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**Enhancing Employee Productivity in Remote Work: A Case of
Standards Association of Zimbabwe**

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of remote work on employee productivity at the Standards Association of Zimbabwe (SAZ). Using questionnaires and interviews, it identified major challenges faced by remote workers, including poor connectivity, isolation, home distractions, communication barriers, and difficulties balancing work and personal life. Findings show that productivity can be enhanced through open communication, incentives, structured routines, and clear boundaries, while psychological safety measures had little effect. To optimize remote work, the study proposes organizational frameworks such as monitoring and evaluation systems and standard operating procedures. It concludes that organizations should provide stronger support, establish clear operational guidelines, and invest in training to improve productivity in remote settings. These insights contribute to understanding remote work dynamics and offer practical guidance for organizations seeking to maximize performance.

Introduction

Remote work has emerged as a defining transformation in the modern workplace, reshaping organizational structures and productivity dynamics. Although enabled by advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) long before the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work was largely regarded as an optional practice rather than a mainstream model (Messenger & Ghosheh, 2010). The outbreak of COVID-19, however, forced organizations worldwide to rapidly adopt remote work to maintain operations while safeguarding employee health (Toscano & Zappalà, 2021; Wang, Liu, Qian, & Parker, 2021). This shift has since persisted, with many organizations integrating remote and hybrid models into long-term strategies (Adekoya, Adisa, & Aiyenitaju, 2022).

At the center of this transition is the question of employee productivity, a fundamental determinant of organizational success, competitiveness, and sustainability (Alfaleh, Alzahrani, Alharbi, & Alshahrani, 2021; Baudot & Kelly, 2020). Advocates argue that remote work enhances productivity through reduced commuting, flexible scheduling, and improved work–life balance (Wang et al., 2021). Conversely, critics caution that challenges such as technological disruptions, isolation, home distractions, and blurred personal–professional boundaries can reduce efficiency and collaboration (Jalagat & Jalagat, 2019). Empirical findings remain mixed: while studies in Europe report productivity gains of 10–20% under remote or hybrid arrangements (Buffer, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024), other evidence highlights declines in teamwork quality and employee engagement.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the effectiveness of remote work is constrained by systemic barriers, including high data costs, unreliable electricity, and uneven internet access (Maphosa & Mfowabo, 2022). In Zimbabwe, for instance, only 38.4% of the population were internet users in early 2025 (DataReportal, 2025), and more than 60% reported rarely or never going online (Afrobarometer, 2021). These limitations hinder the potential productivity benefits of remote work and present unique challenges for organizations operating in resource-constrained environments. The Standards Association of Zimbabwe (SAZ), the national standards body established in 1957, provides certification, testing, inspection, and conformity assessment services that are central to trade facilitation and regulatory compliance. High employee

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productivity is essential for SAZ to deliver quality services and maintain credibility. However, the adoption of remote work within the organization raises important questions about how employee productivity is influenced under conditions of infrastructural limitations and evolving work practices.

Despite extensive global research on remote work, there is limited empirical evidence on its impact within Zimbabwean organizations. This knowledge gap constrains SAZ and similar institutions from designing contextually appropriate frameworks to sustain productivity in virtual environments. While remote work has become integral to organizational functioning, its influence on employee productivity within Zimbabwe remains under-researched. Without locally relevant insights, organizations risk adopting practices that undermine efficiency, service delivery, and employee well-being. The study aimed to identify the challenges affecting employee productivity in remote work settings at SAZ, to examine strategies that enhance productivity in virtual work environments, and to propose a framework for optimizing employee productivity under remote work in the Zimbabwean context.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Job Characteristics Model (JCM)

The Job Characteristics Model by Hackman and Oldham (1976) identifies five key job elements, skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback, as drivers of motivation and performance. In remote work, autonomy and feedback become especially critical because employees work independently and depend on structured communication for direction (Cook, Cheshire, Rice & Nakagawa, 2013). However, studies show that remote workers often experience lower task identity and significance due to reduced visibility of their work's broader impact (Sokolic, 2022; Adekoya et al., 2022). This indicates that JCM principles must be adapted to virtual settings by reinforcing job significance and ensuring regular, meaningful feedback.

