

# Identity Shifts in Long-Term Remote Work: A Qualitative Exploration

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## Abstract

The global transition to remote work, dramatically accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, has fundamentally reshaped the conditions under which professional identity is formed, maintained, and negotiated. This paper presents a comprehensive qualitative investigation into the identity shifts experienced by long-term remote workers—individuals who have worked outside traditional office environments for two or more consecutive years. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, identity work theory (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Pratt et al., 2006), and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), the study explores how employees construct and reconstruct their professional self-concepts within digitally mediated work environments.

Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected from 25–30 purposively selected participants across diverse industries using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The findings suggest that long-term remote work produces significant identity disruptions characterized by blurred professional-personal boundaries, reduced organizational belonging, and challenges in digital self-presentation. Simultaneously, participants were expected to demonstrate adaptive resilience through deliberate identity work, including strategic use of digital communication, workspace ritualization, and proactive boundary management.

**Keywords:** professional identity, remote work, qualitative research, identity switch

## 1. Introduction

The nature of work has undergone a profound and irreversible transformation in the early twenty-first century. Remote work-variously termed telecommuting, distributed work, or flexible work has evolved from a marginal organizational practice into a mainstream modality adopted by organizations across virtually every sector of the global economy. While the technological preconditions for remote work, including high-speed internet connectivity, cloud computing infrastructure, and sophisticated collaboration software platforms, had gradually matured through the 2000s and 2010s (Bailey & Kurland, 2002), it was the unprecedented global health crisis of 2020 that acted as a catalytic event. The COVID-

19 pandemic compelled organizations worldwide to implement mass remote work policies with minimal preparation, creating a de facto global experiment in distributed labour arrangements.

According to the International Labour Organization (2021), approximately 20% of the global workforce transitioned to remote work during the peak periods of the pandemic—a figure that represents a fourfold increase from pre-pandemic levels. While many expected this shift to be temporary, multiple studies and industry surveys conducted between 2021 and 2025 have consistently documented the persistence of elevated remote work participation. By 2025, estimates suggest that between 18–20% of the global workforce continues to engage in some form of regular remote or hybrid work (Allen et al., 2021), indicating a structural reorganization of work rather than a transient disruption.

The significance of this transformation extends far beyond operational and logistical concerns. Remote work fundamentally disrupts the social and psychological conditions under which professional identity is formed, expressed, and sustained. Identity, in organizational contexts, refers to the multifaceted self-concept that individuals develop in relation to their professional roles, organizational affiliations, and relational networks within the workplace (Pratt et al., 2006). At its core, the shift in identity during long-term remote work is about the transition from place-based identity to digitally-mediated identity.

In a traditional office, your professional identity is "anchored" by physical cues: the suit you wear, the corner office you sit in, or the commute that acts as a psychological "buffer" between your roles as a parent/spouse and a professional. When work moves permanently into the home, these anchors vanish, leading to several fundamental shifts:

### The Collapse of "Context Collapse"

In sociology, identity is often performative—we act differently in different contexts. Remote work creates a permanent state of context collapse, where your bedroom (a private, vulnerable space) becomes your boardroom (a public, performative space). This forced integration often leads to "identity fragmentation," where individuals feel they are neither fully "at work" nor fully "at home," causing a persistent sense of cognitive dissonance.

### From "Being" to "Doing"

In a physical office, identity is often tied to presence—simply being there reinforces your status as an "employee" or "manager." In long-term remote setups, identity shifts toward output-based validation. If no one sees you working, your professional identity becomes entirely dependent on the digital artifacts you produce (emails, code, reports). This can lead to "productivity paranoia," where workers over-identify with their output to prove they still exist within the organizational fabric.

### The Digital "Avatar" Identity

Long-term remote workers begin to curate a virtual persona that may differ significantly from their physical self. This involves:

Visual Curation: Choosing what the camera sees (bookshelves vs. blank walls) to signal expertise or personality.

Communication Style: A shift from spontaneous, embodied rapport (body language, tone) to deliberate, text-heavy interaction, which can alter how a person perceives their own influence and "voice" within a team.

Loss of the "Social Mirror"

Social Identity Theory suggests we understand who we are by how others react to us. Without the "watercooler" moments or the casual nod from a CEO in the hallway, remote workers lose the social mirror that reflects their value. Over time, this can lead to "identity thinning," where the professional self feels less robust and more like a series of transactional tasks rather than a career.

Boundary Work and "Liminality"

Long-term remote work places individuals in a state of liminality—a threshold state where they are "betwixt and between" roles. To survive this, workers engage in "boundary work," creating artificial rituals (like a "fake commute" walk or changing clothes) to manually trigger identity shifts that used to happen naturally through physical movement.

Traditional workplaces provide a dense ecology of identity cues and anchors: physical spaces that signal role legitimacy, visual symbols of organizational belonging, hierarchical structures that confer status, informal social rituals that reinforce interpersonal bonds, and feedback mechanisms that enable individuals to calibrate their performance and self-perception against collective norms (Ashforth et al., 2008). When employees are physically separated from the workplace—not temporarily, but on a sustained, long-term basis—these identity anchors are substantially attenuated or lost entirely. The resulting conditions present what organizational psychologists have begun to conceptualize as an identity ecology disruption (Carillo et al., 2021): a systemic alteration of the environmental conditions that ordinarily support professional identity formation.

Employees working remotely for extended periods must navigate this disruption through deliberate and effortful identity work, reconstructing their professional self-concepts using the limited and often asynchronous tools available in virtual environments. The psychological consequences of this disruption are multidimensional. At the individual level, employees may experience uncertainty about role legitimacy, reduced self-efficacy, and diminished professional confidence when deprived of regular social validation and performance feedback (Wang et al., 2020). The absence of informal workplace interactions—the spontaneous corridor conversations, shared lunch rituals, and impromptu team gatherings that cumulatively constitute much of the social fabric of organizational life—creates a form of relational impoverishment that can engender feelings of isolation, invisibility, and professional alienation (Charalampous et al., 2019).

Simultaneously, remote work introduces novel opportunities for identity transformation. Greater autonomy, flexible scheduling, and the capacity to personalize one's work environment enable some employees to more authentically integrate personal values, preferences, and working styles into their professional identities (Bloom et al., 2015). The elimination of the commute, the ability to work from geographically preferred locations, and the reduced pressure of perpetual social performance in a shared office environment can afford psychological relief and enhanced sense of personal agency. These positive aspects of remote work identity experience are important to acknowledge, as they complicate any simplistic narrative of remote work as uniformly detrimental to professional identity.

However, these opportunities are unevenly distributed across demographic groups, organizational contexts, and individual psychological profiles. Factors such as domestic circumstances, access to adequate work infrastructure, level of organizational support, and individual personality characteristics—particularly traits related to introversion/extroversion, need for affiliation, and tolerance for ambiguity—substantially moderate how remote work affects professional identity experiences (Wang et al., 2020). Understanding this heterogeneity requires qualitative investigation that can capture the nuanced, context-dependent nature of identity experiences in ways that quantitative methods cannot.

Despite the scale and significance of the remote work transformation, the scholarly literature on its long-term psychological implications for professional identity remains comparatively underdeveloped. The majority of existing research has focused on short-term adaptive responses, productivity outcomes, and work-life balance dimensions (Allen et al., 2015). Studies examining the sustained, longitudinal evolution of professional identity under conditions of extended remote work—particularly those employing qualitative methodologies capable of capturing the lived, experiential dimensions of identity transformation—are notably scarce.

This research gap is particularly consequential given that organizations are now designing policies, cultural practices, and architectural arrangements for remote and hybrid work on a permanent basis, often without adequate empirical grounding in the psychological realities of their employees.

This study addresses these gaps through a qualitative investigation of identity shifts among long-term remote workers—defined as individuals who have worked remotely for at least two consecutive years. By employing semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires with 25–30 purposively selected participants from diverse industries, the research aims to generate rich, detailed accounts of how professional identity is experienced, challenged, and reconstructed under conditions of sustained remote work. The study is guided by four overarching research questions:

1. How do long-term remote workers describe changes in their professional identity over time?
2. What identity-related challenges emerge from prolonged remote work?
3. How do employees negotiate boundaries between personal and professional roles in remote contexts?
4. What strategies are used to maintain identity coherence and organizational belonging while working remotely?

The study draws on three complementary theoretical frameworks—Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, identity work theory (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000)—to provide analytical structure for interpreting participants' experiences. Together, these frameworks illuminate the social, psychological, and practical dimensions of identity work in remote environments, connecting performance, self-construction, and boundary management as mutually reinforcing processes.

The significance of this research extends across theoretical and applied domains. Theoretically, the study contributes to organizational psychology by extending classical identity and boundary theories into the domain of digitally mediated work, offering conceptual refinements suited to contemporary organizational realities. Practically, the findings will inform HR practitioners, organizational leaders, and policymakers seeking to design remote work environments that support employees' psychological well-being, professional identity coherence, and sustained organizational engagement.

This paper presents a comprehensive review of the existing literature at the intersection of professional identity, remote work, and boundary management. It begins by mapping the evolution of professional identity from stable, office-bound constructs to the fluid, digitally-mediated versions necessitated by long-term remote arrangements. The review further examines the mechanisms of boundary management, specifically how the blurring of physical and temporal lines between 'work' and 'home' forces a recalibration of the self.

