DOI: https://doi.org/10.4038/jhrmp.v11i4.87

Impact of Physical Isolation, Remote Work Intensity, and Team Cohesion on Employee Interpersonal Relationships in Sri Lanka: The Moderating Role of Trust

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Abstract: The increasing adoption of remote and hybrid work models has significantly transformed workplace interaction patterns, raising concerns regarding employee interpersonal relationships. While flexible work arrangements enhance autonomy and efficiency, they simultaneously reduce face-to-face interaction, potentially weakening relational ties among employees. Despite extensive global research, limited empirical evidence exists within the Sri Lankan context, particularly regarding the role of trust in shaping these relationships. Therefore, this study aims to examine the impact of remote and hybrid work on employee interpersonal relationships and to assess the moderating role of trust. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 384 employees from Sri Lanka's formal sector. Physical isolation, remote work intensity, team cohesion, trust, and interpersonal relationships were measured using a five-point Likert scale, and data were analyzed using SPSS. The findings confirm that physical isolation and remote work intensity negatively influence interpersonal relationships, whereas team cohesion positively contributes to relational quality. Trust plays a significant moderating role, reducing the negative effects of remote work conditions and strengthening interpersonal connections. This study provides practical implications for organizations by emphasizing the importance of trust-building and structured communication strategies in sustaining effective workplace relationships in flexible work environments.

Keywords: *Physical Isolation, Remote Work Intensity, Team Cohesion on Employee Interpersonal Relationships, Trust*

Introduction

The transformation of traditional work structures into remote and hybrid models represents a fundamental shift in contemporary organisational practices. Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and advancements in digital technologies, remote and hybrid work arrangements have become a permanent feature in many industries worldwide (Kniffin et al., 2021). These models offer substantial benefits, including increased flexibility, reduced commuting time, and improved work-life balance, making them attractive to both employees and organisations (Barrero et al., 2021).

However, significant concerns have emerged regarding their impact on employee interpersonal relationships. In traditional office environments, relationships are strengthened through spontaneous interactions, informal communication, and shared experiences, all of which contribute to team cohesion and organisational commitment (Golden, 2022). In contrast, remote work relies heavily on digital communication platforms, which often lack non-verbal cues, emotional depth, and immediacy, thereby limiting interaction quality (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Wang et al., 2021).

Empirical studies indicate that reduced physical interaction leads to weaker

relational ties, decreased collaboration, and increased feelings of disconnection (Wang et al., 2021). Yang et al. (2022) found that remote work significantly reduces network connectivity and spontaneous communication essential for relationship-building. Hybrid work models, while more balanced, introduce challenges such as proximity bias, where on-site employees may receive greater visibility and social inclusion than remote counterparts (Barrero et al., 2021).

Trust becomes a critical moderating factor in this evolving context. It facilitates cooperation, enhances communication, and reduces uncertainty, particularly where direct supervision and face-to-face interaction are limited (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Blau, 1964). Despite growing global research, most studies focus on developed countries, leaving developing economies such as Sri Lanka underexplored. Sri Lanka's workforce is characterized by a strong cultural emphasis on interpersonal relationships, and remote work was largely introduced as an unplanned emergency response during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving organizations with limited experience in managing its relational consequences (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023). Therefore, this study examines the impact of physical isolation, remote work intensity, and team cohesion on employee interpersonal relationships, while assessing the moderating role of trust.

The study objectives are to: (1) to examine the effect of physical isolation on employee interpersonal relationships; (2) To examine the effect of remote work intensity on employee interpersonal relationships; (3) to examine the effect of team cohesion on employee interpersonal relationships and (4) to assess the moderating role of trust on the above relationships. Unlike Western economies where remote work was gradually adopted within established digital infrastructures and individualistic work cultures, Sri Lanka presents a distinctly different context. Sri Lankan workplace culture is characterised by collectivism and a high reliance on face-to-face interaction for building trust (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023). Moreover, remote work was largely introduced as an unplanned emergency response during COVID-19, leaving organisations structurally unprepared (Adikaram & Naotunna, 2023). These contextual differences suggest that Western findings may not directly transfer to Sri Lanka, underscoring the need for localised empirical evidence (Sivapalan & Jeyarajah, 2022).