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

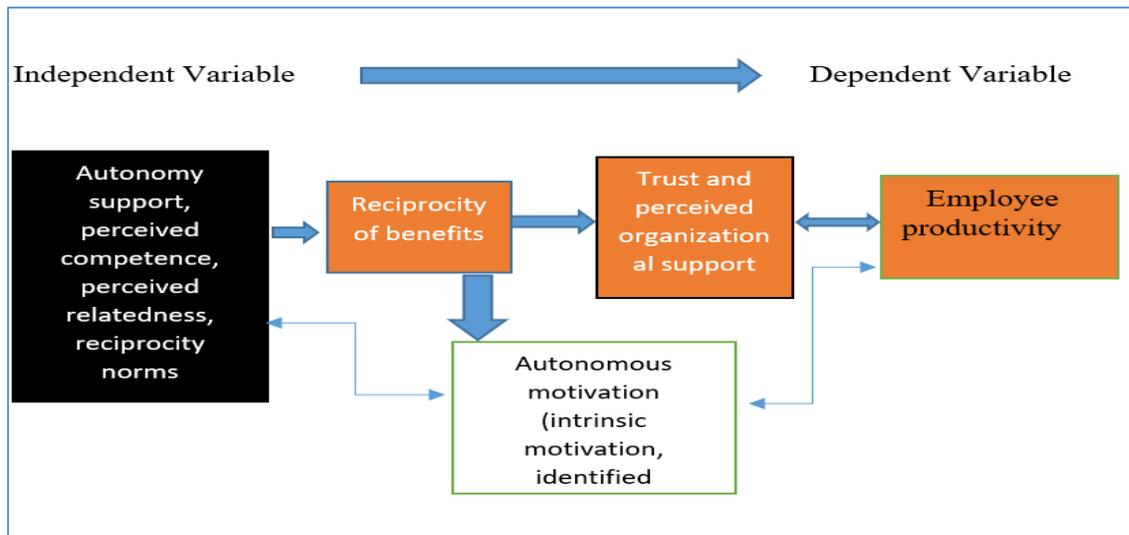
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Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cooper-Thomas & Morrison, 2018) explains remote work by emphasizing that employee–employer relationships depend on reciprocal exchanges of effort, support, and rewards. In physical workplaces, these exchanges are strengthened through face-to-face interaction and visible managerial support, but in remote settings they rely heavily on communication, trust, and perceived organizational support (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). Monteiro, Straume, and Valente (2019) note that remote productivity depends on employees’ sense of fairness and reciprocity. In Zimbabwe, this may be reinforced by the Ubuntu philosophy, which values collectivism and mutual care, extending SET beyond simple transactions to cultural expectations of solidarity (Rai & Maheshwari, 2020). Thus, SET shows that remote work outcomes may be shaped by both organizational practices and cultural norms.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework on Enhancing Employee Productivity in Remote Work

(Illustrates the relationships between job characteristics, social exchanges, psychological needs, and productivity.)



Adapted from Deci & Ryan, (1985)

Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), this study conceptualizes employee productivity as a function of satisfying three fundamental

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psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. JCM contributes to autonomy and competence by focusing on job design factors such as autonomy and feedback, while SET addresses relatedness through social support, communication, and trust.

In this framework, remote work productivity is enhanced when:

- Job characteristics provide employees with sufficient autonomy and constructive feedback.
- Social exchanges foster mutual trust, recognition, and support.
- Psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled, leading to higher intrinsic motivation.

This integrated framework highlights the interconnections between job design, social relationships, motivation, and performance, showing how productivity in remote work emerges from both structural and relational enablers (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014; Tewari et al., 2019)

Empirical Literature Review

Benefits of Remote Work

Research shows that remote work offers several benefits for employees and organizations. A key advantage is improved work–life balance, as flexible schedules allow workers to manage personal and professional responsibilities more easily (Sullivan, 2012). This flexibility reduces stress and supports well-being, especially where commuting is challenging (Van Zoonen et al., 2021). Reducing or eliminating commute time also lessens fatigue and frees time for rest and professional development (Felstead & Henseke, 2017). Remote work further enhances autonomy, which boosts intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When employees are trusted to self-manage, they often show greater commitment and improved performance (Bloom et al., 2015). Organizations also benefit by accessing wider talent pools beyond geographic boundaries, increasing diversity and innovation (Bailey & Kurland, 1999). Remote systems strengthen organizational resilience during crises such as pandemics or political disruptions (Obrenovic et al., 2020). Cost savings are another documented benefit: organizations reduce expenses for office space and utilities, while

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employees save on transport and daily living costs (Bloom et al., 2015). Remote work can also support environmental sustainability by reducing commuting-related emissions (Hook et al., 2020). Overall, remote work enhances employee well-being, strengthens organizational performance, and supports environmental sustainability. However, realizing these benefits depends on technological readiness, supportive policies, and cultural acceptance of flexible work arrangements.

Challenges of Remote Work

Despite its advantages, remote work brings several challenges that can weaken productivity and well-being. A key issue is social isolation, as reduced face-to-face interaction limits mentoring, collaboration and team cohesion (Gardiner, Geldenhuys & Gott, 2018). This can lead to loneliness, weaker organizational identification and higher turnover (Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Golden, Veiga & Dino, 2008). In collectivist contexts like Zimbabwe, these effects may be even stronger, given the cultural emphasis on community ties, extended family networks, and workplace relationships as sources of identity and support. Limited digital infrastructure and unequal access to reliable internet may further exacerbate feelings of exclusion, while economic pressures heighten the importance of social cohesion in organizations. These dynamics will be elaborated under the heading contextual considerations. Home-related distractions are another concern. Many employees struggle to balance work and family responsibilities, especially where households lack a dedicated workspace or involve extended families (Allen et al., 2021; Matli, 2020). Such distractions blur work–home boundaries and increase burnout risk. Technological limitations also hinder effective remote work. Challenges such as unreliable internet, power cuts and costly data, common in developing countries, disrupt workflow and widen digital inequalities (Maphosa & Mfowabo, 2022). Remote work often leads to longer working hours and an “always-on” culture, increasing stress and eroding work–life balance (Leonardi & Bailey, 2008). Managing boundaries requires clear communication policies (Hertel, Geister & Konradt, 2005). Managers face difficulties supervising remote teams, which may trigger trust issues or micromanagement through digital monitoring (Staples, Hulland & Higgins, 1999). This can undermine autonomy and satisfaction. Finally, remote work can magnify inequalities, as employees with better technology, private spaces, or support systems perform more effectively than those without

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(Choudhury, Foroughi & Larson, 2021). Overall, remote work presents challenges, including isolation, distractions, technological gaps, blurred boundaries, managerial strain, and inequality, that require strong organizational policies, adequate infrastructure, and supportive management to address.