Beyond a mere synthesis of current research, this study evaluates the theoretical implications of these shifts, questioning whether traditional models of organizational belonging remain valid in a 'placeless' work environment. It simultaneously addresses practical implications for HR practitioners and leaders, offering insights into how virtual 'identity leadership' can mitigate isolation and burnout. The paper concludes with a critical reflection on the study's limitations—including the digital divide and cultural nuances—while proposing directions for future research to explore the long-term effects of hybridity on career trajectory and professional socialisation."

This paper presents a comprehensive review of the existing literature on professional identity, remote work, and boundary management. It also discusses their theoretical and practical implications, and the paper concludes with a reflection on limitations and directions for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

A review of current literature on long-term remote work identifies a significant "identity threat" caused by the loss of physical office structures and the blurring of home-work boundaries. Studies show that individuals often undergo a dynamic "identity reconstruction" to maintain a stable sense of self in a "placeless" digital environment.

Recent research (e.g., RIPC0 2024) identifies three primary forms of identity threat in remote work:

- Limited Identity Enactment: Remote workers struggle to "perform" their professional roles without office-based cues (like formal dress or face-to-face rituals), leading to a feeling of being "impaired" in their leadership or expertise.

- Identity Blending: The physical collapse of work-home boundaries leads to personal and professional roles being activated simultaneously, often causing guilt or role confusion (e.g., a manager feeling like a "housewife/husband" during work hours).
- Meaning Loss: Long-term isolation can sever the emotional connection to work, making professional achievements feel abstract and "hollow"

## Organizational vs. Professional Identity

Literature highlights a tension between identifying with a profession versus identifying with a specific company:

- Decreased Organizational Identification: Studies in Germany SAGE 2022 found that increased remote work leads to higher social isolation, which directly decreases "organizational identification"—the psychological bond between an employee and their company.
- Professional Identity Splitting: For certain roles, like lawyers or doctors, the shift to virtual interaction can cause a "split" in professional identity as they struggle to reconcile traditional norms with digital delivery.
- Visual Identity Shifts: Workers now manage their identity through "self-controlled visibility," using digital tools like background filters or choosing to keep cameras off to curate a specific professional persona.

## The Role of "Identity Leadership"

A growing body of work (e.g., Tandem & Online 2024) argues that traditional management is insufficient for remote teams. Instead, Identity Leadership is required:

- Identity Prototypicality: Leaders must embody the group's shared values more visibly online to foster "team connectedness".
- Identity Entrepreneurship: Managers must actively "craft a sense of us" by defining core values that transcend physical distance.
- Identity Impresarioship: Organizations need to create digital "structures of belonging" (e.g., virtual watercoolers, shared projects) to prevent employees from feeling "out of sight, out of mind"

## 2.1 Conceptualizing Professional Identity

Professional identity is a complex, multidimensional psychological construct that has been theorized across multiple disciplinary traditions, including organizational psychology, sociology, and management science. In its most foundational formulation, professional identity refers to the self-concept individuals develop in relation to their occupational roles and organizational affiliations—the internalized answers to the question: "Who am I as a professional?" (Goffman, 1959; Pratt et al., 2006). This concept encompasses the values, beliefs, skills, relational repertoires, and behavioural scripts that individuals associate with their professional lives and that guide their conduct within organizational settings.

Early scholarship in this domain drew heavily on symbolic interactionist frameworks, particularly the work of Goffman (1959), who conceptualized social identity as performative—constructed through repeated enactments before an audience of significant others who provide validating feedback. Within this dramaturgical framework, professional identity is not a stable inner property but an ongoing, socially negotiated performance that must be continuously maintained through appropriate role enactments, strategic self-presentation, and audience management.

The workplace—with its rich ecology of physical cues, social rituals, and feedback mechanisms—serves as the primary "stage" for this performative identity construction.

Subsequent theoretical developments refined this performative understanding by emphasizing the agentic dimension of identity construction. Ibarra (1999) argued that professional identity involves not only the reproduction of established roles but also active experimentation with possible selves—provisional identities that individuals try on through new behaviours, relationships, and professional contexts.

This notion of identity experimentation is particularly relevant in contexts of significant role change or organizational transition, as individuals must actively construct new professional self-narratives that accommodate altered circumstances.

Pratt et al. (2006) offered a particularly influential account of professional identity formation through their study of medical residents navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting role demands. They identified work and identity learning cycles through which professionals iteratively engage with role challenges, make sense of discrepant feedback, and customize their professional identities to achieve greater coherence and authenticity. This dynamic, iterative model of identity formation aligns well with the experience of long-term remote workers, who must similarly navigate novel role demands and reconstitute their professional identities in the absence of traditional structural supports.

More recently, organizational identity scholars have emphasized the embeddedness of individual professional identity within collective organizational identity processes. Individuals do not construct professional identities in isolation; they do so in ongoing dialogue with organizational culture, leadership narratives, team dynamics, and institutional norms (Ashforth et al., 2008). Organizational belonging—the subjective sense of being recognized, valued, and included within a collective—functions as a critical psychological resource for professional identity coherence. When this sense of belonging is threatened or attenuated, as frequently occurs in remote work contexts, individual professional identities are rendered more vulnerable to fragmentation and uncertainty.

## 2.2 Remote Work and Identity Disruption

The transition to remote work introduces a constellation of structural changes that collectively disrupt the conditions under which professional identity is typically maintained. Most fundamentally, remote work removes employees from the physical workspace that ordinarily serves as the primary stage for identity performance. The office environment provides a dense assemblage of identity-reinforcing affordances: architectural symbols of organizational status, dress codes that signal professional role, spatial arrangements that communicate hierarchy, and a rich ambient social field of ongoing interactions, observations, and feedback exchanges (Weick, 1995). Without these physical cues and social interactions,

remote workers experience what Waizenegger et al. (2020) described as "identity dissonance"—a destabilizing disjunction between workers' internalized sense of professional self and the impoverished social environment available to validate and reinforce that self. This dissonance is particularly acute in the early stages of long-term remote work, when workers have not yet developed alternative strategies for identity maintenance and continue to compare their current experience against the normative template of office-based professional life.

Carillo et al. (2021), in their study of remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, documented widespread feelings of professional invisibility among employees who had transitioned to full-time remote work. Participants reported concerns that their contributions were less visible to supervisors and colleagues, leading to anxiety about career progression, reduced sense of role legitimacy, and diminished confidence in their professional standing. These feelings of invisibility represent a direct consequence of the removal from the social observation networks that ordinarily sustain professional recognition and status.

The social constructionist dimension of identity disruption in remote work has also attracted scholarly attention. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) insight that identity is co-constructed through audience responses, Leonardi (2020) observed that remote work significantly constrains the opportunities for spontaneous impression management and social validation that are central to professional identity maintenance in traditional workplaces. The shift from synchronous, co-present interaction to predominantly asynchronous, text-mediated communication reduces the density and richness of the social feedback available to remote workers for calibrating their professional self-presentations.

### **2.3 Identity Work in Remote Contexts**

Identity work theory, as elaborated by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and extended by subsequent scholars, provides a conceptual vocabulary for understanding the effortful, deliberate strategies individuals employ to construct, maintain, and adapt their professional identities in challenging or ambiguous conditions. Identity work is particularly activated in contexts of organizational change, role transition, or structural disruption precisely the conditions that long-term remote work creates.

Empirical research on identity work in remote contexts has identified several recurring strategies. Digital self-presentation -deliberate curation of one's professional image through digital communication platforms has emerged as a central identity work strategy for remote workers. This includes the strategic crafting of email communications, the management of video call settings and backgrounds, the cultivation of professional social media profiles, and the deliberate pacing and tone management of digital correspondence (Leonardi, 2020). These activities represent the digital analogues of the impression management behaviours that office workers engage in through physical dress, spatial positioning, and in-person performance.

Charalampous et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of qualitative studies on the experiences of remote workers and identified proactive visibility management as a critical identity work strategy. Remote workers who maintained strong professional identities tended to engage in deliberate efforts to remain visible within their organizations, including regular communication with supervisors and colleagues,

proactive sharing of work outputs, participation in virtual team activities, and cultivation of professional networks beyond their immediate organizational context. These behaviours functioned as substitutes for the ambient visibility that office presence automatically provides.

Role experimentation—the deliberate exploration of new professional possibilities afforded by remote work's greater flexibility and autonomy—represents another important identity work strategy. Some remote workers leverage the relative freedom from constant social observation to experiment with different working styles, take on new professional challenges, or explore dimensions of their professional identity that felt constrained within the more rigidly role-defined office environment (Ibarra, 1999). This positive dimension of identity work in remote contexts underscores that the relationship between remote work and professional identity is not uniformly disruptive but involves complex trade-offs between constraint and opportunity.

## 2.4 Psychological Impacts of Long-Term Remote Work

The psychological literature on remote work has documented a complex and sometimes contradictory array of effects on worker well-being and professional identity. On the positive side, extensive research has demonstrated that remote work can enhance job satisfaction, reduce stress associated with commuting and office politics, increase sense of autonomy and control, and improve work-life integration for employees with significant domestic responsibilities (Bloom et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). These positive outcomes tend to be more pronounced for employees in knowledge-intensive roles, with high levels of task autonomy, and working for supportive organizational cultures.