Literature Review

Employee interpersonal relationships are a critical determinant of organisational effectiveness, influencing collaboration, engagement, and performance (Pandey et al., 2025). From a theoretical perspective, Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) explains that relationships develop through continuous reciprocal interactions, trust, and mutual support. Remote work environments disrupt these exchanges and reduce relationship-building opportunities (Golden, 2022). The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) highlights that while remote work offers flexibility and autonomy as valued resources, it also introduces social isolation as a significant job demand that negatively affects employee well-being and relational quality. Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) further explains that digital communication platforms lack the non-verbal cues and emotional expression essential for building strong interpersonal connections, potentially leading to misunderstandings and reduced relational trust (Wang et al., 2021).

Empirically, Wang et al. (2021) found that remote work significantly reduces social interaction and increases feelings of

isolation, while Yang et al. (2022) reported weakened collaboration networks that limit opportunities for informal communication and relationship development. Longitudinal research indicates that prolonged remote work can gradually erode team cohesion and organisational identification (Golden, 2022). However, these effects are not uniform; individual characteristics, communication practices, and organisational support all play a mediating role (Golden, 2022; Barrero et al., 2021). Evidence from Sri Lanka's public sector further suggests that employees working from home report mixed outcomes, with job satisfaction levels varying considerably depending on the nature of the role and available organisational support (Priyangaa & Wickramaratne, 2022). A significant gap in the literature is the limited empirical examination of trust as a moderating variable, particularly in developing economies such as Sri Lanka (Sivapalan & Jeyarajah, 2022). High levels of trust are theorised to compensate for the absence of physical interaction by facilitating openness and reducing relational uncertainty (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). This study addresses that gap by integrating these variables within a single conceptual framework.

Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), and Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), this study conceptualises three remote work factors — physical isolation, remote work intensity, and team cohesion — as key determinants of employee interpersonal relationships. Trust is incorporated as a moderating variable based on its established role in facilitating relational exchange under conditions of limited physical interaction (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Blau, 1964). The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships between remote work factors and employee interpersonal relationships (Bryman, 2016). A deductive approach was applied, whereby hypotheses were derived from established theoretical frameworks — Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), and Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) — and tested using empirical data. While qualitative approaches offer greater depth in exploring causal mechanisms, a quantitative design was chosen to enable statistical testing across a large and diverse sample, providing generalisable insights into how remote work conditions influence interpersonal relationships in the Sri Lankan context (Bryman, 2016). Future research is encouraged to employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs to further explore the causal pathways identified here.

Population and Sample

The target population comprised employees in Sri Lanka's formal sector engaged in remote or hybrid work arrangements, spanning industries such as IT, banking, telecommunications, and professional services (Kniffin et al., 2021). As no official registry of remote workers exists, the population size is unknown and the sample of 384 was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Respondents were primarily drawn from organizations in Colombo and other urban districts, with the majority from IT and software development (44.5%), professional services (24.5%), and telecommunications (12.2%) — sectors with the highest concentration of remote workers in Sri Lanka (Jayanandana et al., 2023). Convenience and snowball sampling were employed given the absence of a formal sampling

frame, though future research should employ stratified random sampling for improved representativeness.

Measurement Instruments

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire using five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Items measuring physical isolation and remote work intensity were adapted from Wang et al. (2021), while items on team cohesion, trust, and interpersonal relationships were adapted from Golden (2022). All scales were modified to suit the local Sri Lankan context. Table 1 presents the constructs, number of items, source references, and sample items used in the study.

