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Article

The Hidden Cost of Remote Work: The Dynamics of Cynicism and Employee Engagement

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Received: 10-02-2025 **Revised**: 20-09-2025 **Accepted**: 01-12-2025 Published: 07-12-2025 Abstract: The change in working culture has been redefined due to shift from office coming to remote work providing autonomy as well as flexibility to remotely working employees, but at the same time remote work is intensifying, and give rise to isolation and disconnection. Thus, this shift also creates a Work Paradox: while employees gain autonomy over their work environment, but at the same time it is disrupting interpersonal connections, psychological contract. This Paradox has enhanced problem of workplace cynicism; a negative attitude characterized by distrust, disillusionment and perceived organizational hypocrisy. In traditional work culture there was existence of trust building and informal group support and on the contrary in virtual work environment there is manifestation of cynicism, virtual disengagement, withdrawal from collaboration, less organization recognition and decreased responsiveness. This paper conceptualizes show remote work can foster workplace cynicism and virtual disengagement, and how they are interconnected. This paper advances a conceptual model linking remote work virtual disengagement and workplace cynicism, proposing that workplace cynicism mediates relationship between Remote Work and Virtual disengagement. Furthermore, the study embarks upon how managerial transparency, communication and work design can eradicate the problem of cynicism and cultivate virtual engagement. The study is also helpful in building strategies so that trust and fairness can be inculcated in the work environment so that employees can be retained in remote work environment. Drawing on previous studies, we propose three hypotheses: (H1) remote work environment positively influences workplace cynicism; (H2) Work cynicism mediates the relationship between remote work condition & virtual disengagement; and (H3) managerial transparency and inclusive communication negatively moderate the relationship between cynicism and virtual disengagement. Through this theoretical analysis, the study features credible risks on the attitude and behaviour of remote work for employees. At the same time, it draws attention to the need for organizations to follow activities that reduce detachment and strengthen engagement in virtual environments. Both theoretical and pragmatic implications are discussed to guide employers in handling the challenges of a rising remote and hybrid

Keywords: Cynicism, Virtual Disengagement, Remote Work, Work Paradox, Managerial Transparency.

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Introduction

Decades-long aspirations toward working remotely have been framed as freedom—employees freed from the informality of offices, able to strike a balance between professional and personal demands through unprecedented autonomy. But beneath the pretense of such freedom is a quieter cost: isolation, mistrust, and disengagement. What is framed as empowerment on the surface nearly always conceals a double bind of isolation and diffused organizational identification, a tension the scholars now frame through the Remote Work Paradox(Mcfelly et al 2018).

This paradox offers fertile ground for cynicism in the workplace, an orientation characterized by distrust, disillusionment, and organizational hypocrisy (Dean,

Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998). Informal interaction and the presence of managers cushioned frustration and sustained trust in traditional office workspaces. Telework supplies higher amounts of unfulfilled expectations, technostress, and communication breakdown, and they all feed cynicism (Abraham, 2000; Yalçın et al., 2022; Kakkar et al., 2023). Cynical workers are less motivated, less cooperative, and more prone to disaffiliate from organizational goals (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Johnson & Chang, 2008).

Cynicism is followed by virtual disengagement—retreat from cooperation behaviors, reduced responsiveness, and decreased identification within the organization (Blake, 2023). The virtual work environment, with its broken communication and diminished psychological safety, amplifies the risk of disengagement (Derks et al., 2014; Tkalich et al., 2022).

Inclusive communication and managerial openness were found to reduce the potency of cynical attitudes and preserve investment in online communities (Treadway et al., 2004; Hell & Muck, 2012; Kakkar et al., 2024). Through the articulation of intentions, fairness, and consideration of employee voice, leaders can interrupt the negative cycle of cynicism and disengagement. In this article, the paradoxical process involved in working remotely is studied through three hypotheses: (H1) remote work positively affects cynicism within the workspace; (H2) there is a meditational relationship where working remotely and virtual disengagement are related through cynicism; and (H3)managerial openness communicative inclusiveness cushion the relationship linking cynicism and disengagement. In such a paradigm, the article highlights both the risk and possibility involved in designing the future of work.