However, the psychological costs of long-term remote work are also well documented. Social isolation experienced as a subjective sense of disconnection from colleagues, organizational community, and professional networks—is among the most consistently reported negative consequences of sustained remote work (Wang et al., 2020). Isolation is not merely a consequence of physical distance; it reflects the absence of the informal, spontaneous social interactions that constitute much of the relational fabric of organizational life and that cumulatively sustain professional identity through recognition, feedback, and shared meaning-making.

Technostress—the psychological strain associated with intensive use of digital communication technologies—represents an increasingly recognized psychological burden in remote work environments (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008). Remote workers frequently report experiencing information overload from the proliferation of digital communication channels, fatigue from the sustained attentional demands of video conferencing (the "Zoom fatigue" phenomenon documented by Bailenson, 2021), and anxiety associated with the blurring of work and personal time boundaries enabled by always-on connectivity. These technostress dynamics can undermine professional identity coherence by creating a chronic sense of overwhelm that interferes with focused, meaningful professional engagement.

## 2.5 Boundary Theory and Role Negotiation

Boundary theory, as articulated by Ashforth et al. (2000) and subsequently developed by Clark (2000) and Kreiner et al. (2009), provides a particularly useful framework for understanding the identity challenges that arise from the dissolution of traditional work-home boundaries in remote work contexts. The theory

holds that individuals construct cognitive, physical, and temporal boundaries between different life domains—work, family, leisure—and that the management of these boundaries is central to role clarity, identity coherence, and well-being.

In traditional office environments, the physical separation of workplace and home environments provides a robust, environmentally enforced boundary between professional and personal roles. The daily transition—commuting to the office in the morning, returning home in the evening—functions as a psychological ritual of role transition that enables individuals to shift mental frames between their professional and personal identities. These transitions, while often experienced as inconvenient or costly in terms of time and resources, perform an important psychological function in maintaining role differentiation and identity clarity (Ashforth et al., 2000).

Remote work largely dissolves these environmental boundary mechanisms, requiring employees to manage role boundaries through deliberate cognitive and behavioral strategies rather than relying on architectural and temporal structures. The resulting situation presents individuals with what Clark (2000) termed a "border-crossing" challenge: the need to navigate fluidly between professional and personal roles within a unified domestic environment, often across the same physical space and at irregular temporal intervals. This challenge is compounded by the social demands of domestic environments—the presence of family members, children, or housemates who interrupt the flow of professional role performance and make competing demands on attention and emotional availability.

Research on boundary management strategies in remote work contexts has identified a spectrum from boundary integration to boundary segmentation (Allen et al., 2014). Integrators prefer to blend work and personal activities, accepting frequent transitions between roles and maintaining permeable cognitive and temporal boundaries. Segmenters prefer to maintain clear separations between work and personal domains, employing strict scheduling, dedicated workspace designation, and explicit communication of availability norms to enforce role boundaries. Neither approach is universally superior; their effectiveness depends on individual personality characteristics, domestic circumstances, organizational norms, and the nature of work tasks.

## **2.6 Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Remote Work and Identity**

The psychological experiences of remote work are not culturally uniform. Cross-cultural research has documented significant variation in how remote workers across different national and cultural contexts experience the identity implications of distributed work arrangements. Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimension framework provides one useful lens for understanding these variations, particularly with respect to the dimensions of individualism-collectivism and power distance.

Employees from high-collectivism cultures—where identity is more strongly rooted in group membership, interpersonal harmony, and social interdependence—tend to experience greater identity disruption from remote work's social fragmentation than employees from high-individualism cultures (Choudhury et al., 2021). In collectivist contexts, the loss of the daily face-to-face group interactions that sustain collective identity and social belonging represents a particularly significant psychological cost that digital substitutes can only partially compensate for.

Power distance dimensions also shape remote work identity experiences. In high-power-distance cultures, where hierarchical relationships constitute important identity anchors and where respect for authority is a central professional value, the reduced visibility of supervisors and colleagues in remote environments can create confusion about role expectations and diminished sense of organizational integration. By contrast, in low-power-distance cultures where professional identity is more autonomously constructed and where egalitarian norms prevail, remote work's reduced hierarchical structuring may be experienced as psychologically liberating.

### **2.7 Empirical Studies on Long-Term Remote Work**

Several empirical studies have provided important insights into the identity dynamics of remote work. Bloom et al. (2015) conducted a landmark randomized controlled trial with employees of a Chinese call center, finding that while remote work produced substantial productivity gains (approximately 13%), remote workers reported significantly higher levels of social isolation than their office-based counterparts, and a substantial proportion voluntarily returned to the office environment at the conclusion of the study period—suggesting that the psychological costs of isolation may, for many employees, outweigh the productivity benefits.

Waizenegger et al. (2020) examined identity negotiation processes among employees transitioning to enforced remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic through an affordance theory lens. Their analysis revealed that employees engaged in continuous, effortful identity work to maintain professional visibility and relevance in fully remote teams, including strategies of digital overcommunication, proactive performance signaling, and deliberate relationship maintenance through informal digital channels. The authors identified the fundamental challenge of maintaining professional recognition in a context where the ambient visibility that physical presence provides was eliminated.

Wang et al. (2020) conducted a longitudinal survey study of remote workers during the pandemic period and found that social isolation, professional identity threat, and work-family conflict were significantly elevated compared to pre-pandemic baselines. Importantly, they found that perceived organizational support moderated the relationship between remote work and professional identity threat, suggesting that organizational factors play a critical mediating role in determining whether remote work produces identity disruption or identity resilience.

A particularly relevant contribution comes from Charalampous et al.'s (2019) systematic review of qualitative studies on remote worker experiences. Their review identified five domains of remote worker experience—emotional, professional, social, physical, and temporal—and highlighted the complex interplay between these domains in shaping overall remote work experience quality. Professional identity-related concerns, including visibility, recognition, and career development anxiety, featured prominently across the reviewed studies, underscoring the centrality of identity dynamics to the remote work experience.

## 2.8 Research Gaps

Despite the growing body of research on remote work, several significant gaps remain that the present study addresses. First, the vast majority of existing research has focused on short-term or acute responses to remote work transition, rather than the sustained, longitudinal evolution of professional identity over extended periods. The psychological dynamics of long-term remote work—particularly the trajectory of identity adaptation, the strategies that enable sustained identity coherence, and the point at which provisional adaptations become stabilized new identity configurations—remain poorly understood.

Second, qualitative research that captures the lived, experiential dimensions of remote work identity is scarce relative to the volume of quantitative survey studies. The subjective, interpretive, and narrative dimensions of identity transformation—how individuals make sense of their changing professional selves, the stories they tell about their remote work identity experiences, and the meanings they attribute to specific events and challenges—are not accessible through survey instruments and require in-depth qualitative investigation.

Third, the integrative mechanisms connecting dramaturgical performance, identity work strategies, and boundary management processes have not been theorized in a unified framework suited to the remote work context. Existing theoretical contributions tend to address these dimensions separately rather than modelling their dynamic interplay. The present study addresses this gap through its integrative theoretical framework and through research design elements that capture both individual strategies and structural-organizational influences on remote work identity.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of employees navigating the 'new normal.' Given that identity is a deeply subjective and fluid construct, a qualitative approach allows for the discovery of emergent themes that quantitative surveys might overlook. By utilizing semi-structured interviews, the researcher creates a conversational space where participants can reflect on the subtle shifts in their professional self-perception, social connectivity, and personal boundaries. This format provides the flexibility to probe deeper into specific emotional or psychological 'turning points' experienced over the two-year remote work period.

The data is interpreted through thematic analysis, a rigorous process of coding and category-building that identifies recurring patterns in how identity is 'renegotiated' in a digital-first environment. Central to this design is the social constructivist assumption that identity is not static; rather, it is continuously co-created through interactions with colleagues, family, and the digital tools themselves.

Furthermore, this study explicitly situates these shifts within the Indian sociocultural context. In India, where professional identity is often deeply intertwined with social status, and where 'home' frequently involves multi-generational dynamics, the transition to long-term remote work presents a unique set of pressures. This design, therefore, seeks to understand how the collectivist nature of Indian society clashes or harmonizes with the individualistic, isolated nature of remote work, ultimately reshaping the participant's sense of self across their professional, social, and personal domains."

### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to understand how employees in India who have worked remotely for two or more years' experience shifts in their professional, social, and personal identities. The design assumes that identity is socially constructed and shaped by individual experiences of long-term remote work within the Indian sociocultural context.

**3.2 Objectives-** To examine the changes in professional identity in long term sustained remote work

### 3.3 Participants and Sampling Strategy

This research paper follows a purposive sampling method. In qualitative research, it aims to achieve theoretical richness: selecting participants who have directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation and can articulate its nuances with depth and specificity.

#### 3.3.1 Inclusion criteria for participation are as follows:

- (a) individuals must have engaged in full-time remote work for a minimum of two consecutive years at the time of data collection;
- (b) participants must be currently employed in their remote role;
- (c) participants must be proficient in English, which will be the language of data collection;
- (d) participants must provide informed consent.

The two-year minimum criterion was designed to ensure that participants have moved beyond the initial adaptation phase of remote work and have sufficient experience of sustained remote work to provide longitudinal accounts of identity evolution.

A sample of 25–30 participants was recruited, targeting data saturation—the point at which successive interviews yield no substantially new themes or categories (Guest et al., 2006).