Table 1: Summary of Measurement Instruments

Construct	Items	Source	Sample Item
Physical Isolation (PI)	4	Wang et al. (2021)	*"I feel disconnected from my colleagues when working remotely"*
Remote Work Intensity (RWI)	4	Wang et al. (2021)	*"I spend the majority of my working hours outside the office"*
Team Cohesion (TC)	5	Golden (2022)	*"My team collaborates effectively despite working remotely"*
Trust (TRU)	5	Golden (2022)	*"I trust my colleagues to fulfil their responsibilities remotely"*
Interpersonal Relationships (IR)	6	Golden (2022)	*"I maintain strong working relationships with my colleagues"*

Note: *All scales used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Sample items are illustrative; full items are listed in the Appendix.*

Prior to formal data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 30 respondents drawn from the target population to assess item clarity, response time, and preliminary reliability. Cronbach's alpha values obtained during the pilot exceeded the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978) for all constructs, confirming adequate internal consistency. Minor wording adjustments were made based on respondent feedback before the final questionnaire was administered. Trust was treated as a moderating variable consistent with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964).

Data Collection

The survey was distributed online via email and social media. Participants were informed of the study purpose and gave their consent before responding. To reduce bias, anonymity was assured and the questionnaire was structured so that predictor and outcome items were not placed together (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (v.26). The analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability testing (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$; Nunnally, 1978), normality checks, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression. To test the moderating role of trust, hierarchical regression was used following Cohen et al. (2003). Variables were mean-centred before creating the interaction term to avoid multicollinearity. Harman's single-factor test was also run to statistically check for common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Prior to regression analysis, the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity were examined through residual diagnostics. The plot of standardized residuals against predicted

values revealed no systematic pattern, confirming linearity, and the spread of residuals remained constant across predicted values, satisfying homoscedasticity. The Normal P-P plot indicated that residuals were approximately normally distributed. These checks confirm that the regression assumptions were not violated.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and all responses were kept anonymous and confidential. The study followed institutional ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Limitations

The study has three main limitations. First, the cross-sectional design cannot establish cause and effect. Second, self-reported data may introduce bias, although steps were taken to minimize this. Third, non-probability sampling may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research should use longitudinal and probability-based approaches to address these issues.

Conceptual Framework

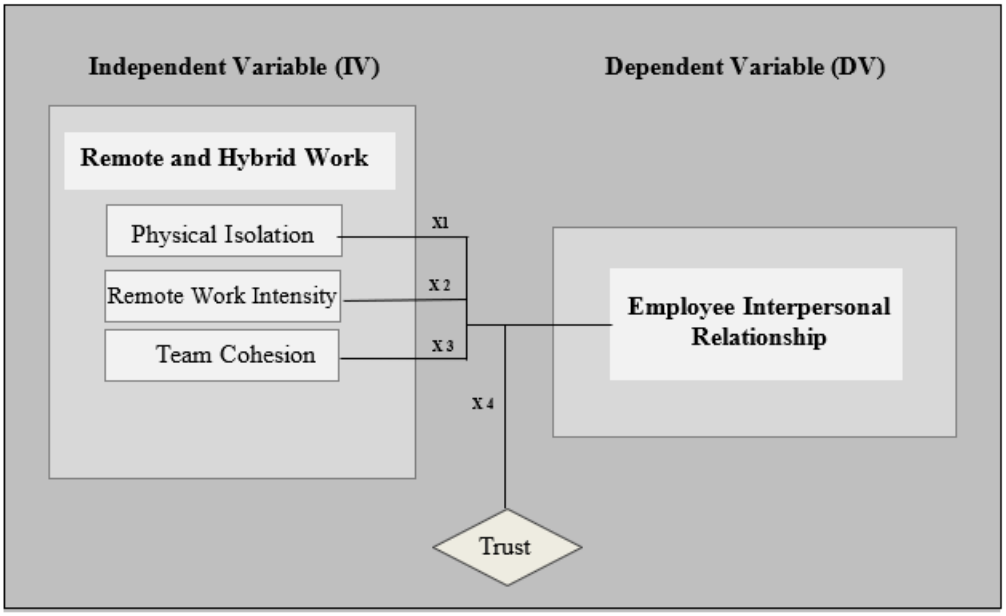

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by the authors based on Blau, 1964; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Wang et al., 2021)

Hypotheses of the Study

- H1: There is a significant relationship between Physical Isolation and Employee Interpersonal Relationships.
- H2: There is a significant relationship between Remote Work Intensity and Employee Interpersonal Relationships.
- H3: There is a significant relationship between Team Cohesion and Employee Interpersonal Relationships.