Review of Literature

Workplace cynicism

The foundational work by Dean et al. (1998) defines organizational cynicism as a negative attitude toward one's employing organization, rooted in beliefs that the organization lacks integrity and engages in hypocrisy. Based on this foundation, Abraham (2000) explains the cause and effects of organizational cynicism, describing those cynical attitudes often comes from unfulfilled expectations and perceptions of injustice. Their study embarks upon the unresolved dissatisfaction and prolonged stress can amplify cynical sentiments. The breach of psychological contracts plays an impostant role in exacerbating cynical attitudes, as demonstrated by Johnson et al. (2003). Similarly, Hell and Muck (2012) through light on high-stress professions and find that minimal organizational support contributes to burnout and increased cynicism, highlighting the crucial role of supportive work environments. The motivational dimension of workplace cynicism is explained by Cartwright and Holmes (2006), who argue that absence of meaning in work leads to disengagement and cynicism. Johnson and Chang (2008) support this by showing that higher levels of cynicism significantly mark down intrinsic motivation and reduce employees' willingness to invest in their tasks. Despite these gloomy outcomes, Treadway et al. (2004) offer a nuanced perspective by

proposing that politically skilled employees are better at managing cynicism in the workplace.

Remote work

The level of communication satisfaction plays a major role; in case remote workers are facing a low level of communication, this prompts them to alienation, and ultimately cynical views (Kakkar, 2023). The so-called technostress -stress that occurs as a result of working remotely because of a large amount of digital content- is also directly increasing the level of organizational cynicism and, consequently, diminishing job performance (Yalçin et al., 2022). In remote jobs, the amount of cynicism among the interns is lower when the faculty supporting them is strong, and communication is taking place frequently in their institutions (Kakkar et al., 2024). In addition, even the demographic location can make cynicism among remote workers more pronounced, i.e., the presence of caregiving duties and unclear supervision (Buzás and Faragó, 2023).

Virtual disengagement

Communication quality has become an important aspect as remote and hybrid work becomes more widespread, with researchers showing that virtual communication is more disjointed and less emotionally dense compared to face-to-face interaction, which misunderstandings, communication overload, emotional fatigue which are all contributors to decreased engagement and virtual disengagement (Civility Partners, 2024). A diary-based research identified that workplace tele pressure, or the constant pressure to check workrelated messages fast, was a significant predictor of offjob use of smartphones, which disturbs psychological disengagement at off-work times and enabled sustained disengagement (Derks et al., 2014; Van Laethem et al., 2018). Applying to the virtual team dynamics, one of the studies carried out on Norwegian software engineers showed that psychological safety was diminished by reduced physical presence in the hybrid and remote setting, and it additionally strengthened the sense of disconnection and disengagement (Tkalich et al., 2022).

Employee Disconnection and its Relevance for Organizational Settingsz

Employee Productivity and Wellbeing in relation to Workplace Cynicism. Employees who feel left out by the other people in the organization easily develop the feeling of cynicism, whichfurther hamper their performance and thus engagement (Byrne et al 2005).Cynicism underminesco-operation among the employees, posing risk to organizational success (Dean et al 2006). High organizational Cynicism is closely linked to Emotional Burnout (Guzeller and Akinsi 2011). Remote work extends working hours and reduce job engagement due to boundaries and impaired socialization (Beauregard and Henry, Felsteadand Henseke, others), Remote work Fatigue strongly corelates with turnover intentions, emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Syakir, Hasna and Mawiza 2025). A strong sense of belonging helps buffer workstressors, performance decline and distress in remote work settings (Pettita and Ghezzi 2025). In remote work setting engagement is a dynamic and depends upon job crafting strategies

overtime (Frontier in Organizational Psychology 2024). 2024).

