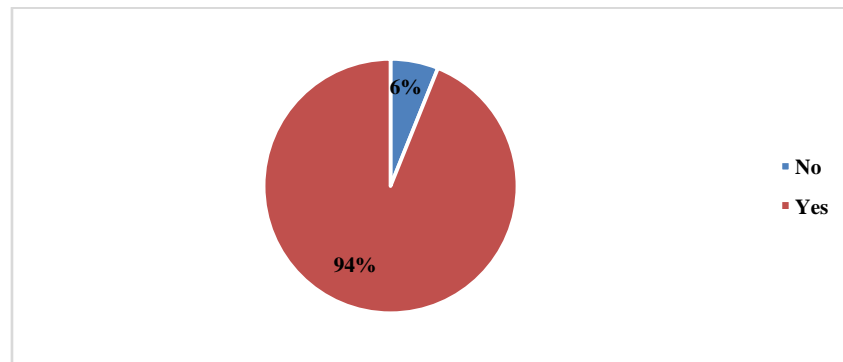
**Table 1:-** Relevant benefits when analysing a job offer (source: developed by the author).

Benefits	Option 1	Weighted
Economic preposition	40.00%	18,6%
Growth possibilities	21.74%	17,0%
Industry	13.04%	9,8%
Job environment	12.17%	13,5%
Location	5.22%	11,7%
Remote working	4.35%	10,9%
Additional benefits	3.48%	11,5%
Technology	0.00%	6,9%

**Note:** employees needed to rank from their priorities 1 to 10 on the differing benefits a company might offer to attract talent. Remote working is ranked at number 6 on the ranking based on preference.

While remote working benefits and location might be perceived as two different options, however, they are complementary to one another (Table 1). If an employee lives far away from the office location, then remote working represents a bigger benefit in their preference, same applies to the employee who lives within minutes and commuting to work takes no significant effort on time or energy, then the remote working benefit would not be that relevant.

94% of the surveyed population feel satisfied with their outputs and performance during the remote work model (Figure 11).

**Figure 11:-** Employees' performance during remote working mode in 2020 (source: developed by the author).

**Note:** this measured if the person was satisfied with current performance in the remote working environment.

To better understand the population surveyed, they were asked if they could accept a remote work model before COVID-19 and the number of days they would prefer to work from home. Over 61% decline remote work model (Table 2).

**Table 2:-** Employees remote work status before covid (source: developed by the author).

Days per week on telecommuting before COVID 19	Score
No	61.74%
Yes, 1 day per week.	17.39%
Yes, 2 days per week.	14.78%
Yes, 3 days per week.	3.48%
Yes, 4 to 5 days per week.	2.61%

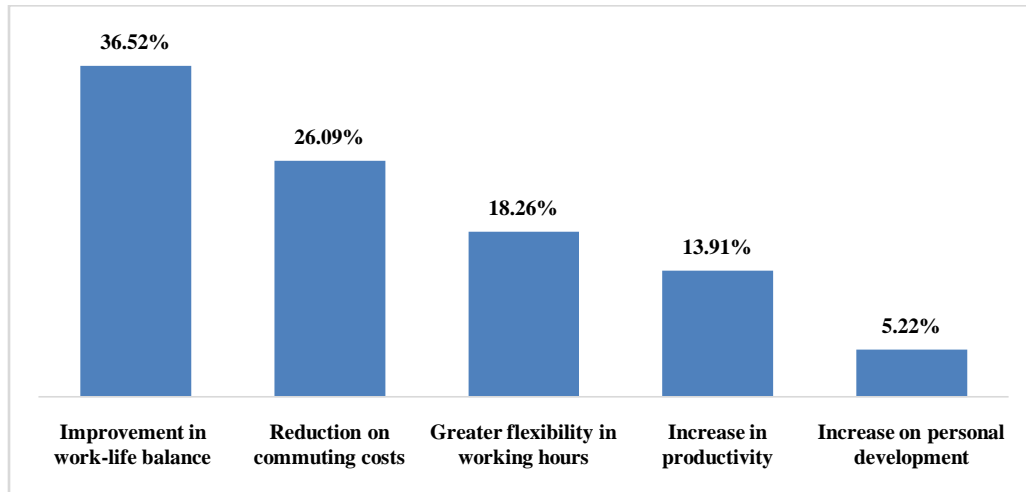
The same question was asked but after the first cases of COVID-19 were identified and the government had implemented lockdown measures and social distancing. Over 50% preferred to work remotely for up to 4-5 days weekly (Table 3).



**Table 3:-** Employees telecommuting status during COVID 19, (source: developed by the author).

Days per week on telecommuting during COVID 19	Score
No	46.96%
Yes, 2 days per week.	1.74%
Yes, 3 days per week.	0.87%
Yes, 4 to 5 days per week.	50.43%

We asked employees to tell us from a list of 5 benefits, which factors they considered as highly important for remote working. Over 36% consider improvement in work-life balance as a principal benefit of remote working (Figure 12).