- H4: There is a significant moderating effect of Trust on the relationship between Remote and Hybrid Work factors and Employee Interpersonal Relationships.

Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

The sample (n = 384) is predominantly young to mid-career, with 52.9% aged 26–35 and 36.7% aged 36–45, reflecting the Millennial and Gen X professionals who most commonly engage in remote and hybrid work. Educational attainment is high, with 80.7% holding a Bachelor's degree and 11.7% holding postgraduate qualifications, ensuring the requisite technical proficiency for digital work environments. Sectorally, IT and Software Development accounts for 44.5% of respondents, followed by Professional Services (24.5%) and Telecommunications (12.2%), reflecting the industries that have most extensively adopted remote work practices in Sri Lanka — a pattern consistent with Jayanandana et al. (2023), who confirmed that Sri Lanka's IT sector has the highest concentration of remote workers in the formal economy.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Table 2: Results of Reliability

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
Physical Isolation (PI)	4	0.833	Good
Remote Work Intensity (RWI)	4	0.842	Good
Team Cohesion (TC)	5	0.892	Good
Trust (TRU)	5	0.906	Excellent
Interpersonal Relationships (IR)	6	0.900	Excellent

All Cronbach's Alpha coefficients range from 0.833 to 0.906, comfortably exceeding the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978), indicating good to excellent internal consistency across all constructs.

Table 3: Results of Validity

Variable	Items	KMO Test Value	Bartlett's Test (p-value)
Physical Isolation (PI)	4	0.812	0.000
Remote Work Intensity (RWI)	4	0.815	0.000
Team Cohesion (TC)	5	0.882	0.000
Trust (TRU)	5	0.897	0.000
Interpersonal Relationships (IR)	6	0.915	0.000

KMO values range from 0.812 to 0.915, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Kaiser, 1974), confirming adequate sampling adequacy for factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < .001$) across all constructs, indicating that the correlation matrices are not identity matrices and that factor analysis is statistically appropriate for all measured constructs.

Normality Test

Table 4: Analysis of Skewness and Kurtosis

Variable	N	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
Physical Isolation (PI)	384	-0.033	0.125	-0.171	0.250
Remote Work Intensity (RWI)	384	-0.100	0.125	-0.281	0.250
Team Cohesion (TC)	384	-0.128	0.125	-0.315	0.250
Trust (TRU)	384	-0.119	0.125	0.191	0.250
Interpersonal Relationships (IR)	384	0.133	0.125	-0.227	0.250

Skewness values range from -0.128 to +0.133 and kurtosis values from -0.315 to +0.191, all within the acceptable ±1 range (Hair et al., 2010), confirming approximate normality and validating the use of parametric techniques including correlation and multiple regression.

Correlation Analysis

Table 5: Correlation Analysis of IVs on DV

		PI	RWI	TC	TRU	IR
Physical Isolation (PI)	Pearson Correlation	**1**				
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
	N	384				
Remote Work Intensity (RWI)	Pearson Correlation	0.435**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000				
	N	384	384			
Team Cohesion (TC)	Pearson Correlation	-0.243**	-0.281**	**1**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000			
	N	384	384	384		
Trust (TRU)	Pearson Correlation	-0.248**	-0.253**	**0.450****	**1**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		
	N	384	384	384	384	
Interpersonal Relationships (IR)	Pearson Correlation	-0.345**	-0.318**	0.489**	0.399**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	384	384	384	384	384
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).						