Disengagement leads to lower productivity, high turnover and organizational apathy (Ullah & Colleagues 2023-

Research Methodology

This study is a conceptual approach to study the remote work paradox, workplace cynicism, and virtual disengagement. The review of literature and theories aims to develop the conceptual model comprised of the variables mentioned and proposing strategies to mitigate negative results.

Conceptual Research Design

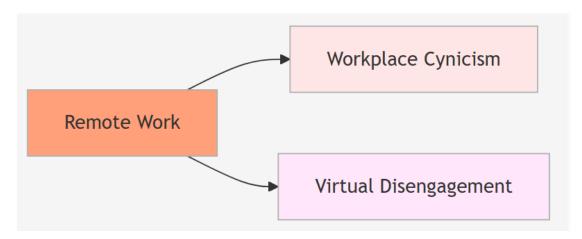
This is a qualitative study, focusing on conceptual development. This design can address the complex phenomenon such as remote work, where existing data is fragmented (Whetten 1989). The research integrates organizational cynicism theory (dean1998) with emerging studies on virtual work dynamics to construct a model that captures the interplay and remote work condition, cynicism and virtual disengagement.

Conceptual Model Framework

The model is developed through a process of integrating theoretical findings. The model explains that workplace cynicism mediates the relationship between remote work environment and virtual disengagement.

Constructs are defined based on literature:

- 1. Limited interpersonal interaction, perceived organization authenticity and psychological contract breach. (S Srivastava et at 2025)
- 2. Distrust, Disillusionment and perceived organization hypocracy (dean 1998)
- 3. Virtual disengagement withdrawal from collaboration, reduce responsiveness and weekend organization identification (S Blake2023)
- 4. The model proposes that managerial transparency inclusive communication and work design moderate relationship between cynicism and disengagement based on studies of engagement in virtual settings (Norman 2010).



Development of Research Hypothesis

Based on conceptual model a set of hypotheses are formulated to guide future empirical testing:

H₁: Remote work environment positively influences workplace cynicism.

H₂: Work cynicism mediates the relationship between remote work condition & virtual disengagement

 H_3 : Managerial transparency and inclusive communication negatively moderate the relationship between cynicism and virtual disengagement

 $These \ hypotheses \ are \ developed \ through \ review \ of \ literature, \ deductive \ reasoning \ and \ theories.$

These hypotheses are framed based on the following theories.

Theoretical Rational

Organization cynicism theoryby Dean et al: The theory was primarily explained by Dean in the year 1998. The theory explains the negative attitude developed by the employee against the organization he works in. Cynicism has three main components.

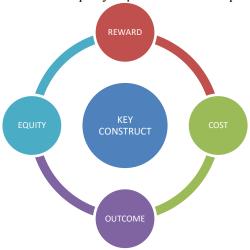
Belief component

Affective component

Behavioral component

Dean et al further explains that cynicism is a negative perception of employees when they find gap between the promised and practiced statements of the employer. In remotely working environment, an employee generally lacks trust due to broken promises and superficial communication by the organization.

Social exchange theory (Homans et al 1958): Homans explained that human interaction is like an economic transaction and is based on reward and cost relationship. According to him any relationship is self inertest driven and any interaction is continued till the reward derived is greater than the cost of any relationship. Peter Blau in 1964 further extended this theory by explaining that the reward can be short term or long term. He focused on long term bonds that do not pay immediately but will pay in the future out of obligation. Richard Emerson in 1976 explained that exchange theory is power dependence framework. When one party depends on another party another party gets more powerful.



Hypotheses

Based on conceptual model a set of hypothesis are formulated to guide future empirical testing. These hypotheses are developed through review of literature, deductive reasoning and theories. These hypotheses are framed based on the following theories:

Organization cynicism theory and (Dean et al 1998)

Social exchange theory (George C Homans 1958)

H₁ – Remote work environment positively influences workplace cynicism.