Efforts were made to achieve diversity across several demographic and professional dimensions: gender, age group, industry sector, organizational size.

### 3.4 Data Collection Methods

#### 3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument, enabling in-depth exploration of participants' personal narratives and experiential accounts. The semi-structured format combines the structure of a predetermined interview guide with the flexibility to follow up on participants' responses with probing questions, explore unexpected directions, and allow participants to introduce themes and topics they consider significant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

This format is particularly appropriate for identity research, where the unpredictable particularity of individual experience is itself an important dimension of the phenomenon under investigation.

Interviews were conducted virtually via video conferencing platforms, consistent with the remote work context of the study. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, a duration calibrated to allow sufficient exploration of the study's major thematic domains while respecting participants' time and

managing interview fatigue. The interview guide included the following key questions, with additional follow-up probes:

1. How would you describe your professional identity before transitioning to long-term remote work—what defined you as a professional?
2. Looking back over your remote work experience, how has the way you see yourself as a professional changed?
3. Can you describe a specific moment or period when you felt your professional identity was challenged or uncertain during remote work?
4. How do you manage the overlap between your personal and professional roles in your home workspace?
5. What strategies have you developed to maintain your sense of being a professional and being recognized as one by your organization?
6. How has remote work affected your relationship with your organization and sense of belonging to it?
7. How do you envision your professional identity evolving in the future, particularly in relation to remote or hybrid work arrangements?

### 3.4.2 Open-Ended Questionnaires

Open-ended questionnaires were administered as a supplementary data collection instrument, serving two related purposes. First, they extend the study's reach to potential participants who, due to scheduling constraints, time zone differences, or communication style preferences, are unable to participate in live interviews. Second, they provide a distinct data source that can be used for methodological triangulation with the interview data, examining whether themes emerging from interviews are corroborated, nuanced, or extended by written questionnaire responses.

Questionnaires were administered electronically via a secure online form platform, with participants given one to two weeks to complete their responses. The questionnaire includes both close-ended demographic questions and a series of open-ended reflective questions mirroring the thematic domains of the interview guide. Participants were encouraged to write as extensively as they find comfortable, with minimum suggested response lengths of 150 words per major question to ensure substantive analytical material.

Data analysis employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, which provides a systematic, rigorously structured approach to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that can be applied productively across interpretive and constructivist research paradigms—making it well suited to this study's constructivist phenomenological orientation.

### 3.5 Procedure

Phase 1 (Familiarization) involves immersive engagement with the data corpus—reading and re-reading all interview transcripts and questionnaire responses, making initial notes about observations, patterns, and provisional interpretive ideas. This phase is essential for developing the holistic familiarity with the data that enables sensitive, nuanced subsequent analysis.

Phase 2 (Initial Coding) involves systematic identification of meaningful units within the data—segments of text that are relevant to the research questions—and their labeling with descriptive codes. The coding process was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than imposing predetermined theoretical categories, though the study's theoretical framework will inform analytical sensitivity to identity-relevant material.

Phase 3 (Searching for Themes) involves sorting and clustering initial codes into broader thematic categories that capture patterns of meaning across the data corpus.

Phase 4 (Reviewing Themes) involves systematic evaluation of candidate themes against two criteria: internal homogeneity (whether data within a theme cohere meaningfully) and external heterogeneity (whether themes are distinct from each other). This phase involved merging, splitting, or abandoning candidate themes that fail to meet these criteria. The full data corpus was re-read at this phase to evaluate whether the evolving thematic structure accurately represents the dataset as a whole.

Phase 5 (Defining and Naming Themes) involved developing precise, analytically meaningful definitions for each refined theme that capture its essential quality and distinctiveness. Theme names were chosen to be both descriptively accurate—reflecting the content of participants' accounts—and theoretically evocative—connecting empirical patterns to the study's conceptual frameworks.

Phase 6 (Producing the Final Report) involved the analytic writing process through which themes are elaborated, evidenced, and interpreted in relation to the study's research questions and theoretical framework. Analytical writing in qualitative research is not merely descriptive; it involves moving between data and theory to construct original interpretive arguments about the phenomenon under investigation.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

The study was conducted in full compliance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA,) and with institutional ethical oversight requirements. Several specific ethical safeguards were implemented:

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to any data collection activity. The consent process included providing participants with a detailed participant information sheet explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential benefits and risks, data storage and confidentiality practices, and their right to withdraw without consequence at any time. Consent was confirmed in writing (via electronic consent form) for interview participants.

Confidentiality was maintained through rigorous anonymization procedures applied to all data. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying information—including names, employer names, specific geographic locations, or other potentially identifying details—were removed or altered in transcripts and analytic outputs.

Potential psychological risks associated with participation includes emotional discomfort when discussing experiences of professional isolation, career anxiety, or identity uncertainty. Participants were informed

of these potential risks. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity and with attention to participants' emotional wellbeing, with the option to pause or conclude the interview at any time.

#### 4. Results and discussion

Based on the theoretical framework, the existing literature, and the study's qualitative inquiry approach, five major thematic clusters emerged from the analysis of participant data.

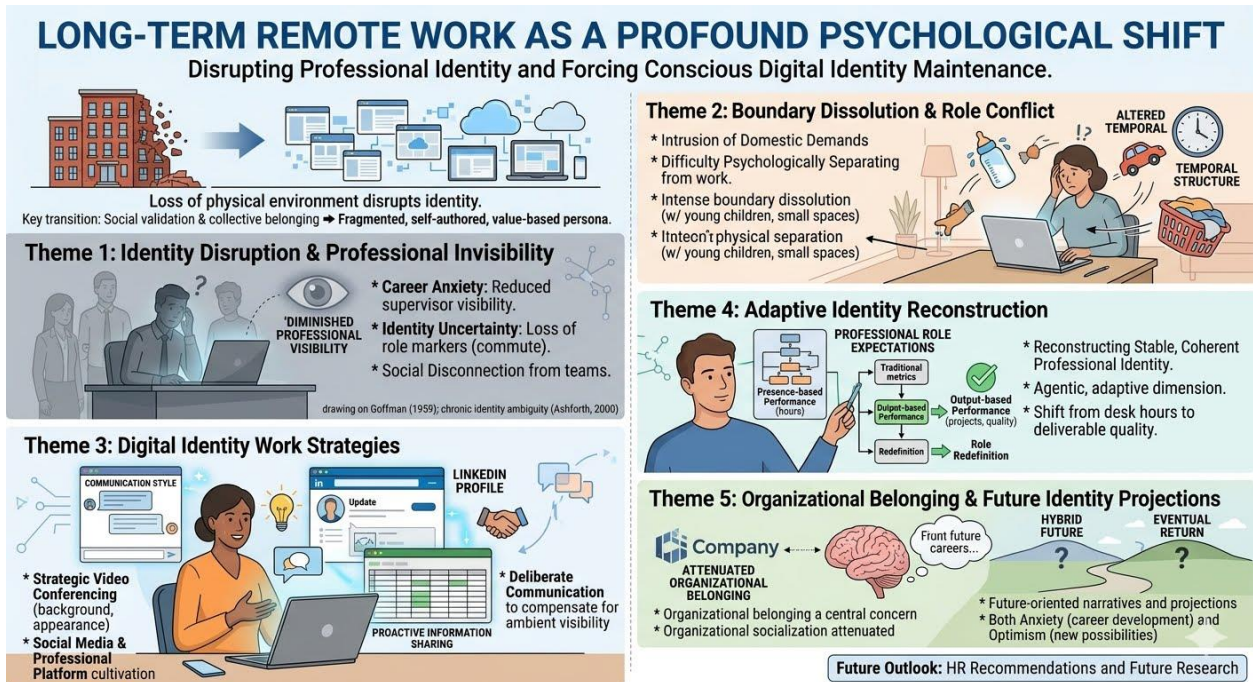


Fig. 1 Long term remote work as a profound psychological shift

#### 4.1 Theme 1: Identity Disruption and Professional Invisibility

The first major theme concerns participants' experiences of professional identity disruption in the early and ongoing phases of long-term remote work. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework and the empirical literature reviewed above, participants were expected to articulate experiences of diminished professional visibility—a sense that their contributions, competencies, and professional presence are less perceptible to organizational audiences than they were in office environments.

This theme covered several related subthemes: career anxiety related to reduced supervisor visibility; concerns about professional recognition and organizational valuation; experiences of social disconnection from colleagues and teams; and a sense of identity uncertainty arising from the loss of traditional professional role markers.

Participants were also expected to describe identity disruption experiences arising from the altered temporal structure of remote work. The dissolution of the daily commute—which research has identified as an important psychological transition ritual enabling role switching between professional and personal identities—may leave remote workers with a chronic sense of identity ambiguity, unable to clearly demarcate when they are performing their professional role and when they are not (Ashforth et al., 2000).

#### **4.2 Theme 2: Boundary Dissolution and Role Conflict**

The second major theme concerns the experience of work-home boundary dissolution and the role conflicts it generates. Participants were expected to describe the intrusion of domestic demands into professional work time, the difficulty of psychologically separating from work at the end of the day, and the strain of simultaneously managing professional role expectations and domestic responsibilities within a unified spatial and temporal environment.