**Figure 12:-** Principal benefits of remote working (source: developed by the author).

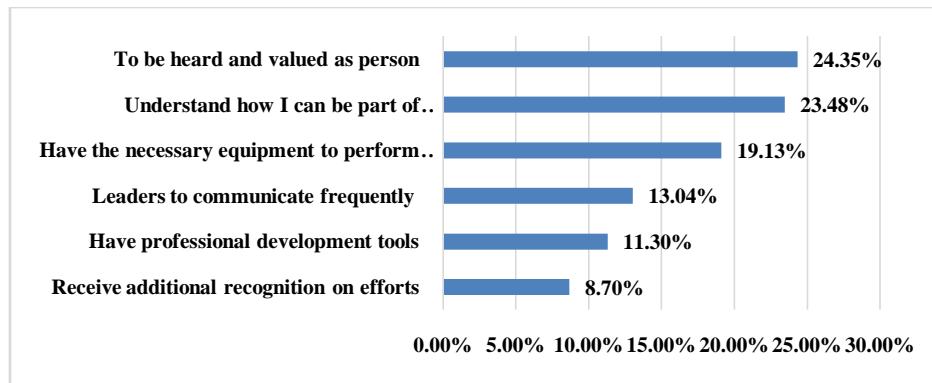
One of the most important questions we asked, was to provide feedback on their current interaction with managers and to give advice on how this relationship could be made better. As the question in the survey was open-ended, these were categorized into the following distribution (Table 4):

**Table 4:-** Feedback to people managers (source: developed by the author).

Categories	Distribution
Communication	46.43%
N/A	18.75%
Positive feedback	12.50%
Leadership support	8.93%
Appropriate usage of technology (camara)	5.36%
Performance Management	4.46%
Infrastructure	2.68%
Follow a schedule	0.89%

**Note:** Positive feedback is related to an employee being satisfied with his/her current manager, “N/A” represents comments for scenarios that do not apply. Infrastructure refers to equipment, hardware, or software. We also found out that there was good communication in the remote work model.

People surveyed were asked to rank from 1 to 5 (1 being the least and 5 being the highest value) on predetermined reasons for engagement they considered a priority. 24% consider the need to be heard and valued key when engaging employees and managers (Figure 13).



**Figure 13:-** Engagement reasons based on employees' perspective (source: developed by the author).

## Discussion:-

### Status and perception of remote working

The pandemic has speeded up the rate at which companies and employees are adjusting to remote working. This has inevitably created anguish and several technical challenges associated with the transition process (Kelly, 2020). The digital transition has been greatly enhanced during the pandemic. This is because of tight lockdowns and social distancing measures, companies were left with no other alternative other than the use of technology for their business operations (Nagel, 2020). However, according to Paniagua (2021), a new reality has emerged where pretty much most administrative roles can be performed remotely, and employers are willing to accept it. To employees, this has brought intrinsic benefits such as work-life balance, cost and time savings, simplicity at work, productivity, among others. This has set a new expectation that there should be no limitation to improve performance and productivity. According to Centro Internacional para el Desarrollo (acronym in Spanish) CIDTT (2017), identifies factors such as productivity, cost reduction, and better use of technological resources and time saved while commuting as key drivers of remote working. The report further shows that 10 years ago internet coverage in Costa Rica was around 10.2% only, versus 56% back in 2017.

Our findings show that although 91% of our study population are willing to alternate office and remote working, there is still a significant population of 9% who are not open to the new narrative at all. It is important to consider this percentage as well in the future organization. When employees are analyzing a potential job offer, there are strong priorities that influence decision making like the economic proposition a priority, followed by growth opportunities within a company and remote working as a third priority. This indicates that, however much the pandemic has accelerated remote working models, it is still not a principal priority in decision making for a job change.

However, the most important benefit to companies is the reduction in costs for physical space and maintenance. There is also a broader talent pool supply because a significant number of employees are interested in remote working. The same applies to client-base and consumption. For instance, Spotify early this year announced that it would adopt a remote working (Business Standard, 2021)

### Importance of Remote Working for the Future

Our study found out that 45% consider remote working as key when deciding on a new job but still almost half (46%) stated that they will consider looking for another job only if there was a lack of management support. This contradiction could be probably explained given the current economic recession that Costa Rica is going through where the unemployment rate in December 2020 was at 21.9% based on projections by the Costa Rican Central Bank, BCCR (2021). The same report also forecasts a positive economic recovery by 2022, implying that the unemployment rate will reduce.

Most of the positive scenarios assessed in terms of flexibility and remote working are driven by the fact that our sample belongs to a services industry. This is because remote working was already being implemented before the pandemic by most companies. We also identified that 40% of the population had at least from 1 to 5 days of remote work. This implies that during the pandemic, there was a quick adjustment. This adjustment increased from 2.61% to 50% remote work model and there were no negative impacts perceived by employees. This

research shows that 93% of the population perceived the same or better productivity during the remote working model.