Contextual Considerations

While global research highlights the benefits and challenges of remote work, its effectiveness is highly context dependent. Most studies come from high-income countries with strong digital infrastructure, supportive organizational cultures, and employees who have private workspaces. In developing contexts like Zimbabwe, structural and socio-cultural realities significantly shape the remote work experience.

A key contextual issue is infrastructural capacity. Effective remote work requires stable electricity, reliable internet, and affordable data, conditions that remain inconsistent in Zimbabwe due to power outages, underdeveloped ICT systems, and high data costs (Maphosa & Mfowabo, 2022). These limitations create productivity gaps between urban and rural employees. Organizational readiness is also crucial. Many Zimbabwean institutions, especially in the public sector, operate with bureaucratic structures and limited digital transformation. Remote work demands a shift to outcome-based performance management, yet such systems are difficult to implement where supervision still relies on physical presence (Leonardi, 2020). Weak policies and limited digital tools further hinder adoption.

Socio-cultural values shape remote work as well. Zimbabwe's collectivist culture and the Ubuntu philosophy emphasize social connection and community (Murove, 2016). Reduced face-to-face interaction in remote settings can therefore weaken the sense of belonging that fuels engagement, more so than in individualistic cultures where autonomy is valued. Economic conditions also influence effectiveness. High unemployment and financial insecurity mean that employees place greater importance on economic stability and tangible rewards, unlike in wealthier economies, where flexibility and psychological safety may suffice as motivators. Digital exclusion adds another layer. Access to devices, connectivity, and suitable workspaces is uneven, with women and low-income employees often facing greater caregiving

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demands and limited resources (Matli, 2020). Poorly implemented remote work can therefore deepen existing inequalities.

Overall, remote work models from high-income countries cannot be applied directly in Zimbabwe. Context-sensitive strategies, aligned with local infrastructure, organizational culture, economic realities, and socio-cultural norms, are needed to fully realize the benefits of remote work while minimizing its challenges.

Synthesis and Gaps

The review of literature demonstrates that remote work is a double-edged phenomenon, offering substantial benefits but also presenting significant challenges. On one hand, studies show that remote work can enhance work–life balance, autonomy, and organizational resilience, while reducing commuting costs and broadening access to talent (Sullivan, 2012; van Zoonen et al., 2021; Obrenovic et al., 2020). These benefits suggest that, when properly managed, remote work can be a powerful tool for improving both employee well-being and organizational performance.

On the other hand, evidence highlights serious challenges such as social isolation, home distractions, blurred boundaries, and technological disruptions (Allen et al., 2021; Matli, 2020). These challenges can undermine the very advantages remote work promises if not addressed through clear policies, managerial support, and adequate infrastructure (Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005). In addition, unequal access to digital resources risks exacerbating existing socio-economic disparities within organizations (Choudhury, Foroughi, & Larson, 2021).

When viewed in context, it becomes clear that most of the literature is based on developed country experiences, where strong ICT infrastructure, organizational readiness, and individual workspaces are taken for granted. In contrast, in developing contexts such as Zimbabwe, structural barriers (e.g., poor connectivity, unstable electricity, high internet costs), organizational weaknesses (e.g., limited digital policies, reliance on physical oversight), and socio-cultural factors (e.g., collectivist values and Ubuntu philosophy) create a unique set of conditions that shape the effectiveness of remote work (Maphosa & Mfowabo, 2022). These contextual nuances remain underexplored in the global discourse.

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Theoretically, while the Job Characteristics Model (JCM) explains how task design factors such as autonomy and feedback affect motivation, and Social Exchange Theory (SET) highlights the importance of reciprocal support and communication, very few studies have integrated these perspectives with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain remote work productivity. Such integration provides a more holistic understanding by linking job design, social exchanges, and psychological need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

From this synthesis, several research gaps emerge:

1. **Contextual Gap:** Limited empirical studies examine remote work in Zimbabwe, despite the unique infrastructural, economic, and cultural factors that shape its outcomes.
2. **Theoretical Gap:** Few studies integrate JCM, SET, and SDT into a unified framework for explaining productivity in remote work environments.
3. **Policy and Practice Gap:** There is insufficient evidence on how organizations in developing countries can tailor remote work strategies to local realities, balancing flexibility with accountability and inclusivity.

This study addresses these gaps by developing a context-specific framework for enhancing employee productivity in remote work settings in Zimbabwe. By integrating JCM, SET, and SDT, the study not only explores task-related and relational dimensions of motivation but also situates them within the broader socio-economic and cultural realities of a developing country. In doing so, it contributes both to theoretical advancement and to practical insights for policymakers and organizational leaders seeking to optimize remote work in similar contexts.

