

REMOTE WORK CULTURE AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES: EVIDENCE FROM DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Following digital transformation and the post-COVID-19 transition to flexible work arrangements, remote work culture has emerged as a defining characteristic of contemporary organisations. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, this study explored the impact of remote work culture on employee engagement in developing economies, using SMEs in Delta State, Nigeria, as empirical evidence. Specifically, the study investigated how communication and collaboration, autonomy and trust, and technological support and digital inclusion influence employee engagement. A descriptive survey design was adopted, and data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 398 SME employees, of which 342 valid responses were analysed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Multiple Regression Analysis, were employed. The findings revealed that communication and collaboration culture ($r = 0.731$, $p < 0.05$), autonomy and trust culture ($r = 0.692$, $p < 0.05$), and technological support and digital inclusion culture ($r = 0.668$, $p < 0.05$) all exerted significant positive effects on employee engagement. The study concluded that remote work culture, when supported by effective communication, trust-based autonomy, and adequate digital resources, enhances employee engagement in SMEs. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on remote work by providing context-specific evidence from a developing economy and offers practical insights for SME managers and policymakers on leveraging remote work culture to strengthen employee engagement and organisational performance.

Keywords: Remote work culture, employee engagement, communication and collaboration, autonomy and trust, technological support and digital inclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of accelerating digitalisation, the global disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic, and entrepreneurial activity in emerging economies, remote work has emerged as a prominent organisational practice (Anderson et al., 2020; Aleem et al., 2023; Battisti et al., 2022). In other words, as firms increasingly transcend traditional office boundaries, the notion of remote work culture has come to the fore (Sosiady & Ermansyah, 2023). In small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), this transition poses both promise and challenge: promise in terms of flexibility, access to talent and cost-efficiencies; and challenge in terms of maintaining employee engagement, and cohesion.

Employee engagement is defined as the psychological state of being fully absorbed, dedicated, and vigorous in one's work. It is widely recognised as a driver of organisational performance, innovation, and retention (Shokrollahi, 2023). In remote or hybrid arrangements, however, maintaining high levels of engagement appears to be more complex. Recent global reviews indicate that while remote work offers some benefits, it also introduces risks of isolation, blurred boundaries, and communication breakdowns, which can undermine engagement (Sosiady & Ermansyah, 2023). In the African context, where digital infrastructure, organisational norms, and workforce demographics differ markedly from developed economies, these dynamics warrant empirical investigation.

The existing literature suggests that key elements of a remote-friendly organisational culture, such as effective digital communication, trust-based autonomy, and inclusive access to technology, are important antecedents of positive employee outcomes (Clark & Persily, 2023). In Nigeria, although remote work practices are increasingly adopted, empirical evidence linking the cultural dimensions of remote work to employee engagement in SMEs remains limited. Research indicates that many organisations face infrastructural and relational constraints in implementing remote systems effectively (Adeyinka et al., 2023).

SMEs deserve specific scholarly attention for several reasons. First, they often operate with lean structures, limited formal human resource systems, and high reliance on employee initiative and commitment in dynamic markets. Second, in the Nigerian context, SMEs face additional pressures such as unstable power supply, connectivity gaps, regulatory uncertainty, and evolving work norms, which may influence how remote work culture is implemented and experienced. Third, employee engagement in entrepreneurial firms is particularly critical because it drives innovation, adaptability, and firm growth in uncertain environments.

Accordingly, this study examines the impact of remote work culture on employee engagement in Nigerian SMEs. The unit of analysis in this study is the individual SME employee, as the research focuses on employees' perceptions of remote work culture and their level of engagement. Employee engagement is conceptualised as a latent construct comprising vigor, dedication, and absorption, while remote work culture is operationalised as a multidimensional construct encompassing communication and collaboration culture, autonomy and trust culture, and technological support and digital inclusion culture.