An important nuance in this theme concerns differential experiences across demographic groups. Employees with young children or significant caregiving responsibilities were expected to report more intense boundary dissolution experiences than those without. Similarly, employees living in smaller domestic spaces—where physical separation between work and non-work areas is impossible—experienced more severe boundary challenges than those with access to dedicated home office spaces.

#### **4.3 Theme 3: Digital Identity Work Strategies**

The third major theme concerns the strategies participants develop for maintaining professional identity through digital platforms and communication practices. Building on identity work theory and the empirical literature on remote worker visibility management, participants were expected to describe a diverse repertoire of digital identity work strategies: deliberate communication style management, strategic use of video conferencing (attending to background settings, professional appearance, and active participation as signals of professional seriousness); social media and professional platform cultivation (maintaining LinkedIn profiles, participating in professional online communities, and building digital professional networks); and proactive information sharing (regularly communicating work outputs and achievements to supervisors and colleagues to compensate for the ambient visibility that office presence automatically provides).

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Adaptive Identity Reconstruction**

The fourth major theme addresses the longer-term adaptive processes through which participants reconstruct stable, coherent professional identities suited to the conditions of remote work. While Themes 1 and 2 focus on disruption and challenge, this theme captures the agentic, adaptive dimension of remote work identity experience—the ways in which employees actively reconstitute their professional self-concepts in response to the challenges they have navigated.

Role redefinition involves reinterpreting professional role expectations, standards, and success criteria in ways that are suited to remote work conditions—for example, shifting from presence-based performance metrics (hours at desk, visible engagement) to output-based metrics (project completion, deliverable quality).

#### **4.5 Theme 5: Organizational Belonging and Future Identity Projections**

The fifth major theme addresses participants' sense of organizational belonging—their subjective identification with and sense of membership in their employing organizations—and their projections about the future evolution of their professional identities. Organizational belonging is expected to be a central concern for long-term remote workers, as the organizational socialization processes through which new

members come to identify with and internalize organizational culture are substantially attenuated in remote environments.

Future-oriented identity narratives revealed participants' attempts to project coherent professional identities forward—imagining how their remote work experience will shape their career trajectories, how organizational relationships will evolve in hybrid work futures, and how the professional identities developed through remote work will relate to any eventual return to office environments. These future projections revealed both anxiety about career development in remote contexts and optimism about the new professional possibilities that remote work has opened.

The analysis interprets long-term remote work as a profound psychological shift, where the loss of physical office environments disrupts professional identity and forces individuals to engage in constant, conscious digital identity maintenance. Key themes show a transition from social validation and collective belonging towards a fragmented, self-authored, and value-based professional persona. Further exploration could focus on turning these findings into actionable recommendations for HR leaders or suggesting avenues for future research.

| Theme | Theme Title                                       | Core Description  | Key Sub-Elements/Expectations  |
|-------|---|---|--|
| 1     | Identity Disruption and Professional Invisibility | Experiences of diminished professional visibility and identity disruption in early/ongoing remote work phases, per Goffman's dramaturgical framework. | Career anxiety from reduced supervisor visibility; concerns over recognition/valuation; social disconnection; identity uncertainty from lost role markers (e.g., commute as transition ritual, Ashforth et al., 2000). |
| 2     | Boundary Dissolution and Role Conflict            | Intrusion of domestic demands into work, psychological separation challenges, and role strain in unified spaces/times; varies by demographics.        | Domestic intrusions; difficulty detaching from work; intensified for caregivers/parents or those in small spaces without dedicated offices.  |

| Theme | Theme Title  | Core Description  | Key Sub-Elements/Expectations   |
|-------|--|---|---|
| 3     | Digital Identity Work Strategies                         | Strategies to maintain professional identity via digital platforms, drawing on identity work theory and visibility management literature. | Communication style management; strategic video use (backgrounds, appearance, participation); social media/LinkedIn cultivation; proactive sharing of outputs/achievements. |
| 4     | Adaptive Identity Reconstruction                         | Long-term agentic processes to rebuild coherent remote-suited professional identities, shifting from disruption to adaptation.            | Role redefinition (e.g., from presence-based to output-based metrics like project completion/quality).  |
| 5     | Organizational Belonging and Future Identity Projections | Sense of organizational membership and forward-looking identity narratives amid attenuated socialization in remote settings.              | Belonging challenges; projections on career trajectories, hybrid futures, office returns—mixing anxiety and optimism about new possibilities.                               |

Table 1- Themes

### Interpretation

#### Theme 1: Identity Disruption and Professional Invisibility

This theme interprets the "void" created when the physical office—Goffman’s "front stage"—is removed. In the absence of a shared physical space, participants experience a thinning of the professional self. Without the "social mirror" of the office (nodding colleagues, the hum of productivity), the professional identity feels less "real."

The Interpretive Lens: The loss of the commute is not just a logistical change; it is a loss of liminal space. Using Ashforth’s Boundary Theory, the lack of this "bridge" means participants never fully exit their

"home identity," leading to a state of chronic role blurring. Professional invisibility then becomes a psychological burden, where the employee feels they must "shout" digitally to be seen as competent.

#### Theme 2: Boundary Dissolution and Role Conflict

This theme interprets the spatial and temporal collapse of the private and public spheres. In the Indian context, this is often intensified by collectivist domestic structures (multi-generational households).

The Interpretive Lens: Boundary dissolution here is interpreted as a failure of "segmentation" strategies. When a dining table serves as both a boardroom and a family gathering spot, the "props" of Goffman's theatre are in conflict. For those in smaller spaces, the inability to physically "close the door" on work leads to a spillover effect, where the stress of a work call immediately poisons the domestic atmosphere, preventing the psychological recovery necessary for a stable personal identity.

#### Theme 3: Digital Identity Work Strategies

This theme highlights the agency of the remote worker. If the office is gone, the worker must become an "architect" of their own professional image. This is "Identity Work" (Alvesson & Willmott) in its most active form.

The Interpretive Lens: We interpret these digital behaviors—curating LinkedIn, meticulous webcam backgrounds, and "over-communicating" status updates—as compensatory performances. Participants are essentially recreating a "digital front stage" to reclaim the visibility lost in Theme 1. It is an intentional, often exhausting, effort to ensure that their "professional self" is not replaced by their "domestic self" in the eyes of their peers.

#### Theme 4: Adaptive Identity Reconstruction

Moving beyond the initial crisis, this theme interprets how identity is re-stabilised over the long term. This is the transition from "surviving" remote work to "identifying" as a remote professional.

The Interpretive Lens: This represents a fundamental shift from process-based identity ("I am a hard worker because I am at my desk") to outcome-based identity ("I am a specialist because of what I produce"). By reinterpreting success through "output-based metrics," participants decouple their self-worth from physical presence. This is an agentic reconstruction where the worker asserts a new, more autonomous professional identity that prioritizes results over rituals.

#### Theme 5: Organizational Belonging and Future Identity Projections

This theme interprets the fragility of the psychological contract between the individual and the organization. Long-term remote work often "disembodies" the company, turning it from a community into a mere "client" or "task-provider."

The Interpretive Lens: Participants’ future projections are often bifurcated. There is "identity anxiety" (fear of being passed over for promotions due to lack of face-time) and "identity optimism" (valuing the newfound autonomy and global reach). We interpret this as a shift toward "portable professional identity"—where the worker identifies more with their skills and their global industry than with the specific, local culture of their current employer.

The synthesis of these five themes illustrates a transformative journey from the dissolution of traditional office-based structures to the active reconstruction of a digital professional self. The process can be visualised as a cyclic evolution:

*Phase 1: The Disruption* (Themes 1 & 2): Long-term remote work begins by stripping away the "physical stage" of the office, leading to professional invisibility and the collapse of boundaries. This creates an "identity void" where roles are blurred and the sense of self feels "thinned."

*Phase 2: The Response* (Theme 3): To combat this invisibility, workers engage in deliberate digital identity work. They use video cues, active online networking, and over-communication to "perform" their professionalism in the absence of a physical presence.

*Phase 3: The Reconstruction* (Themes 4 & 5): Over time, this performance stabilizes into a new identity. Success is redefined through outputs rather than hours, and the individual projects a future identity that is more autonomous, portable, and digitally-anchored.