Methodology

This study investigated the impact of remote work on employee productivity at the Standards Association of Zimbabwe (SAZ) using a pragmatic research philosophy, which emphasizes practical application and the integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Pragmatism was suitable because it allowed for the collection of measurable productivity data while also exploring the subjective experiences of

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employees engaged in remote work (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach ensured that findings were both theoretically sound and practically relevant within the organizational context.

A mixed-methods research design was employed, combining descriptive and exploratory elements. Descriptive methods, implemented through structured questionnaires, captured quantitative data on productivity levels, job satisfaction, and perceptions of remote work (Bryman, 2016). Simultaneously, exploratory methods were implemented through semi-structured interviews to delve into employees' personal experiences, challenges, and strategies related to remote work, providing nuanced qualitative insights. This triangulation of methods enhanced the credibility and comprehensiveness of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Flick, 2018).

The target population comprised all employees of SAZ who were engaged in remote work during the study period. This included staff from Training, Finance and Administration, Technical Services, Auditing and Certification, Standards Development, Marketing, Procurement, and Information Technology departments. In total, the population included 40 permanent employees and approximately 10–15 subcontracted staff with relevant remote work experience. To ensure representation across departments and functional roles, a purposive sampling technique was applied to select participants with direct exposure to remote work (Etikan et al., 2016). A total of 35 participants were selected, representing 70% of the active remote workforce. Table 1 details the target population and sample distribution by department.

Table 1: Target Population and Sample Size

Department	Total Remote Employees	Sample Size Selected
Training	4 + variable subcontracted trainers	3
Finance and Administration	8	6
Technical Services	4	3
Auditing and Certification	10 + variable subcontracted auditors	7
Standards Development	4	3

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Marketing	6	5
Procurement	2	2
Information Technology	2	2
Total	40 + 10–15 subcontracted	35

Data collection involved electronic questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires, distributed via email, included four-point Likert-scale items to measure perceptions and experiences of remote work, ensuring respondents provided decisive feedback without a neutral option (Likert, 1932; Baddeley et al., 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person and via virtual platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, depending on participant preference. These interviews explored individual experiences, challenges, and strategies for managing productivity in a remote work setting, complementing the quantitative data and providing depth to the analysis.

To ensure validity and reliability, well-established instruments were employed for quantitative data, with internal consistency assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Field, 2018). For qualitative data, credibility was reinforced through member checking, where participants verified summaries of their responses, and transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the research context, sampling criteria, and data collection procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These measures strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings.

Data analysis followed a systematic process. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and percentages, as well as inferential statistics to examine relationships between variables (Pallant, 2020). Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using NVivo, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and themes within participant narratives (Flick, 2018). Results were presented using a combination of tables, graphs, and charts to enhance clarity and interpretation.

Ethical considerations were central throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature

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of participation (Israel & Hay, 2006). Data were securely stored, and participants could withdraw at any time without consequence. These measures ensured adherence to ethical standards and reinforced the integrity of the research process.

The methodology employed a pragmatic philosophy with a mixed-methods design, purposive sampling, and robust data collection and analysis procedures, ensuring reliable, valid, and practically relevant findings on the impact of remote work on employee productivity at SAZ. The inclusion of a representative sample across departments further strengthened the study's applicability and generalizability within the organization.

Presentation and Discussion of Results

This section presents the study findings by integrating quantitative data, qualitative insights, and existing literature. The results are organized around the four study objectives and are followed by an overall synthesis.

1. Key Challenges Influencing Employee Productivity in Remote Work Environments

Connectivity and Technical glitches

Connectivity and Technical glitches					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	12	31.6	31.6	31.6
	Agree	20	52.6	52.6	84.2
	Disagree	1	2.6	2.6	86.8
	strongly disagree	5	13.1	13.1	100.0
Total		38	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 Connectivity and technical glitches

The study revealed that connectivity and technical glitches were the most significant challenges, with over four-fifths (84.2%) of respondents acknowledging their negative impact. This finding aligns with broader research emphasizing that infrastructural limitations are among the most persistent barriers to remote work in developing economies (McElreath, 2018).

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Unreliable internet, high data costs, and frequent power outages disrupt digital communication and workflow, leading to inefficiencies and frustration. In Zimbabwe, where frequent load shedding and limited broadband penetration are common, remote work productivity is highly contingent on infrastructural investments that lie largely outside the control of individual organizations (Maphosa & Mfowabo, 2022).

feeling of isolation

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	13	34.2	34.2	34.2
	Agree	8	21.1	21.1	55.3
	Disagree	6	15.8	15.8	71.7
	strongly disagree	11	28.9	28.9	100.0
	Total	38	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 Feeling of Isolation