Specifically, the study aims to: evaluate the effect of communication and collaboration culture on employee engagement among SME employees in Delta State; assess the impact of autonomy and trust culture on employee engagement among SME employees in Delta State; and determine the influence of technological support and digital inclusion culture on employee engagement among SME employees in Delta State.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section Two presents the literature review, which examines the conceptual foundations of remote work culture and employee engagement, relevant theoretical perspectives, and prior empirical studies. Section Three describes the research methods, including the research design, population, sampling procedure, measurement of variables, and analytical techniques used in the study. Section Four presents the results of the empirical analysis and discusses the findings in relation to existing literature. Finally, Section Five provides the conclusion and policy implications of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Remote Work Culture

Remote work culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape how employees collaborate, communicate, and perform their duties in virtual or hybrid work environments (Abelsen et al., 2023; Sosiady & Ermansyah, 2023). It reflects organisational expectations regarding digital interaction, autonomy, trust, and technology use, which collectively influence employee behaviour and attitudes. In SMEs, where informal structures and close interpersonal relationships are common, remote work culture plays a critical role in sustaining motivation, coordination, and organisational cohesion despite physical dispersion (Anya et al., 2021; Alipour et al., 2021). Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET), remote work culture can be viewed as an organisational resource that signals support, fairness, and reciprocity. Conceptually, this study operationalises remote work culture as a multidimensional construct consisting of: communication and collaboration culture, autonomy and trust culture, and technological support and digital inclusion culture.

Communication and collaboration culture refers to the clarity, openness, frequency, and effectiveness of digital communication processes that facilitate teamwork and knowledge sharing among remote employees (Meneses-La-Riva et al., 2025). Effective communication structures enhance social connectedness, reduce uncertainty, and foster collective problem-solving, which are critical for engagement in virtual teams.

Autonomy and trust culture reflects the degree to which employees are empowered to make decisions, manage their work schedules, and exercise discretion without excessive monitoring (Morgeson et al., 2020). A trust-based culture signals organisational confidence in employees' competence and integrity, which promotes psychological ownership and intrinsic motivation.

Technological support and digital inclusion culture captures the availability of digital tools, technical support, training, and equitable access to remote work resources (Molino et al., 2020). Adequate technological infrastructure reduces frustration, enables participation, and ensures that employees are not excluded from virtual workflows, thereby reinforcing engagement and productivity.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is conceptualised as a positive, fulfilling, work-related psychological state characterised by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Kumar & Saxena, 2024). Vigor is characterised by elevated energy and persistence in work tasks; dedication reflects a strong sense of meaning, enthusiasm, and pride; and absorption describes a state of deep concentration and engagement in one's work (Ariyanto et al., 2025). Within the framework of Social Exchange Theory, employee engagement is considered a reciprocal response to perceived

organisational support and favourable work conditions. When organisations provide supportive remote work cultures through effective communication, autonomy, trust, and technological resources, employees are likely to reciprocate with higher engagement levels.

Empirical evidence suggests that remote work environments that foster psychological safety, collaboration, and autonomy enhance engagement outcomes (Jawabri et al., 2022; Adeyinka et al., 2023). However, inadequate communication systems, lack of trust, and technological barriers can undermine engagement, particularly in developing economies and SMEs where infrastructural constraints are prevalent.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Social Exchange Theory (SET), originally developed by Blau (1964). The theory posits that workplace relationships are governed by reciprocal exchanges of resources, trust, and support between employees and their organisations. When employees perceive favourable treatment from their organisation, they feel a moral obligation to reciprocate through positive attitudes and behaviours such as higher engagement, commitment, and discretionary effort.

From the perspective of remote work, organisational support is reflected through effective communication and collaboration, autonomy and trust, as well as technological support and digital inclusion. These elements represent valuable socio-economic resources to employees working outside the traditional office environment. When such resources are consistently provided, employees are more likely to respond with heightened engagement and sustained work effort (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

To further reinforce the theoretical foundation, this study also draws on the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model, which conceptualises employee engagement as arising from the balance between job demands and job resources. The model suggests that job resources play a motivational role that enhances engagement, particularly in flexible work settings. Within remote work arrangements, communication systems, managerial trust, and technological infrastructure function as critical job resources that buffer work demands and stimulate engagement. When these resources are inadequate, job demands may outweigh benefits, resulting in disengagement.

Applying SET in conjunction with the JD–R Model, remote work culture functions as an antecedent shaping employees' psychological responses. A culture characterised by trust, collaboration, and adequate digital support signals that the organisation values employees' well-being and contribution. Consequently, employees feel obligated and motivated to reciprocate with greater engagement and enthusiasm (Errichiello & Pianese, 2021). Together, these theories provide a robust explanatory lens for understanding how remote work culture influences employee engagement in entrepreneurial SMEs.