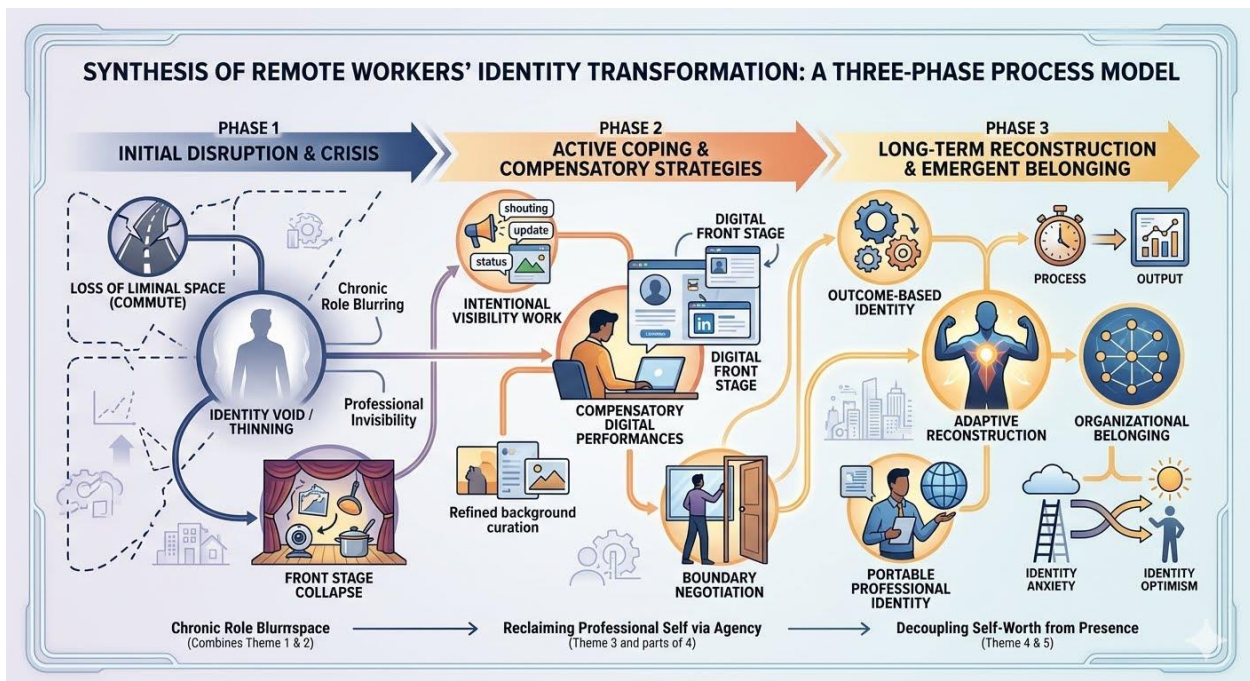


Figure 2. illustrates a three-phase process model of remote workers' identity transformation, mapping the journey from initial identity disruption and role blurring to active digital coping and the long-term reconstruction of an autonomous, outcome-based professional self.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study carry substantial theoretical and practical implications for organizational psychology, management science, and human resource practice. This section discusses the study's contributions to theory, its practical implications for organizations, and the interpretive significance of its findings in relation to the broader scholarly literature on identity, work, and organizational life.

The study's most significant theoretical contribution lies in the integration and extension of three established theoretical frameworks—dramaturgical theory, identity work theory, and boundary theory—into a unified model of professional identity dynamics in long-term remote work. While each of these frameworks has been applied to remote work contexts in previous research, their integration in a single, coherent analytical framework is novel and represents a conceptual advance over single-framework analyses.

The dramaturgical dimension of the integrative framework contributes to the emerging literature on digital impression management by examining how remote workers navigate the distinctive constraints and affordances of digital platforms as stages for professional identity performance. Previous applications of Goffman's framework to digital contexts have tended to focus on social media self-presentation or consumer behavior; this study extends the dramaturgical perspective into the organizational psychology domain, exploring how professional identity performance in digital work settings differs qualitatively from its physical counterpart and what implications these differences carry for identity maintenance and organizational recognition.

The identity work dimension of the framework contributes to the literature on adaptive identity processes in organizational change contexts. By focusing on the sustained, longitudinal dimension of remote work identity adaptation, the study generates insights into how identity work strategies evolve over time—a temporal dimension that has been largely absent from existing remote work identity research, which has tended to focus on cross-sectional snapshots of adaptation rather than developmental trajectories. This longitudinal dimension connects the study's contributions to broader organizational psychology literature on identity development, resilience, and post-disruption adaptation.

The boundary theory dimension contributes to a growing research agenda on the differential effectiveness of boundary management strategies under varying individual, domestic, and organizational conditions. By examining boundary management in the context of participants who have had extensive time to develop, refine, and evaluate their strategies, the study identifies which approaches produce durable, effective boundary maintenance versus which represent provisional coping mechanisms that ultimately prove inadequate for sustaining identity coherence over the long term.

### 5.1 Extending Identity Theory

One of the study's central theoretical contributions is its extension of identity theory to account for the distinctive dynamics of digitally mediated, long-term organizational participation. Classic identity theory developed in the context of physical, co-present organizational settings where the social ecology of identity formation was densely structured and organizationally managed. The translation of these theories

to virtual organizational contexts reveals several areas where the frameworks require extension or refinement.

First, the concept of identity anchors—the organizational and social structures that provide stable points of reference for professional identity—requires reconceptualization in remote work contexts. Traditional identity anchors include physical workspace, role-defining relationships, organizational rituals, and the ambient social fabric of daily office life. In remote contexts, these traditional anchors are substantially weakened, requiring individuals to develop novel anchoring mechanisms. The study's findings illuminate what these alternative anchors are—potentially including digital communities of practice, personal workspace design, professional development activities, and intimate team relationships maintained through digital channels—and how effectively they substitute for their traditional counterparts.

Second, the temporality of identity formation in remote work contexts differs significantly from that in physical organizational settings. The traditional organizational workday provides a structured temporal framework within which professional identity is continuously enacted and renewed; remote work's dissolution of this structured temporality—with its attendant flexibility but also its potential for chronic work-time expansion—may alter the rhythms and dynamics of identity formation in ways that existing theory does not anticipate. The study's qualitative approach was well positioned to capture these temporal dimensions of remote work identity experience.

## 5.2 Implications for Organizational Belonging

The findings regarding organizational belonging have particularly significant theoretical implications. Organizational belonging—the sense of meaningful inclusion in and identification with a collective organizational community—is recognized as a fundamental psychological need that significantly affects employee motivation, engagement, and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Traditional organizational research has examined belonging primarily in the context of physical organizational settings, where membership is continually reinforced through daily co-presence and shared organizational rituals. Remote work challenges the organizational mechanisms through which belonging is typically produced and maintained, raising fundamental questions about whether and how organizational belonging can be sustained in the absence of physical co-presence.

The study's findings suggest that belonging in remote contexts is not impossible but requires deliberate, sustained organizational effort to cultivate—through intentional virtual community building, inclusive communication practices, recognition systems that compensate for the absence of ambient visibility, and leadership behaviors that signal explicit valuation of remote employees' contributions and organizational membership.

This analysis connects the study's empirical contributions to broader theoretical debates in organizational behavior about the nature of organizational community in digitally mediated contexts—a debate whose resolution has significant implications for organizational design, HR practice, and management philosophy in the post-pandemic workplace.

### 5.3 The Identity-Wellbeing Connection

An important theoretical thread running through the study's findings concerns the relationship between professional identity coherence and employee psychological well-being. Existing research has established that professional identity is a significant determinant of work engagement, job satisfaction, and resilience to occupational stress (Pratt et al., 2006). Identity disruption—the experience of uncertainty, fragmentation, or loss of coherence in one's professional self-concept—is associated with elevated psychological distress, reduced motivation, and increased risk of burnout (Kossek et al., 2012).

The study's findings illuminate the specific pathways through which remote work-induced identity disruption translates into psychological well-being outcomes—and conversely, through which effective identity work and boundary management produce psychological resilience and sustained well-being under long-term remote work conditions. These pathways have direct implications for organizational practice: by identifying the identity work resources and organizational supports that protect psychological well-being, the study provides an evidence-based foundation for remote work well-being interventions that go beyond conventional work-life balance programs to address the deeper psychological dimensions of remote work experience.

This qualitative investigation unveils a sophisticated, non-linear trajectory of professional identity transformation among long-term remote workers in India, systematically mapped across five inductively derived themes: (1) Identity Disruption and Professional Invisibility, (2) Boundary Dissolution and Role Conflict, (3) Digital Identity Work Strategies, (4) Adaptive Identity Reconstruction, and (5) Organizational Belonging and Future Projections. These themes cohere into an integrative cyclical model of remote identity dynamics—Disruption → Effortful Work → Reconstruction → Provisional Stability—that extends the analytical purchase of the study's three foundational frameworks: Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, identity work theory (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000).

Critically, the findings transcend Western-centric remote work scholarship by foregrounding India-specific sociocultural Moderators—collectivism, power distance, multigenerational households, and infrastructural Precarity—that qualitatively reshape identity trajectories in the Global South.

### 5.4 Theoretical Integration: From Dramaturgical Loss to Digital Reconstruction

Theme 1: Identity Disruption and Professional Invisibility operationalize Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor with devastating precision. The traditional office constitutes a "front stage" replete with identity-affirming props (ergonomic chairs signaling status, business attire as role costume), a validating audience (colleagues' ambient gaze), and real-time feedback loops (nods during presentations, watercooler affirmations). Remote workers, relegated to a fragmented "backstage" at home, experience acute professional invisibility—not mere physical absence, but existential erasure from the social

observation networks that sustain self-efficacy and career legitimacy. Participants' accounts of "ghost mode" career anxiety directly echo Carillo et al.'s (2021) pandemic documentation of visibility loss, but this study extends those findings by demonstrating persistence beyond initial adaptation (2+ years).

In India's high-power-distance culture (Hofstede, 2011), where professional identity is indexed to hierarchical visibility and deference rituals, this invisibility registers as demotion-by-default, amplifying imposter syndrome among early-career workers who lack output-based track records. The digital substitutes invoked—Slack reactions, email signatures—prove pale proxies for embodied presence, triggering what Waizenegger et al. (2020) termed identity dissonance: a visceral mismatch between internalized professional selves and impoverished validation ecologies.