A second major concern was feelings of isolation, reported by 55.3% of respondents. This result is consistent with Weir and Vincent (2020), who argue that the absence of regular face-to-face interactions weakens professional networks, reduces morale, and increases psychological strain. Qualitative interviews reinforced this finding, with participants emphasizing that they missed informal office conversations that traditionally serve both social and professional functions, such as spontaneous brainstorming and peer mentoring. Thus, isolation emerges not only as a psychosocial challenge, affecting employee well-being, but also as a performance-related barrier, diminishing motivation, knowledge sharing, and collective problem-solving.

home-related distractions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	14	36.8	36.8	36.8
	Agree	9	23.7	23.7	60.5
	Disagree	8	21.1	21.1	81.6

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strongly disagree	5	18.4	18.4	100.0
Total	38	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 Home-related distractions

Home-related distractions also significantly undermined productivity, with 60.5% of respondents citing their negative influence. These results resonate with Varghese et al. (2019), who found that domestic responsibilities, childcare, and limited workspace frequently compromise concentration during remote work. In the Zimbabwean context, many households lack dedicated workspaces, and employees often juggle competing personal and professional demands. Such blurred boundaries increase stress, reduce efficiency, and result in unfinished tasks, illustrating that the effectiveness of remote work is shaped by socio-economic conditions in addition to organizational policies.

The qualitative data further revealed that communication barriers and lack of work–life boundaries exacerbated these challenges. Respondents described difficulties in maintaining consistent engagement with supervisors and colleagues due to unreliable platforms and poorly coordinated communication protocols. For some, asynchronous communication created misunderstandings and delays, while others noted that the lack of clear work–life boundaries fostered an “always-on” culture, where employees felt pressured to remain available beyond normal working hours. Similar observations are echoed in the literature, where poorly managed virtual communication and boundary blurring contribute to stress, fatigue, and burnout (Leonardi & Bailey, 2008; Allen et al., 2021).

Taken together, these findings underscore that remote work productivity in Zimbabwe is constrained by a convergence of structural deficits, psychosocial stressors, and household dynamics. Addressing a single challenge in isolation—such as improving connectivity—may be insufficient unless complemented by organizational reforms and employee support mechanisms. Holistic interventions that combine infrastructural investments with clearer communication policies, structured work–life boundaries, and psychosocial support are therefore essential to unlock the productivity potential of remote work in developing contexts.

2. Effective Strategies for Enhancing Productivity in Remote Work Settings

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In spite of the challenges, the study identified several strategies that were viewed as effective in enhancing employee productivity in remote contexts. These strategies demonstrate that, even in environments constrained by infrastructural and socio-economic limitations, targeted organizational practices can help sustain engagement and performance.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly agree	13	34.2	34.2	34.2
Agree	13	34.2	34.2	68.4
Strongly disagree	8	21.1	21.1	89.5
Disagree	4	10.5	10.5	100.0
Total	38	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 Two-way open communication over the use of the Likert scale and the same way of presentation of data

First, two-way open communication was strongly endorsed, with 68.4% of respondents affirming its importance. This result is consistent with Basias and Pollalis (2018), who describe communication as the “lifeblood” of organizational performance. Respondents emphasized that effective communication channels reduce misunderstandings, align expectations, and foster inclusivity. Mechanisms such as regular feedback sessions, virtual check-ins, and transparent communication policies were highlighted as critical for maintaining team cohesion in remote settings. Qualitative interviews reinforced this finding, with employees noting that open communication built on trust helped to offset the isolation often experienced in virtual environments. These findings align with research by Gibbs, Sivunen, and Boyraz (2017), who found that communication quality directly influences collaboration and satisfaction in distributed teams.

Incentives

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly agree	11	28.9	28.9	28.9
Agree	15	39.5	39.5	68.4
Disagree	6	15.8	15.8	84.2
strongly disagree	6	15.8	15.8	100.0

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Total	38	100.0	100.0
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Table 5 Incentives

Second, incentives were also endorsed by 68.4% of respondents as a key motivating factor. In contexts characterized by economic volatility and uncertainty, both financial and non-financial incentives were regarded as essential for sustaining morale and encouraging consistent performance. Singh (2006) similarly observed that in emerging economies, tangible motivators such as allowances, bonuses, or resource support are often more effective than abstract engagement strategies. The qualitative findings in this study provided specific illustrations: respondents reported that modest support measures, such as covering internet data costs, providing airtime, or introducing performance-based bonuses, made remote work more manageable and rewarding. These results underscore the need for organizations in Zimbabwe to consider context-sensitive incentive structures that respond to employees' immediate material needs, as opposed to relying solely on cultural or symbolic recognition mechanisms.