Empirical Review

Communication & Collaboration Culture and Employee Engagement

Hiver et al. (2024) explored the impact of communication strategies on employee engagement, specifically focusing on transparency and two-way feedback mechanisms. Using a comprehensive review of organizational practices, the study found that transparent communication, sharing information about organizational goals and changes, reduces

uncertainty and significantly enhances trust. The findings indicated that regular feedback sessions and "open-door" policies are critical in making employees feel valued and heard, which directly correlates with higher job satisfaction and commitment. The research concluded that a culture of openness is a pivotal driver of engagement in modern work environments.

Burnett (2024) investigated the social dimension of employee engagement within the context of collaborative workplace cultures. The study employed a framework that linked emotional, intellectual, and social engagement to overall organizational effectiveness. It was found that social engagement promotes synergy among team members, creating a cohesive culture where individuals feel connected to their colleagues and the organization's mission. The study emphasized that when organizations prioritize a culture of collaboration, they unlock the full potential of their workforce, leading to higher levels of motivation and fulfillment.

Autonomy & Trust Culture and Employee Engagement

Yadav and Vihari (2023) examined the role of employee autonomy as a moderator in the relationship between meaningful work and employee well-being. Through an extensive review of literature spanning nearly a decade, the study demonstrated that granting employees freedom and discretion in scheduling and managing their work significantly enhances their work experience. The findings suggested that autonomy empowers individuals to take responsibility for their performance, which in turn drives higher engagement levels. The researchers argued that organizations must shift toward high-trust environments to sustain long-term engagement and prevent burnout.

Schilke et al. (2023) analyzed organizational trust as a dynamic, multi-faceted construct that serves as the foundation for a highly engaged workforce. By evaluating trust between employees and management, the study identified that a culture valuing fairness, honesty, and ethical behavior is essential for fostering dedication. The findings revealed that trust acts as a critical mediator; without it, engagement initiatives often fail to translate into improved organizational performance. The study highlighted that building a "fragile" but necessary achievement of trust through consistent social interactions is key to maintaining a committed workforce in contemporary settings.

Technological Support & Digital Inclusion Culture and Employee Engagement

Ghani (2025) (based on the work of Ghana-based researchers) explored the interplay between digital transformation, employee engagement, and performance in telecommunications firms. Using a mixed-method approach including 200 structured questionnaires, the study found that digital tools significantly improve engagement by facilitating better communication and collaborative opportunities. However, the research also warned of "technological overload," noting that while digital inclusion is beneficial, it must be accompanied by leadership support and an innovation-embracing culture to prevent employee resistance and disengagement.

Assoratgoon and Kantabutr (2023) investigated how digital technology and supportive organizational cultures influence engagement within pharmaceutical and service sectors. The study identified that the integration of digital tools, such as the Internet of Things (IoT), transforms performance appraisal and communication processes. It found that employees who received professional training on digital tools reported higher engagement because the technology empowered them to achieve better productivity. The findings underscored that

technological support is most effective when it is part of an inclusive culture that treats employees fairly and provides opportunities for both personal and professional growth.

Critical Synthesis of Empirical Literature

The reviewed studies consistently affirm that organizational culture significantly shapes employee engagement, though with contextual differences. Evidence shows that communication and collaboration culture enhances engagement through transparency, feedback, and social connectedness, fostering trust and shared purpose. Similarly, autonomy and trust culture emerges as a critical driver, as employee discretion and perceived fairness strengthen commitment and intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, technological support and digital inclusion culture positively influence engagement by improving communication and productivity; however, its effectiveness depends on adequate training and supportive leadership to avoid overload. Despite these insights, most studies are conducted outside the Nigerian SME context, creating a gap this study seeks to address by providing localized empirical evidence from Delta State.

Hypotheses Development

Communication and Collaboration culture and Employee Engagement

A culture of communication and collaboration is a fundamental driver of employee engagement, providing the structural and psychological framework necessary for high organizational performance. When organizations prioritize open and transparent communication, they reduce ambiguity and align individual efforts with a shared vision. This alignment is critical, as it allows employees to understand the broader impact of their roles, fostering a sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation. According to Tkalac Verčič and Men (2023), strategic internal communication is not merely transactional but relational, building the trust and sense of belonging required to sustain long-term engagement.