All correlations are statistically significant at the 0.01 level. According to Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, Physical Isolation (r = -0.345) and Remote Work Intensity (r = -0.318) demonstrate moderate negative relationships with Employee Interpersonal Relationships, while Team Cohesion (r = 0.489) and Trust (r = 0.399) show moderate positive relationships, providing preliminary support for all four hypotheses.

Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Prior to interpreting the regression results, multicollinearity among the predictor variables was assessed using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance values. As presented in Table 5, all VIF values fall well below the commonly accepted threshold of 10, and all Tolerance values exceed the minimum recommended level of 0.10 (Hair et al., 2010), confirming the absence of problematic multicollinearity among the predictors.

Table 6: Multicollinearity Diagnostics

Variable	Tolerance	VIF
Physical Isolation (PI)	0.764	1.308
Remote Work Intensity (RWI)	0.773	1.294
Team Cohesion (TC)	0.762	1.312
Trust (TRU)	0.771	1.297

These results indicate that each predictor contributes independently to the regression model, and the estimated coefficients are stable and reliable. The low inter-predictor correlations observed in the correlation matrix (Table 4) are consistent with these diagnostics, further supporting the integrity of the regression model.

Regression Analysis

Table 7: Regression Analysis of IVs on DV

	Model	β	Std. Error	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.000	.029	.000	1.000
	Physical Isolation (PI)	-.180	.044	-4.054	.000
	Remote Work Intensity (RWI)	-.100	.041	-2.442	.015
	Team Cohesion (TC)	.403	.044	9.061	.000
	R^2	.304			
	F	55.367			.000
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Interpersonal Relationships (IR)					

The model is statistically significant ($F = 55.367$, $p < .001$), explaining 30.4% of the variance in employee interpersonal relationships ($R^2 = .304$). This is an acceptable level of explanatory power for behavioral research, as relational outcomes are also shaped by unmeasured factors such as personality and organizational culture (Cohen, 1988).

Team Cohesion was the strongest predictor ($\beta = .403$, $p < .001$), indicating that a strong sense of belonging among team members considerably improves interpersonal relationships even when working remotely. This supports the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), which treats cohesion as a key resource

that compensates for the social losses of remote work.

Physical Isolation had a significant negative effect (β = -.180, p < .001), confirming that employees who feel disconnected from colleagues' experience weaker relational ties. However, its effect is smaller than that of cohesion, suggesting that strong team practices can partially offset the harm caused by isolation, consistent with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964).

Remote Work Intensity showed the weakest negative effect (β = -.100, p = .015), suggesting that working remotely more hours does not severely damage relationships on its own — what matters more is how well communication and collaboration are managed during those hours (Barrero et al., 2021).

Overall, the effect size hierarchy — TC (β = .403) > PI (β = -.180) > RWI (β = -.100) — clearly indicates that investing in team cohesion offers the greatest benefit for sustaining healthy workplace relationships in flexible work settings.

Moderation Analysis

Table 8: Moderation Analysis — Moderating Role of Trust

	Model	β	Std. Error	t	Sig.
2	(Constant)	.000	.029	.000	1.000
	Physical Isolation (PI)	-.162	.044	-3.675	.000
	Remote Work Intensity (RWI)	-.086	.040	-2.129	.034
	Team Cohesion (TC)	.333	.048	6.999	.000
	Trust (TRU) [Moderator]	.182	.049	3.722	.000
	R^2	.329			
	ΔR^2	.025			
	F	13.851			.000

a. Dependent Variable: Employee Interpersonal Relationships (IR)
b. Predictors: PI, RWI, TC, Trust (TRU) c. ΔR^2 = Change from baseline model (Table 4.6)
*** p < .01, * p < .05*

The moderating role of Trust was tested using hierarchical multiple regression following Cohen et al. (2003), whereby the three predictor variables (PI, RWI, TC) were entered in Step 1 and Trust was added in Step 2. Variables were mean-centered prior to analysis to minimize multicollinearity between predictors and the interaction term. The addition of Trust produced a significant incremental change in explained variance (ΔR^2 = .025, p < .001), increasing total variance explained to 32.9%.