Third, the study highlighted the importance of structured routines and boundaries in sustaining productivity. Respondents noted that establishing dedicated workspaces, adhering to fixed work schedules, and setting clear boundaries between personal and professional life reduced distractions and improved focus. This finding supports Allen et al. (2021), who argue that effective boundary management is crucial for preventing burnout and maintaining work-life balance in remote contexts. Employees who successfully implemented routines reported fewer interruptions and higher levels of efficiency compared to those with more fluid or unstructured approaches. These observations suggest that self-discipline and proactive boundary management are critical individual-level strategies for adapting to remote work, particularly in environments where household distractions are prevalent.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly agree	6	15.8	15.8	15.8
Agree	9	23.7	23.7	39.5
Disagree	5	13.2	13.2	52.7
strongly disagree	18	47.3	47.3	100.0

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Total	38	100.0	100.0
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Table 6 Psychological safety

Interestingly, psychological safety was not widely regarded as impactful, with 60.5% of respondents disagreeing on its relevance. This contrasts sharply with Western literature, where psychological safety is widely recognized as central to innovation, collaboration, and productivity in both traditional and remote work contexts (Howell, 2012). Edmondson (2019) also stresses that psychological safety enables employees to take interpersonal risks, share ideas, and engage in constructive problem-solving. The divergence observed in this study may reflect the immediate priorities of employees in Zimbabwe, where access to connectivity, income stability, and reliable resources outweigh cultural or relational concerns. In this context, employees may value tangible, material support more than the abstract assurance of interpersonal safety. This finding highlights the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach when transferring strategies across contexts. What works in high-income countries cannot be uncritically applied in developing economies without accounting for socio-economic realities and cultural expectations.

Taken together, these findings suggest that enhancing productivity in remote work settings requires a multi-level approach. At the organizational level, clear and open communication structures and well-designed incentive systems are essential. At the individual level, employees must cultivate structured routines and boundaries to balance competing demands. Moreover, the diminished importance of psychological safety in this context highlights the need for contextualized strategies that prioritize immediate material and infrastructural needs before emphasizing higher-level cultural or relational dimensions.

3. Frameworks for Organizations to Optimize Remote Work Productivity

Beyond individual strategies such as communication and boundary management, the study revealed that employees placed significant importance on the presence of formal organizational frameworks to sustain productivity in remote work settings. Three frameworks emerged as central: monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and performance-related evaluations. These reflect employees' recognition that remote

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work environments require structured systems of accountability to replace the oversight and coordination that typically occur in physical workplaces.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	10	26.3	26.3	26.3
	Agree	10	26.3	26.3	52.6
	Disagree	5	13.2	13.2	65.8
	strongly disagree	13	34.2	34.2	100.0
	Total	38	100.0	100.0	

Table 7 Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

First, monitoring and evaluation systems were endorsed by more than half of respondents as vital for ensuring accountability and alignment with organizational goals. In remote settings, where managers cannot rely on direct observation, employees viewed structured M&E as necessary to track progress, provide timely feedback, and ensure that outputs met agreed standards. Hertel, Geister, and Konradt (2005) argue that virtual teams are most effective when guided by clear standards, measurable targets, and performance feedback mechanisms. Qualitative insights from this study confirmed that employees appreciated M&E practices that emphasized support and guidance, as opposed to micromanagement, as this helped sustain motivation while maintaining accountability.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	7	18.4	18.4	18.4
	Agree	13	34.2	34.2	52.6
	Disagree	9	23.7	23.7	76.3
	strongly disagree	9	23.7	23.7	100.0
	Total	38	100.0	100.0	

Table 8 Standard operating procedure

Second, the study found that standard operating procedures (SOPs) were viewed as indispensable for creating consistency and predictability in remote work. Without daily face-to-face interactions, employees emphasized the need for clear guidelines on reporting structures,

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communication channels, task allocation, and performance expectations. Respondents noted that SOPs reduce confusion, minimize risks of duplicated effort, and enhance coordination across distributed teams. This finding resonates with Staples, Hulland, and Higgins (1999), who observed that clear organizational routines and norms are critical for virtual team effectiveness. In the Zimbabwean context, where infrastructural disruptions are frequent, SOPs also serve as a stabilizing mechanism, enabling employees to maintain continuity of operations even in uncertain conditions.

Performance related evaluation					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	14	36.8	36.8	36.8
	Agree	13	34.2	34.2	71.1
	Disagree	3	7.9	7.9	78.9
	strongly disagree	8	21.1	21.1	100.0
	Total	38	100.0	100.0	

Table 9 Performance related evaluation

Third, performance-related evaluations were endorsed by 71.1% of respondents as both fair and motivating. Linking rewards, recognition, or progression to measurable outputs was seen as an effective way to encourage accountability in the absence of physical supervision. Baddeley, Barrowclough, and Wright (2015) note that performance-based evaluation creates transparency, aligns individual goals with organizational objectives, and strengthens employees’ commitment to delivering results. In this study, respondents emphasized that evaluation frameworks should balance fairness with adaptability, ensuring that performance metrics reflect the realities of remote work environments—such as infrastructural barriers or domestic constraints, rather than applying rigid criteria designed for traditional office contexts.

Taken together, these findings suggest that employees perceive productivity in remote settings as dependent not only on personal strategies but also on formalized governance structures that provide clarity, accountability, and direction. In environments where infrastructural instability and communication challenges are common, such frameworks serve as essential anchors for organizational performance.

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Importantly, the results also caution against overly rigid applications of monitoring or evaluation systems. When applied without sensitivity, these frameworks risk creating mistrust, reducing autonomy, and undermining the flexibility that remote work is intended to provide. Thus, the challenge for organizations is to strike a balance between oversight and empowerment: designing frameworks that ensure accountability while still granting employees the autonomy and flexibility needed to thrive in remote contexts.