This hypothesis suggests that working as a remote employee may increase cynical attitudes toward their organizations. Remote work have challenges such as reduced face-to-face communication, limited management support, feelings of isolation, and a lack of organizational transparency. These conditions can enhance mistrust among employees, making them believe that their organizations are failed to act in accordance with predefined values.

\mbox{H}_2 – Work cynicism mediates the relationship between remote work condition & virtual disengagement

This hypothesis justifies that workplace cynicism is a psychological process by which telecommuting conditions affect virtual disengagement. Remote work usually decreases the possibilities of social interaction and transparency in the organization that can increase the suspicions of the employees toward the integrity and openness of the organization. Under such circumstances, employees can become cynical, having a lack of trust, distrust, and negative intellectual discussions about the intentions of the organization (Dean et al., 1998). In this way, the hypothesis supposes the existence of a concept that disengagement is not only caused by remote work conditions. Rather, the conditions contribute to cynicism in the workplace, which consequently leads to engagement in virtual work duties by the workers. That is, the cynicism at the workplace is a mediator between the problems of remote work and the outcomes of virtual disengagement.

H₃ - Managerial transparency and inclusive communication negatively moderate the relationship between cynicism and virtual disengagement

The hypothesis states that managerial transparency and participative communication serve as negative moderators for the influence of workplace cynicism on virtual disengagement. When managers are open and strive to communicate inclusively, it is less likely." In other words, no matter how cynical employees can get, managerial communication can mitigate the effects of cynicism on disengagement. Transparent communication minimizes employee mistrust and ambiguity about intentions, while inclusive dialogue promotes employee feelings of belonging and participation.

Findings

It is a qualitative research, where conceptual development is targeted. This type of design is capable of handling the complicated phenomenon like remote work, in which the existing data are distributed (Whetten 1989). The study combines organization cynicism theory (dean1998) and the recent research on the virtual work dynamics in order to design a model that embodies the interaction and remote work status, cynicism and virtual disengagement.

Remote working offers autonomy, flexibility, and work life integrity which can also lessen stress and increase engagement (Bloom et al., 2015). Nonetheless, it intensifies the sense of isolation, undermines the social relationships, and promotes mistrust, consequently, contributing to cynicism in the workplace. (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006)

The mediation between the conditions of remote work and virtual disengagement is mediated by cynicism. Workers who believe that an organization is hypocritical or does not support them when working remotely tend to switch off virtual collaboration systems and team-level interactions (Johnson et al., 2003).

The results indicate that virtual disengagement does not equate to cynicism but is highly correlated to them. Disaffection is even more directly harmful to work and cooperation than cynicism by itself (Abraham, 2000; Chia et al., 2013)

Open communication about leadership is an important way of mitigating the adverse impact of cynicism on disengagement (Hell and Muck, 2012). Inclusive communication builds trust and psychological security, cushioning the effect of cynicism. (Treadway et al., 2004).

Remote work engagement is possible through making investments in managerial transparency, support, and inclusive communication strategies by organizations. In the absence of these, the cynicism-based disengagement spiral can aggravate with time.

Discussion

The findings of this study embark upon thethe paradoxical dynamics of remote working conditions, where employees experience autonomy and flexibility while facing risks of cynicism and virtual disengagement. This tension can be understood through Organizational Cynicism Theory (Dean et al., 1998) and Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976).

Organizational Cynicism Theory suggests that employee cynical attitudes are inculcated in situations where employees feel there is a lack of connection between the organization vision and the practice. The basis of such disillusionment lies in perceptions of hypocrisy, promises and absence of integrity in the organization (Dean et al., 1998). These risks are compounded on remote jobs where people tend to have less chances of developing face to face trust as well as informal support networks (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006). The present analysis, based on the previous study, indicates that the less psychological contract is violated during remote employment, the higher the levels of cynicism due to the psychological contract breach because of the reduced visibility of the managers and the availability of communication barriers (Johnson et al., 2003). This cynicism then intermediates the relationship between remote working and disengagement as had already been determined that unmet expectations and extended stress aggravate negative workplace attitudes (Abraham, 2000; Chia et al., 2013).