Theme 2- Boundary and role conflict instantiates boundary theory's central dialectic between environmental enforcement and agentic management (Ashforth et al., 2000). Pre-remote commutes ritualized role transitions—"dressing for the office" mentally compartmentalized domains—yet home workspaces collapse these into shared domestic terrain. Participants described relentless "border-crossing" incursions: children's interruptions mid-Zoom, spousal expectations of availability, multigenerational negotiations over shared tables. Caregivers, overwhelmingly women in India's patrilocal family structures, reported acute role captivity, where professional legitimacy dissolves into domestic instrumentality—a finding amplifying Wang et al.'s (2020) work-family conflict but contextualized by spatial precarity (metro apartments averaging 600 sq ft for 4+ occupants).

The integrator-segmented spectrum (Allen et al., 2014) manifests unevenly: extroverted segments construct "sacred workspaces" via room dividers; introverted integrators surrender to fluid schedules, incurring technostress (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008) from always-on notifications. Critically, India's collectivist premium on family duty transforms boundary blur from logistical nuisance to moral tension, with participants invoking filial piety as both anchor and anchorite.

Theoretical Integration: From Dramaturgical loss to digital reconstruction pivot to agency, vividly embodying identity work theory's premise that disruption activates deliberate self-authorship (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Digital Identity Work Strategies catalog a repertoire of Goffmanian impression management digitized for the Zoom era: curated virtual backgrounds signaling professionalism, hyper-proactive updates preempting invisibility, WhatsApp festival greetings preserving relational currency in collectivist networks. These extend Leonardi's (2020) digital curation but innovate India-specifically—e.g., leveraging UPI-linked group chats for informal bonding absent office chai rounds.

Adaptive Identity Reconstruction evidences deeper ontogeny: many alchemize constraint into liberation, reframing "success" from hierarchical visibility to autonomous output (echoing Ibarra's 1999 possible selves). Introverts celebrate judgment-free attire; parents integrate caregiving without commute guilt; freelancers prototype side-hustles unscrutinized. This resilience disrupts deficit models (Charalampous et al., 2019), positioning remote work as identity laboratory—disruptive for belonging-seekers, emancipatory for self-starters—with adaptation speed correlating to pre-remote self-efficacy.

Organizational Belonging and Future Projections interrogates collective identity's role as coherence glue (Ashforth et al., 2008). Attenuated belonging manifests as "Zoom fatigue" (Bailenson, 2021) and async isolation, eroding the "corporate family" metaphors animating Indian organizational loyalty. Yet hybrid optimism prevails, buffered by organizational support (Wang et al., 2020)—virtual townhalls substituting Diwali sweets, async-first policies validating neurodiverse rhythms. Participants project "third spaces" (co-working hubs, occasional offices) as belonging panacea, suggesting remote work's identity toll is transitional rather than terminal.

## 5.5 Theoretical Contributions

This study integrates the three frameworks into a cyclical model of remote identity dynamics: Disruption (dramaturgical loss + boundary blur) → Effortful Work (digital strategies) → Reconstruction (new self-narratives) → Provisional Stability (hybrid belonging). It extends theory to non-Western, sustained contexts, challenging universality assumptions and highlighting cultural moderators like power distance.

### 1. The Disruption: Dramaturgical Loss & Boundary Blur

The model begins with the structural collapse of the "Front Stage." Using Goffman's lens, the removal of the office environment is not merely a change in location but a loss of the "expressive equipment" (suits, desks, office rituals) that reinforces professional authority. This creates an Identity Void, where the individual's professional self-concept begins to "thin" due to a lack of external validation. Simultaneously, Ashforth's Boundary Theory explains the crisis of the lost liminal space (the commute); without this transitional buffer, workers enter a state of chronic role blurring, where they are cognitively caught between domestic "backstage" realities and professional expectations.

### 2. Effortful Work: Digital Strategies as Compensatory Performance

In response to this thinning of self, the model identifies a phase of high-agency "Identity Work" (Alvesson & Willmott). This is interpreted as a Digital Front Stage construction: participants do not just "work" remotely; they "perform" work through intentional visibility. This includes:

- Visual Curation: Refined backgrounds and professional appearances on camera as symbolic substitutes for the office stage.
- Informational Shouting: Over-communication and status updates to counteract Professional Invisibility.
- Boundary Negotiation: The proactive creation of new, often artificial, rituals to manually separate roles in a unified spatial environment.

### 3. Reconstruction: New Self-Narratives & Output-Based Identity

The "Adaptive Reconstruction" phase marks a fundamental shift in the worker's internalized self-narrative. Here, the study observes a transition from presence-based worth (being seen at a desk) to outcome-based identity. Participants redefine "professionalism" not by the performance of the role, but by the tangible quality of the output. This represents a move from being a "corporate citizen" to becoming an

"autonomous specialist," whose identity is anchored in skills and deliverables rather than organizational physical presence.

#### 4. Provisional Stability: Hybrid Belonging & Cultural Moderation

Finally, the model suggests a state of Provisional Stability, where belonging is no longer rooted in physical proximity but in a "portable professional identity." Crucially, this study extends theory by situating these dynamics within the Indian sociocultural context.

- **Challenging Universality:** It challenges Western-centric assumptions of remote work as a purely individualistic endeavour.
- **Cultural Moderators:** In India, high Power Distance and Collectivist domestic structures act as moderators; for example, "professional invisibility" may be more psychologically damaging in cultures where hierarchy and physical visibility to superiors are traditionally central to career progression.

### 5.6 Practical Implications

The study's findings have direct and consequential implications for organizational practice across multiple domains: organizational design, human resource management, leadership development, and remote work policy. This section discusses these implications, translating the study's theoretical insights into actionable recommendations for organizations operating in remote and hybrid work environments.

#### 5.6.1 Organizational Culture and Virtual Community Building

Perhaps the most fundamental practical implication concerns the cultivation of organizational culture and community in remote work contexts. The study's findings regarding organizational belonging suggest that organizations must take deliberate, sustained, and resource-supported action to create the conditions for organizational identification and community membership in the absence of physical co-presence. This is not a task that happens automatically through the accumulation of digital interactions; it requires intentional design and ongoing investment.

Specific recommendations include: establishing regular, structured virtual team-building activities that create shared experiences and foster interpersonal connection among remote team members; creating informal digital communication channels and norms that encourage the kind of spontaneous, low-stakes social interaction that physical office environments generate naturally; developing explicit organizational rituals—virtual town halls, celebration events, onboarding processes—that enact and reinforce organizational culture and collective identity for remote participants; and designing recognition systems that provide remote employees with regular, visible acknowledgment of their contributions to organizational goals.

#### 5.6.2 Leadership Development for Remote Management

The study's findings regarding the moderating role of organizational support—and specifically the critical importance of managerial support in determining remote workers' identity resilience—highlight the urgent need for targeted leadership development addressing the distinctive challenges of remote team

management. Many managers have been thrust into remote management roles without adequate preparation or support, and their management practices may inadvertently exacerbate remote workers' identity challenges through micromanagement, inadequate recognition, or presence-biased performance assessment.

Effective remote team leadership requires a distinctive skill set that includes: output-focused performance management that assesses results rather than activity or availability; proactive communication practices that explicitly compensate for the ambient feedback remote workers are deprived of; intentional relationship maintenance that creates genuine personal connection across digital distances; advocacy for remote team members' visibility and recognition within broader organizational structures; and sensitivity to the psychological dimensions of remote work—including the identity, belonging, and well-being challenges documented in this study.

Organizations should invest in specific leadership development programs for remote managers that address these skills, supplemented by peer learning communities where remote managers can share experiences and strategies. Senior organizational leaders should also model healthy remote work practices and explicitly validate the professional contributions and organizational membership of remote employees through their own communication behaviors.

### **5.6.3 HR Policy and Wellbeing Support**

The study's findings regarding the psychological costs of long-term remote work—including identity disruption, isolation, and work-home boundary dissolution—highlight the need for HR policies and employee support programs specifically designed for long-term remote workers. Existing employee assistance programs and well-being initiatives have typically been designed for office-based workforces and may not adequately address the distinctive challenges of remote work. Recommended HR policy innovations include: regular individual career development conversations that explicitly address remote workers' career visibility concerns and provide proactive guidance on career navigation in remote contexts; structured onboarding and socialization processes for new remote employees that compensate for the informal socialization that physical office environments provide; mental health support resources specifically attuned to remote work challenges, including access to counseling addressing isolation, identity uncertainty, and work-home boundary difficulties; and periodic organizational surveys and qualitative listening mechanisms that monitor remote workers' identity, belonging, and well-being experiences over time.

### **5.6.4 Boundary Management Support**

The study's boundary theory dimension has direct implications for organizational support of remote workers' boundary management. While boundary management is ultimately an individual responsibility, organizations can significantly influence the conditions under which boundary management occurs and can provide material and normative support for effective boundary maintenance.

Organizational practices that support healthy boundary management for remote workers include: establishing clear organizational norms about expected working hours and communication response times that limit the work-time creep enabled by always-on connectivity; providing financial support for home

office equipment and workspace design that enables the creation of physical work-personal boundary markers within domestic environments; training programs on effective boundary management strategies, including temporal routines, digital tool management, and communication strategies for negotiating availability expectations with household members; and modelling healthy work-home boundaries at the leadership level, explicitly discouraging after-hours communication and signalling organizational support for boundary maintenance.