In sum, this study highlights that monitoring and evaluation, SOPs, and performance-related evaluations represent critical organizational levers for sustaining productivity in Zimbabwe’s remote work environment. These frameworks compensate for the absence of physical oversight, create transparency in performance expectations, and help maintain coordination in distributed teams. However, their effectiveness depends on careful design and implementation that are sensitive to both infrastructural realities and the psychosocial needs of employees.

4. Impact of Remote Work on Organizational Performance

The study revealed a mixed impact of remote work on organizational performance, underscoring the paradoxical nature of flexible work arrangements in resource-constrained environments. While remote work provided certain benefits, such as spreading operational risks and ensuring continuity during disruptions, it also introduced new challenges that negatively affected efficiency, costs, and overall outcomes.

		Cost to company			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	12	31.6	31.6	31.6
	Agree	9	23.7	23.7	55.3
	Disagree	9	23.7	23.7	79
	strongly disagree	8	21.0	21.0	100.0
	Total	38	100.0	100.0	

Table 10 Cost to company

First, increased operational costs were identified as a major concern, with 55.3% of respondents reporting that remote work raised organizational expenditures. These costs

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included investments in ICT infrastructure, provision of digital tools, data subsidies, and training to facilitate virtual collaboration. While organizations in high-income contexts often view remote work as a cost-saving measure due to reduced office space requirements (Bloom et al., 2015), the opposite appears true in Zimbabwe, where infrastructural deficits mean that organizations must invest heavily in enabling technology before productivity gains can be realized. This aligns with McElreath (2018), who notes that in developing countries, the adoption of remote work requires significant upfront investment, often straining organizational budgets.

Helps to spread risk failure

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	8	21.1	21.1	21.1
	Agree	16	42.1	42.1	63.2
	Disagree	6	15.8	15.8	79.0
	strongly disagree	8	21.1	21.1	100.0
	Total	38	100.0	100.0	

Table 11 Helps to spread risk failure

Second, risk diversification was viewed positively by 63.2% of respondents. Employees and managers acknowledged that remote work allowed organizations to continue operations despite disruptions such as power outages, political unrest, or public health crises. By dispersing employees across different locations, organizations reduced their exposure to localized shocks. Baddeley, Barrowclough, and Wright (2015) similarly argue that remote work enhances organizational resilience by spreading operational risks and maintaining continuity under volatile conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic provided strong evidence of this benefit, as organizations with established remote systems were better able to sustain their operations.

Increases sales revenue

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	9	23.7	23.7	23.7
	Agree	9	23.7	23.7	47.4

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Disagree	10	26.3	26.3	73.7
strongly disagree	10	26.3	26.3	100.0
Total	38	100.0	100.0	

Table 12 Increase in sales revenue

Third, however, potential revenue and performance gains from remote work were far less convincing. Only 47.4% of respondents associated remote work with increased sales or revenue growth, suggesting that the economic benefits often highlighted in developed contexts may not materialize in environments where market conditions and consumer demand remain unpredictable. Qualitative data suggested that many employees felt disconnected from customers and clients in remote contexts, weakening service delivery and undermining opportunities for growth.

Tests of Normality							
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
Factor 4		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Factor	strongly agree	.296	20	.000	.686	20	.142
	Neutral	.385	3	.	.750	3	.114
	Disagree	.355	8	.004	.818	8	.145
	strongly disagree	.258	7	.174	.818	7	.062

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Table 13 Tests of Normality

Most significantly, regression analysis revealed a negative correlation between remote work and organizational performance, with remote work decreasing performance by approximately 50% ($\beta = -0.501, p < 0.05$). This statistical evidence indicates that, despite its resilience benefits, remote work may in practice reduce organizational efficiency in Zimbabwe due to infrastructural barriers, weak digital systems, and the absence of robust management frameworks. These findings mirror concerns raised by Monteiro, Straume, and Valente (2019), who caution that productivity gains from remote work are not guaranteed and are highly contingent on sector, infrastructure, and organizational practices.

Qualitative interviews further reinforced this conclusion, with employees citing reduced collaboration, delayed decision-making, and difficulty maintaining customer relationships as common drawbacks of remote arrangements. Managers expressed frustration at declining

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oversight capacity, while employees noted that constant connectivity challenges disrupted workflows and reduced responsiveness. Taken together, these findings suggest that while remote work enhances resilience, it does not automatically translate into improved performance outcomes in the Zimbabwean context.

The results therefore point to a productivity–performance paradox: remote work may sustain individual productivity under certain conditions but simultaneously weaken overall organizational outcomes due to structural inefficiencies and increased costs. This paradox emphasizes the importance of designing context-specific frameworks that address infrastructural weaknesses and support both employees and organizations in achieving sustainable performance.

In summary, the impact of remote work on organizational performance in Zimbabwe is complex and ambivalent. While it enables risk mitigation and continuity, it also imposes new cost burdens and undermines efficiency when not supported by adequate infrastructure and management systems. Organizations must therefore approach remote work strategically, balancing its resilience benefits against its potential to erode performance in resource-constrained environments.