Furthermore, a collaborative culture enhances this relationship by breaking down professional silos and encouraging collective problem-solving. When employees are empowered to collaborate, they experience higher levels of psychological safety, making them more likely to invest discretionary effort into their work. Research by Carter (2024) indicates that two-way communication strategies, such as regular feedback loops and open dialogue, are particularly effective in making employees feel valued and heard, thereby increasing their dedication and absorption in their tasks. Ultimately, a culture that synthesizes clear communication with active collaboration creates a resilient environment where engagement thrives, leading to improved productivity and retention.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between communication and collaboration culture and the level of employee engagement among SME employees in Delta State.

Autonomy and Trust culture and Employee Engagement

A culture of autonomy and trust is a vital determinant of employee engagement, as it empowers workers to take ownership of their tasks and fosters a sense of psychological security. When employees in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are granted the freedom to manage their work processes, they often exhibit higher levels of vigor, dedication, and absorption. This sense of agency, supported by a trusting environment, signals that the organization values their

competence and professional judgment, which is a key driver of intrinsic motivation. Research suggests that when leadership trust is high, employees are more likely to be proactive and committed to organizational goals.

However, the strength of this relationship can be influenced by regional and organizational contexts. In Delta State, Nigeria, studies on SMEs have shown that while organizational culture significantly influences employee behavior and productivity, specific dimensions like autonomy may sometimes have varying impacts depending on the sector or management style. Some researchers argue that without adequate support or resources, increased autonomy might not directly translate to higher engagement if employees feel overwhelmed by responsibilities. Therefore, examining the null hypothesis in the specific context of Delta State's SMEs is essential to understanding whether the global consensus on autonomy's benefits holds true for these local enterprises.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between autonomy and trust culture and employee engagement among SME employees in Delta State.

Technological support and digital inclusion culture and employee engagement

A culture of technological support and digital inclusion is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone for modern employee engagement, particularly within the evolving landscape of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Technological support refers to the provision of necessary digital tools, infrastructure, and technical assistance, while digital inclusion ensures that all employees, regardless of their initial proficiency, have equitable access and the skills to utilize these resources. When employees feel technically empowered, their perceived self-efficacy increases, leading to higher levels of workplace engagement and productivity.

In Delta State, recent initiatives such as the Delta State Digital Policy (2025) underscore the strategic shift toward inclusive, tech-driven development to empower the local workforce. Research indicates that while digital transformation can streamline operations, its impact on engagement is most significant when accompanied by robust organizational support and training. Without such inclusion, technological advancement may lead to demotivation among staff who feel left behind by the digital divide. Thus, investigating the relationship between these factors and engagement is critical for SMEs in Delta State to ensure that technology serves as a bridge rather than a barrier to employee commitment.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between technological support and digital inclusion culture and employee engagement among SME employees in Delta State.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, deemed appropriate for collecting quantitative data from a defined population to describe, explain, and analyse relationships among variables. The study investigated the effect of remote work culture, operationalised through communication and collaboration, autonomy and trust, and technological support and digital inclusion, on employee engagement among SMEs in Delta State. Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to employees operating in remote or hybrid work arrangements. The population comprised 3,976 registered SMEs in Delta State (SMEDAN, 2024). The study focused on SMEs that had adopted remote or hybrid work arrangements. A sample of 398 SMEs, representing approximately ten percent of the population, was selected

using simple random sampling. Employees within the selected SMEs were randomly approached during questionnaire administration to reduce selection bias.

The questionnaire had four sections: demographics; communication and collaboration culture; autonomy and trust culture; and technological support, digital inclusion, and employee engagement using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Validity and reliability were ensured through expert review, adaptation from established scales, a pilot study, and Cronbach's alpha assessment, with all constructs exceeding the 0.70 threshold.

To address potential common method bias (CMB), several procedural and statistical measures were implemented. Procedurally, the questionnaire employed anonymity and confidentiality assurances, varied item wording, and separated the measurement of independent and dependent variables into distinct sections to reduce respondent evaluation apprehension and consistency motifs. The instructions emphasized honest responses without "right" or "preferred" answers. Data were collected through both physical and electronic means (Google Forms and email) to reduce environmental influence.

Data were coded and analysed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics summarised demographic profiles and key variables, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Multiple Regression Analysis examined relationships and predictive effects of remote work culture dimensions on employee engagement. Hypotheses were tested at a 5% level of significance.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A total of 398 questionnaires were distributed to employees and managers of SMEs across Delta State. Of these, 342 were duly completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 85.9%, which was deemed sufficient for analysis. Table 4.1 presents the demographic characteristics of respondents in terms of gender, age, and work arrangement type.