The resulting regression equation:

IR = .000 + (-.162)PI + (-.086)RWI + (.333)TC + (.182)TRU

indicates that a one-unit increase in Team Cohesion improves interpersonal relationships by 0.333 units, while Physical Isolation and Remote Work Intensity reduce them by 0.162 and 0.086 units respectively. Trust contributes a positive effect of 0.182 units, confirming its role in strengthening interpersonal relationships under remote work conditions, thus supporting H4.

Discussion

This study investigated how physical isolation, remote work intensity, and team cohesion affect employee interpersonal relationships in Sri Lanka's formal sector, with trust as a moderating variable, and all four hypotheses were supported. Physical isolation ($\beta = -.180$, $p < .001$) and remote work intensity ($\beta = -.100$, $p = .015$) both weaken interpersonal relationships, consistent with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Golden, 2022), as reduced physical proximity diminishes the reciprocal everyday interactions and shared experiences that sustain relational ties. Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) further supports this outcome by explaining that digital communication tools lack the non-verbal cues and emotional richness essential for meaningful human connection, a pattern confirmed by Wang et al. (2021) and Yang et al. (2022) in comparable empirical contexts.

Team cohesion was the strongest positive predictor ($\beta = .403$, $p < .001$), suggesting that a strong sense of belonging and solidarity enables employees to maintain healthy working relationships despite physical separation. This aligns with the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), which frames team cohesion as a key relational resource that buffers the demands imposed by remote work conditions. Trust significantly moderated all three relationships ($\beta = .182$, $\Delta R^2 = .025$, $p < .001$), reducing the harmful effects of isolation and work intensity while enhancing the positive impact of cohesion. This confirms that interpersonal trust functions as a relational lubricant (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), enabling open communication and relationship maintenance across distance — consistent with Social Exchange Theory's proposition that trust is foundational to sustaining reciprocal relational exchanges (Blau, 1964). The final model explained 32.9% of variance ($R^2 = .329$, Cohen, 1988), with remaining variance attributable to factors such as leadership style, organizational culture, and individual personality differences.

Conclusion

This study examined how remote and hybrid work arrangements affect employee interpersonal relationships in Sri Lanka's formal sector, with trust as a moderating variable. The findings confirm that physical isolation and remote work intensity weaken interpersonal relationships, while team cohesion strengthens them, and trust moderates all three relationships by reducing the harmful effects of remote work and enhancing the benefits of cohesion. Theoretically, the study extends Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) into the Sri Lankan context, which remains underrepresented in global remote work literature (Sivapalan & Jeyarajah, 2022), while the confirmation of trust's moderating role deepens understanding of how psychological resources help employees overcome relational challenges in flexible work settings. Practically, organizations are advised to build a culture of trust through transparent communication and consistent managerial support, invest in team cohesion through regular virtual interactions and structured collaborative activities, and carefully balance remote and in-person work to protect relational quality. The study is limited by its cross-sectional design (Bryman, 2016), reliance on self-reported data (Podsakoff et al., 2003), and concentration of respondents in technology-intensive sectors; future research should employ longitudinal designs and broader variable sets including leadership style and organizational culture for a more complete understanding. Overall, this study offers a timely and contextually grounded contribution to understanding how Sri Lankan organizations can sustain healthy

employee relationships in an era of increasingly flexible work arrangements.

Practically, organizations in Sri Lanka are advised to invest in structured trust-building initiatives such as transparent communication policies and consistent managerial support to offset the relational costs of remote work. HR practitioners should prioritize regular virtual team interactions and collaborative activities to sustain team cohesion across distributed work settings. Industries with high remote work adoption, particularly IT and professional services, should consider developing formal guidelines for managing interpersonal relationships in flexible work environments to retain talent and maintain organizational effectiveness.

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