### **Technological infrastructure**

Although technological infrastructure is not one of the most relevant benefits for employees when selecting a new job, based on our findings and experts' criteria, it is still suggested that lack of adequate technological infrastructure is key to the transition to remote working. Over 20% of the surveyed sample suggested having all the necessary materials and resources to perform their tasks.

A study by Huling (2020) of Dell Technologies shows how the stress and anxiety generated by technology present negative impacts that increase stress levels when related to task delivery. Aspects such as reliable tools, connectivity systems, IT support, or updating a passcode (this accounts for up to 31% stress increase) are key factors for employees to feel demotivated in remote working. We could certainly do an analogy with Maslow's hierarchy of needs to relate that having a comfortable and stress-free area, where infrastructure is adequate will improve employee psychological and self-actualization (Lester, 2013).

### **Remote Working Benefits**

One of the most predominant benefits of remote working is directly associated with work-life balance (Sullivan, 2012). This is important for employees and organizations because it offers better handling of tasks and time management. According to OECD (2018), Costa Rican employees work on average 2,212 hours annually. This in comparison with the other 34 countries analyzed in 2016, Costa Rica was number 2 in ranking just behind Mexico. The same study reflects that more hours do not mean more productivity. Germany has 849 annual hours less than Costa Rica but with an increase in productivity of 27%. There are several factors why Costa Ricans work longer hours and on average shifts of 8.5 hours per day. This is because the unemployment rate is high, people must work more extra hours to cover their bills. However, remote working may improve productivity since it provides employees with alternatives to attend to other issues.

Alternatively, the Costa Rican Ministry of health indicates that the benefits of remote working do not only apply to employees but also institutions in the following ways:

1. Better handling of physical office space
2. Reduction on costs (such water, power, and paper)
3. Optimization of technology usage, data, and communication (Ministerio De Salud Costa Rica, 2021).
4. We would like to add the reduction on international and local travel as well, which has delivered more productivity for the employees and cost reduction for the companies.

For the society and the country, the benefits can be interpreted as follows:

1. New and more opportunities for remote communities where employment possibilities were limited.
2. Less traffic, with better efficiency on processes and logistics.
3. Decrease on gasoline consumption, therefore less pollution in the city.
4. Increase in talent pool availability.
5. Economy boosts for countries with visions to welcome freelance workers to support tourism. A study by Donnelly & Johns (2021) suggests that for optimum productivity applying remote working, models and policies must be recontextualized to include remote working as a mechanism. Currently, there is a bill in the Costa Rican Congress to launch a nomad passport which will eventually allow foreign people to choose Costa Rica as a remote work paradise.

### **Employee Engagement**

For years companies have been looking for ways of how to support their employees to fulfill their definition of success. In the 80s it was about securing a job that will provide for all household needs. However, recently the concept of work-life balance started to become a goal for several employees. Most HR departments in the service industry realized the necessity to understand the intrinsic demand to create spaces where employees could balance their work-life. This was done by setting up physical training facilities at work and healthy cafeterias. This created room for company-employee dialogue. Almost 25% of employees consider that it is highly important for them to be heard and valued. This research also discovered that 46% considered communication with their managers as key for engagement. This combination seems like a powerful tool to ensure committed organizations.

## Conclusions:-

Remote working has come to stay since employees are becoming accustomed to the current new status quo and for as long as countries are still being affected by the pandemic. This influences talent retention strategy because companies must offer remote working models to increase and diversify high-quality retention capacity. Even companies that were reluctant to adopt this model have transitioned partially or fully to remote working. This reduces their costs in office space and maintenance, thus more resources to invest and diversify.

Remote working if successfully implemented by companies, can significantly reduce warehouse and maintenance costs, this will as well increase the ability to access a high-quality talent pool. However, careful decisions must be taken into consideration about productivity monitoring strategies to increase efficiency. Implementing business eco-friendly models, political stability, and favorable policies like the current bill in Costa Rica's congress to allow tourists to freely work remotely will strategically position the country to benefit from nearshoring.

The services industry in a way has been a leader in modeling the process of remote working because it is a significant contributor to Costa Rica's gross domestic product. In addition to tourism, the country has become a major manufacturer of medical instruments and supplies worldwide, as well as advanced electronic products (Deloitte, 2020).

A key area for managers to leverage is communication. Start by setting clear and common objectives for employees with friendly communication channels to track performance. Communication is also recognized as a key management responsibility because it strengthens the team and aligns goals. This is something that with the right planning will have to backfill for the informal conversations that used to take place while using the in-office model. Build employees' capacity to perform and excel within the new culture which may require skills that are not yet developed by certain individuals and even generations. Skills such as time management, flexibility and focus on priorities have been mentioned by HR as areas that employees will need to develop to succeed as they work remotely.

Companies must ensure that employees have the necessary technology to be able to deliver their daily requirements. This will reduce stress and barriers among employees. It will also increase productivity and eventually guarantee a competitive advantage. Companies must also redefine the compensation and benefits of remote working in terms of technological equipment, infrastructure, and electricity bills which employees must incur during their work hours at home. This will promote remote working.

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