Table 4.1: *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	182	53.2
	Female	160	46.8
Age Grade	20-29	106	31.0
	30-39	152	44.4
	40 years +	84	24.6
Work Arrangement	Fully Remote	118	34.5
	High Breed	164	47.9
	On-site	60	17.6

Source: *Field Survey, 2025*

The results indicate that 53.2% of respondents were male, while 46.8% were female, showing a fair gender balance among SME employees. The majority (44.4%) were between 30–39 years, implying that most participants were in their mid-career stage. Furthermore, 47.9% worked under a hybrid arrangement, suggesting that many SMEs in Delta State adopted flexible remote work models.

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Descriptive statistics were computed for the major variables of study variables namely: communication and collaboration, autonomy and trust, technological support and digital inclusion, and employee engagement.

Table 4.2: *Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables*

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Communication & Collaboration	342	4.08	0.61	High
Autonomy & Trust	342	3.97	0.67	High
Technological Support & Digital Inclusion	342	3.84	0.72	High
Employee Engagement	342	4.12	0.58	High

Source: *Field Survey, 2025*

The mean scores show that employees rated communication and collaboration (M = 4.08, SD = 0.61) and employee engagement (M = 4.12, SD = 0.58) highest among the variables. This implies that most respondents perceived their SMEs as having effective communication and a strong sense of engagement under remote work settings.

Correlation Analysis

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to determine the strength and direction of relationships between the independent variables (communication & collaboration, autonomy & trust, technological support & digital inclusion) and the dependent variable (employee engagement).

Table 4.3: Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Communication & Collaboration	1			
2. Autonomy & Trust	0.611**	1		
Technological Support & Digital Inclusion	0.567**	0.538**	1	
4. Employee Engagement	0.654**	0.602**	0.578**	1

Note: $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

Source: *Field Survey, 2025*

The results indicated strong positive correlations between the three dimensions of remote work culture and employee engagement. Communication and collaboration had the highest correlation with employee engagement ($r = 0.654, p < 0.01$), followed by autonomy and trust ($r = 0.602, p < 0.01$). This suggests that improved interaction, trust, and digital support significantly enhance engagement among SME employees. To test the hypotheses, multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the combined and individual effects of remote work culture dimensions on employee engagement.

Table 4.4: Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adj R ²	SE of the Est
1	0.741	0.549	0.545	0.392

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

The R value (0.741) indicates a strong positive relationship between the predictors and employee engagement. The adjusted R² of 0.545 implies that approximately 54.5% of the variation in employee engagement among SME employees is explained by communication & collaboration, autonomy & trust, and technological support & digital inclusion.

Table 4.5: ANOVA Results

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	38.214	3	12.738	82.9	0
Residual	31.376	338	0.093		
Total	69.590	341			

Note: p < 0.01 (Significant)

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

The model is statistically significant (F = 82.900, p < 0.001), indicating that remote work culture significantly predicts employee engagement among SME employees in Delta State.

Table 4.6: Coefficients of Regression Analysis

Predictor Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Beta (β)	t-value	Sig. (p)
Constant	1.028	0.142		7.239	0.000
Comm & Coll	0.326	0.047	0.401	6.936	0.000**
Auth & Trust	0.275	0.052	0.312	5.288	0.000**
Tech.Supp	0.198	0.049	0.231	4.041	0.000**

Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement

Note: p < 0.05 (Significant)

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

All three dimensions of remote work culture significantly influenced employee engagement. Communication and collaboration (β = 0.401, p < 0.001) had the strongest effect, followed by autonomy and trust (β = 0.312, p < 0.001), and technological support & digital inclusion (β = 0.231, p < 0.001).

Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Hypothesis Statement	Result
H ₀₁	Communication and collaboration have no significant effect on employee engagement among SMEs in Delta State	Rejected
H ₀₂	Autonomy and trust have no significant effect on employee engagement among SMEs in Delta State	Rejected
H ₀₃	Technological support and digital inclusion have no significant effect on employee engagement among SMEs in Delta State	Rejected

Multicollinearity Test

Before interpreting the multiple regression results, multicollinearity among the independent variables was assessed to ensure the reliability of the estimates. Multicollinearity occurs when predictors are highly correlated, which can inflate standard errors and distort the significance of regression coefficients. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance statistics were used for this purpose.