According to the Social Exchange Theory, the relations between the employees and the organization are based on the principle of reciprocity as the employees will be loyal to their positions as long as the perceived benefits exceed the costs (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964). Remote work, nevertheless, changes the dynamics of these exchanges by eliminating the opportunities of recognition and social belonging and restricting the relational reciprocity. Remote and hybrid work studies reveal that perceptions of inequity in the exchange relationship are supported by technostress, poor communication, and lack of clarity in top management support, which is a source of more cynicism (Yalçin et al., 2022; Kakar, 2023; Buzas and Faragogo, 2023). Whenever the staff experience the sense that the organization does not support them or is not supported adequately, they tend to pull out of the joint activities and this is indicative of a failure in the exchange relationship.

Another finding that comes out is that virtual disengagement is different than cynicism. Although cynicism has a negative attitude, disengagement is behavioral in the form of withdrawal, passivity, and the lack of responsiveness in the digital work environment. This difference is consistent with the previous research that disengagement in many cases has more urgent connotations of productivity and collaboration than cynical attitudes alone (Rasmussen et al., 2023; Chia et al., 2013).

Most importantly, the research reveals the moderation of the managerial transparency and inclusive communication. Through open communication, ambiguity is minimized by explaining the decisions and intentions of the organizations making the organization less prone to distrust (Hell and Muck, 2012).

inclusive practices that embrace employee contributions and participation, and absorb the negative impact of cynicism (Treadway et al., 2004). This is consistent with the recent evidence that effective communication support in distant environments decreases alienation and cynicism and maintains engagement (Kakkar et al., 2024; Merino-Santos et al., 2023).

Collectively, these points highlight the nature of the Remote Work Paradox, although employees are enjoying the autonomy and flexibility of working remotely, they might also feel that they are receiving less organizational support, their sense of social connections, and authenticity in employer-employee relationships. This contradiction produces an empowering and dissociative experience (Johnson & Chang, 2008). In the case of organizations the dilemma lies to recognize such risks and use managerial practices that reduce cynicism and creates engagement.

Limitations and Research Gaps

First, the study is essentially conceptual. It relies on literature synthesis and extension rather than empirically testing the proposed model. Though it strengthens conceptual clarity, it hinders empirical confirmation (Whetten, 1989). Surveys, experiments, or longitudinal designs of studies on diverse organizational contexts must be employed by future studies for the confirmation of hypotheses proposed herein.

Secondly, the focus is restricted only to organizational and managerial practices as the main explaining variables. Psychological individual differences such as resilience, emotional intelligence, or personality were excluded and the same was the case with contextual variables such as industry norms or demands of the job. They can potentially contribute toward the formation of cynicism and its conversion into disengagement (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Johnson & Chang, 2008). Future research must incorporate them as the moderators in order to provide the more detailed explanation.

Third, the paper treats working remotely as a general category and does not distinguish among fully remote, hybrid, and flexible working arrangements. As hybrid configurations become increasingly prevalent, future research needs to respond to the question of whether cynicism and disengagement differ under these circumstances and managerial interventions are similarly effective (Tkalich et al., 2022).

Fourth, there exist few cross-cultural studies. The vast majority of the literature that underlies this model is from Western societies, and one wonders if it can be transferred to collectivist societies where trust, communication, and participation would actually operate differently. Comparative, cross-cultural work would lend more generality to these findings.

Finally, the temporal dynamics were not taken into account. Remote work practices continue to evolve, and the future trajectory of cynicism and disengagement is

unknown. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine if such phenomena become more profound or diluted as organizations and workers adapt to remote and blended arrangements.

Finally, although technology's contribution is acknowledged, it is not extensive enough at the framework level. Digital channels, machine learning, and monitoring systems more and more shape employee life, often stoking cynicism under the form of surveillance or enabling engagement under the form of co-working software. Future research should more openly examine the double-functioning of technology as source of tension and tool (Yalçın et al., 2022; Kakkar et al., 2023).

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