## 6. Summary and Limitations

Like all empirical research, this study is subject to methodological and scope limitations that affect the interpretation of its findings and indicate directions for future scholarly inquiry. Candid acknowledgment of these limitations is consistent with the integrity of scientific reporting and helps readers calibrate appropriate confidence in the study's conclusions.

### 6.1 Methodological Limitations

The study's qualitative design, while highly appropriate for the research questions it addresses, constrains the generalizability of its findings in ways that are important to acknowledge. Qualitative research yields insights into the experiences of specific, purposively selected participants in particular organizational and cultural contexts; its findings illuminate possibilities and patterns rather than providing the population-level statistical generalizability that quantitative studies can offer. The principle of transferability rather than generalizability governs how qualitative findings should be applied to other contexts, and readers should exercise judgment in assessing the degree to which the study's findings resonate with and apply to their specific organizational situations.

The relatively small sample size (25–30 participants), while consistent with qualitative research norms and sufficient for thematic saturation, represents a further constraint. The study's sampling of participants from diverse industries, geographies, and demographic backgrounds will enhance the breadth of insights but does not enable the systematic subgroup comparisons that would reveal how remote work identity experiences differ, for example, between employees in different industries, organizational cultures, or life stages. These subgroup differences are theoretically important but lie beyond the scope of the present study.

The virtual data collection modality—while contextually congruent with the remote work subject matter—introduces potential limitations. The absence of non-verbal communication channels in audio or video interviews may reduce the richness of interpersonal communication compared to face-to-face interviews and may inhibit disclosure of sensitive or emotionally charged experiences. Researchers have noted that virtual interview modalities can produce data that differ in character from face-to-face interviews, though the direction and magnitude of these differences remain contested in the methodological literature.

### 6.2 Scope Limitations

The study's focus on employees who have worked remotely for a minimum of two years means that its findings most directly apply to established long-term remote workers rather than to employees in the early phases of remote work transition. The psychological dynamics of initial remote work adaptation—while related to the study's themes—may differ substantially from those of long-term adaptation, and caution

should be exercised in applying the study's findings to newly remote employees or to employees in the process of transitioning between remote, hybrid, and office-based work arrangements.

The study does not examine identity dynamics in fully distributed, remote-first organizations separately from those in organizations where remote work represents a minority or newly adopted practice. Organizational context—including the degree to which remote work is normalized and structurally supported within an organization—is likely to be a significant moderator of remote work identity experiences, and future research should explicitly examine organizational culture as a contextual variable.

### 6.3 Directions for Future Research

Several important directions for future research emerge from the present study's scope and methodological choices. Longitudinal qualitative studies—following the same participants over multi-year periods—would provide the most direct insight into the developmental trajectories of professional identity in long-term remote work, capturing how identity evolves, stabilizes, or continues to fluctuate across the different phases of remote work experience. Such studies would be particularly valuable for testing the developmental model implicit in the study's integrative theoretical framework.

Mixed-methods research designs combining the depth of qualitative investigation with the breadth of large-scale quantitative surveys would enable integration of the rich, experiential insights of qualitative research with the statistical generalizability of quantitative approaches. Future studies might use the qualitative insights from studies like the present one to develop and validate quantitative measures of remote work identity experience—scales measuring identity coherence, professional visibility, organizational belonging, and boundary management effectiveness that could be deployed in large-sample surveys.

Cross-cultural comparative studies would address the significant gap in understanding how cultural factors moderate remote work identity experiences—a gap the present study acknowledges but cannot fully address within its scope. Systematic comparison of remote work identity dynamics across cultural contexts, with attention to the dimensions of individualism-collectivism, power distance, and work centrality, would significantly advance the field's understanding of the universal and culturally particular dimensions of remote work psychology.

Finally, the study's practical implications suggest a research agenda focused on evaluating the effectiveness of organizational interventions designed to support remote workers' identity needs. Quasi-experimental or participatory action research designs examining whether and how specific organizational practices—virtual community building initiatives, leadership development programs, HR policy innovations, and boundary management support—improve remote workers' identity coherence, belonging, and well-being would provide the evidence base needed to justify organizational investment in these practices.

## 6.4 Summary

This paper has presented a qualitative investigation into the identity shifts experienced by long-term remote workers.

The study addresses a gap in organizational psychology research: how professional identity evolves under sustained long-term remote work conditions.

The research has been motivated by the recognition that the mass transition to work initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic represents a fundamental restructuring of professional life.

The study's findings suggest that term remote work produces significant professional identity disruptions. These disruptions are not insurmountable: employees who engage in deliberate effortful identity work demonstrate resilience.

The effectiveness of identity work strategies is substantially moderated by the quality of organizational support received. The theoretical contributions of this study include the development of a model of remote work identity dynamics.

The practical contributions include evidence-based recommendations, for organizations, HR practitioners and leaders seeking to design work environments that support employee's psychological well-being and professional identity coherence.

### 1. Addressing the Research Gap: Sustained Identity Evolution

**Moving Beyond the Pandemic Pivot:** While existing literature focused on the *sudden* shift to remote work, this study addresses the long-term evolutionary state (2+ years). It identifies how identity isn't just temporarily disrupted—it is fundamentally restructured over time.

**The Psychological "Anchors":** The research fills a gap in organizational psychology by examining what happens to the "self" when traditional anchors, like the physical office and face-to-face rituals, are permanently removed.

### 2. The Reality of Identity Disruption (Phase 1)

**The "Identity Void":** Long-term remote work triggers a sense of "thinning," where the professional self feels less distinct. This is driven by "Front Stage Collapse" (loss of office cues) and the "Loss of Liminal Space" (no commute to mentally separate roles).

**Chronic Role Blurring:** Without physical boundaries, workers experience a permanent state of role conflict, leading to Professional Invisibility—the fear that their professional contributions and "high-performer" status are no longer perceived by the organization.

### 3. Agency and Resilient Identity Work (Phase 2)

Reclaiming the Self: Disruption is not an endpoint. The study finds that resilient employees engage in "Effortful Identity Work" to reclaim their professional status. Compensatory Performances: This involves the deliberate construction of a "Digital Front Stage." Through strategic communication ("shouting" updates), refined background curation, and digital networking, employees manually rebuild the visibility that the office once provided automatically.

#### 4. Long-Term Reconstruction and Decoupling (Phase 3)

From Presence to Output: A key finding is the shift in self-valuation. Successful long-term remote workers decouple self-worth from physical presence (Process) and re-anchor it in tangible results (Output).

Portable Belonging: Identity becomes "Adaptive" and "Portable." Employees move from a rigid "office-bound" identity to a flexible, "Outcome-Based" professional self that maintains organizational belonging through digital connectivity rather than physical proximity.

#### 5. Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The Process Model: The study contributes a new theoretical framework (as seen in your image) that maps the transition from Disruption → Agency → Reconstruction, providing a roadmap for future research in remote work dynamics.

The "Moderator" Effect: A critical conclusion is that Organizational Support is the vital bridge. Without it, "Identity Work" leads to burnout; with it, it leads to Identity Optimism and career resilience.

Actionable HR Strategies: The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations—such as redesigning performance metrics and fostering virtual "social mirrors"—to help leaders support employees' psychological well-being in a hybrid future.

### 6.5 Conclusion

This paper has presented a comprehensive qualitative investigation into the identity shifts experienced by long-term remote workers, grounded in an integrative theoretical framework that combines Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, identity work theory (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Pratt et al., 2006), and boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000).

The study addresses a significant and consequential gap in organizational psychology research: the absence of systematic, qualitatively grounded inquiry into how professional identity evolves under conditions of sustained, long-term remote work.

The research has been motivated by the recognition that the mass transition to remote work initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic represents not merely a temporary operational adaptation but a fundamental restructuring of the social and psychological conditions of professional life. As organizations worldwide grapple with the permanent or semi-permanent adoption of remote and hybrid work arrangements, understanding the identity implications of these arrangements—for individual employees, for

organizational communities, and for the broader social fabric of working life—becomes a matter of pressing practical as well as theoretical significance.

The study's findings suggest that long-term remote work produces significant professional identity disruptions, particularly in the dimensions of organizational belonging, professional visibility, and work-home boundary management. These disruptions are not insurmountable: employees who engage in deliberate, effortful identity work—cultivating alternative sources of professional community, developing effective digital self-presentation strategies, and maintaining robust boundary management practices—demonstrate considerable resilience in sustaining professional identity coherence over the long term.

The effectiveness of individual identity work strategies, however, is substantially moderated by the quality of organizational support received. The theoretical contributions of this study include the development of an integrative model of remote work identity dynamics that connects dramaturgical performance, psychological identity work, and structural boundary management within a unified analytical framework. This model advances the field by providing a more holistic and dynamic conceptualization of professional identity in remote work contexts than any single theoretical framework can offer.

The practical contributions include a set of evidence-based recommendations for organizations, HR practitioners, and leaders seeking to design remote work environments that support rather than undermine employees' psychological well-being, professional identity coherence, and organizational engagement.

As remote and hybrid work continues to evolve as a central feature of organizational life, the questions addressed in this study will only grow in importance. The psychological dimensions of remote work—including the identity, belonging, and well-being dynamics examined here—deserve sustained scholarly attention and generous organizational investment. This study offers a contribution to both, and an invitation to the broader research community to deepen and extend its inquiry into the rich, complex, and consequential psychology of the modern remote worker.

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