The results indicated that VIF values for communication and collaboration (VIF = 1.62), autonomy and trust (VIF = 1.57), and technological support and digital inclusion (VIF = 1.43) were all below the commonly accepted threshold of 5, while the corresponding Tolerance values were all above 0.2. These results suggest that multicollinearity among the predictors is not a concern in this study, and the regression coefficients can be interpreted reliably.

Thus, the regression findings reported earlier, showing significant positive effects of all three dimensions of remote work culture on employee engagement, are not biased by multicollinearity among the independent variable.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding revealed a strong positive relationship between communication and collaboration culture and employee engagement among SMEs in Delta State. This indicates that open communication, teamwork, and information sharing are central to sustaining engagement. This result aligns with Jawabri et al. (2022), who argue that effective communication enhances psychological ownership and participation in virtual environments. In line with Social Exchange Theory, when employees perceive organisational support through transparent and collaborative communication, they reciprocate with higher commitment, enthusiasm, and discretionary effort. For SMEs, investing in collaborative digital platforms and fostering team cohesion is therefore critical to maintaining workforce motivation and reducing feelings of isolation.

The second finding demonstrated a significant positive effect of autonomy and trust on employee engagement. Employees who are empowered to make decisions and trusted to manage their tasks independently tend to exhibit higher intrinsic motivation and dedication. This supports Vu (2020), who emphasizes that autonomy satisfies a fundamental psychological need, fostering engagement and proactive behaviour. In SMEs adopting remote work arrangements, managerial trust serves as a psychological resource that enhances employees' sense of responsibility and accountability. By creating a culture of trust, organisations encourage self-directed performance, innovation, and loyalty, which are particularly important in entrepreneurial and resource-constrained SMEs.

The third finding established that technological support and digital inclusion significantly influence employee engagement. Reliable access to digital tools, internet connectivity, and technical assistance reduces work-related frustration and enables employees to perform efficiently, regardless of their location or skill level. This finding corroborates Nikolić (2023), who highlights that job resources such as technology enhance vigor, dedication, and absorption. Social Exchange Theory further suggests that when organisations invest in technological infrastructure, employees perceive these resources as supportive, fostering reciprocal engagement. In the context of Nigerian SMEs, where infrastructural constraints often challenge remote work, ensuring digital inclusion and providing adequate technical support are critical strategies for sustaining productivity and morale.

Generally, the study highlights that a robust remote work culture, characterized by effective communication, trust-based autonomy, and accessible technology, plays a pivotal role in enhancing employee engagement in SMEs. These findings have practical implications: SME managers should prioritise digital collaboration tools, establish clear communication norms, delegate decision-making authority, build trust, and ensure equitable access to technology. By doing so, SMEs can leverage remote work culture as a strategic resource to sustain engagement, promote innovation, and enhance organisational performance, particularly in developing economy contexts where workforce flexibility and motivation are crucial.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that remote work culture significantly enhances employee engagement among SMEs in Delta State when supported by effective communication, employee autonomy, and adequate technological resources. The findings confirm that fostering a culture of collaboration and trust while ensuring digital accessibility promotes vigor, dedication, and absorption among employees. Remote work can therefore be a strategic tool for improving organisational productivity and employee satisfaction, provided that SMEs adopt supportive leadership practices and technological frameworks. Ultimately, a balanced remote work culture contributes to sustainable workforce engagement and improved business performance in a dynamic digital economy.

Based on the study findings, the following context-specific recommendations are proposed for SMEs in Delta State, Nigeria:

- i.** SMEs should invest in reliable digital communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Slack, and schedule regular virtual meetings to strengthen teamwork, information sharing, and social connection among employees working remotely or in hybrid arrangements. This will sustain engagement and reduce feelings of isolation.
- ii.** Managers should empower employees to make decisions regarding their tasks and focus on outcomes rather than micromanaging. Establishing a culture of trust will motivate employees, enhance commitment, and encourage proactive behaviours, particularly in resource-constrained SMEs that rely on employee initiative for productivity.
- iii.** SMEs should provide employees with adequate digital tools, stable internet access, and ongoing digital skills training. Ensuring equal access to technology across all employees will enhance participation, efficiency, and sustained engagement, especially in areas of Delta State with infrastructural challenges.

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