Synthesis of Findings

The findings collectively demonstrate that remote work in developing economies such as Zimbabwe is characterized by a productivity–performance paradox. While remote arrangements provide resilience and continuity by enabling organizations to operate during crises and disruptions, they simultaneously expose both employees and employers to infrastructural, financial, and psychosocial constraints that significantly limit their benefits.

On the structural side, poor connectivity, high costs of data, and inadequate ICT infrastructure consistently emerged as barriers to sustaining productivity. These deficits intersect with socio-psychological challenges such as social isolation, home-related distractions, and blurred work–life boundaries. Together, these structural and psychosocial constraints undermine the very advantages that remote work is supposed to deliver. This dual pressure highlights that employee productivity in remote contexts cannot be viewed solely as

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an individual-level issue but must be understood as the outcome of broader systemic and environmental factors (Allen et al., 2021; Matli, 2020).

At the same time, the study revealed that strategies such as two-way communication, incentive systems, and structured routines help to mitigate some of these challenges. However, their effectiveness is highly dependent on the presence of strong organizational frameworks, including monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, clear standard operating procedures, and fair performance-related assessments. Without these structures, individual-level coping mechanisms may be insufficient to sustain productivity over the long term. This supports Hertel, Geister, and Konradt's (2005) argument that virtual teams thrive only when organizational systems provide both accountability and support.

Importantly, the study shows that positive impacts of remote work often celebrated in developed economies, such as cost savings, improved performance, and global talent integration, may not materialize in the Zimbabwean context. Instead, organizations often experience increased costs, reduced collaboration, and weaker client relationships due to infrastructural weaknesses and economic volatility. These findings reinforce Monteiro, Straume, and Valente's (2019) caution that remote work benefits are highly contingent on context and cannot be assumed to be universally applicable.

Thus, the overall success of remote work depends not merely on the availability of technology but also on context-specific organizational practices and the capacity of managers and policymakers to design interventions that reflect local realities. In Zimbabwe, this means developing policies and strategies that account for infrastructural instability, socio-economic inequalities, and cultural expectations around collectivism and Ubuntu. Without such contextual adaptation, remote work risks entrenching inequities and reducing organizational effectiveness, thereby reinforcing the productivity–performance paradox.

In summary, the study highlights that remote work in Zimbabwe offers both opportunities and vulnerabilities. It can enhance resilience and ensure continuity, but unless supported by robust infrastructure, organizational frameworks, and context-sensitive management practices, it may paradoxically reduce overall performance. This underscores the

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importance of pursuing locally tailored, holistic approaches to remote work that integrate technological investment with organizational and cultural considerations.

Summary and Conclusions

The study examined remote work productivity in Zimbabwe by addressing four objectives: identifying challenges, exploring strategies, assessing organizational frameworks, and evaluating performance impacts.

The findings indicate that connectivity issues, isolation, and home-related distractions were the most significant challenges constraining productivity. These challenges demonstrate that remote work effectiveness in developing contexts is shaped as much by social and domestic realities as by technology.

In terms of strategies, respondents strongly endorsed two-way communication, structured routines, and incentives as effective productivity enablers. However, unlike evidence from developed economies, psychological safety was not considered a key determinant, suggesting contextual differences in prioritizing tangible support mechanisms over cultural or relational factors.

Organizationally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, standard operating procedures, and performance-based evaluations emerged as vital frameworks for sustaining productivity in remote settings. These systems were viewed as necessary substitutes for the absence of physical oversight.

The impact of remote work on organizational performance was mixed. While it enabled risk spreading, respondents highlighted the burden of increased costs and limited evidence of revenue gains. Regression analysis confirmed a negative correlation between remote work and performance, signaling that remote work in resource-constrained environments may erode organizational outcomes unless adequately supported.

Conclusions

The study concludes that remote work in Zimbabwe presents a productivity–performance paradox. While it provides continuity and resilience, it simultaneously exposes workers and organizations to structural and psychosocial barriers that undermine effectiveness. Productivity gains are achievable only when organizations put in place clear structures, reliable infrastructure, and targeted support systems.

Thus, strategies effective in advanced economies cannot be directly transplanted into developing contexts. Instead, organizations must pursue context-specific approaches grounded in local realities to optimize productivity and safeguard performance in remote work environments.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for policymakers, managers, and organizational leaders:

1. **Investment in Digital Infrastructure:** Policymakers should prioritize strengthening internet connectivity and digital infrastructure, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, to minimize technical disruptions that hamper remote work.
2. **Institutionalization of Remote Work Policies:** Organizations should develop and implement **formal standard operating procedures (SOPs)** and monitoring systems tailored to remote environments. Clear protocols improve accountability and align performance expectations.
3. **Targeted Employee Support:** Employers should provide **incentives, structured communication channels, and psychosocial support** to sustain employee engagement and productivity. Support measures could include data subsidies, wellness programs, or access to collaboration tools.
4. **Context-Specific Frameworks:** Both policymakers and organizations should avoid wholesale adoption of remote work models from developed countries. Instead,

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interventions should reflect the socio-economic and cultural conditions of Zimbabwe to ensure effectiveness.

By addressing infrastructural gaps, formalizing work frameworks, and tailoring strategies to local realities, organizations can unlock the potential of remote work while mitigating its risks to productivity and performance.

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