



**ROLE OF SUSTAINING FLEXIBILITY IN EMPLOYEE  
ENGAGEMENT WITHIN THE RETAIL SECTOR OF THE UK  
DURING PANDEMIC**

## Abstract

The dissertation concerns itself with the topic ***“Role of Sustaining Flexibility in Employee Engagement within the Retail Sector of the UK during Pandemic”***. The first chapter provides an introduction of the topic describing how the pandemic has changed employee needs within an organization. By formulating 5 key objectives, the dissertation has set the guideline following which the research work has progressed. The second chapter comprises a review of available literature that initially discusses the general concepts like necessity of flexibility, labour market scenario in post pandemic world and the impact of flexibility on employees overall. The third chapter provides an idea of the methods and methodologies used to execute the research work. The justification of choosing interpretivist philosophy, deductive approach, qualitative data analysis, descriptive research design, non probability sampling and secondary data has also been thoroughly discussed. The fourth chapter has identified 12 themes that cover the various aspect of flexibility in workplace. The chapter discusses Maslow's hierarchy of needs in the context of organisational set up, explaining how, fulfilment of employee needs by incorporating flexibility, can actually help in employee engagement. The assignment consists of a research survey of certain themes that are taken into consideration along with the certain objectives that were already taken into the analysis. The assignment deals with the recommendation that are provided to the researcher along with the future goals explained to know its future aspects.

### **Acknowledgement**

I am extremely grateful to all individuals who have helped me to conclude this research study successfully. I have developed my analytical skills as well as skills of exploration regarding the role of sustaining flexibility in employee engagement within the retail sector of the uk during pandemic. I would specially want to convey my deep gratitude to my professor who has guided me whenever I needed any help during the study.



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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The research aims to evaluate the role of flexibility in sustaining employee engagement within the retail sector of the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employee motivation and engagement are major factors that enable employee productivity within the organization. Employee productivity is crucial in meeting organizational objectives and goals. The COVID-19 pandemic had caused countrywide lockdowns in the UK including border closures to contain the rapid spread of the virus. Organizations had to close down and the entire work base had shifted to the digital medium. It became extremely challenging for organizations especially in the retail industry to sustain employee engagement and make the work base more flexible. The organizations have been coerced into making changes to maintain employee productivity as well as organizational profitability. The revenues of the organizations had gone down during the pandemic due to the cessation of international trade activities and most organizations decided to cut down on the workforce, which affected employee engagement to a significant extent and challenged the notion of sustainability within the organizations. Remote working culture has induced the need for facilitating flexible timings to enable employee performance and help them to accommodate both their home lives and work. The research aims to explore the impact of flexibility on sustaining the engagement of the employees and maintaining their flexibility.

## **1.2 General background**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been harrowing for people and organizations all over the world. The pandemic has led to the entire work base being shifted to the virtual medium because the offices were closed down. The sudden shift has made it challenging for organizations and individuals to adapt to remote work, affecting employee engagement. Only a tenth of the employees feel engaged at work and 21% are actively disengaged (Gyton, 2021). The profitability of the organization involves the performance of the employees. Employee performance is crucial to the success of the organization and enhancing employee engagement while maintaining organizational productivity is often a matter of concern for organizations. Employee engagement has become a strategy and the greatest resource for any business organization (Dinh, 2020). The retail industry employs almost 3 million people all over the UK.

The retail sector has been facing skilled labor shortages posing challenges to meeting organizational objectives. Employees in the retail industry have flexible working hours however, the flexibility is confined to mostly the support managers and sales assistants. Flexibility is however thin for the store managers. Employees can get trapped by their need for flexibility which limits their opportunities for skill development, lack of engagement ultimately leading to an absence of skilled employees and limiting their income opportunities, especially for low-income workers (Timewise.co.uk, 2022). Pandemic has further challenged employee engagement in the retail industry of the UK due to the remote working culture and a change in the consumer purchasing culture as well. This has led to an overall change in organizational policies, changes in the leadership structures which have had a significant impact on employee engagement and sustainability.

### **1.3 Rationale of the research**

#### ***What is the issue?***

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the retail sector of the UK, introducing numerous changes in the working culture, where the entire medium of work has shifted to the virtual medium. The employees have been working from home which has resulted in a lack of engagement. Organizational productivity is determined by the efforts of the employees and their engagement (Larasati and Hasanati, 2019). Engaging the employees, introducing a flexible work culture has become challenging which is impacting the sustainability of employee performance within the organization.

#### ***Why is the issue?***

The pandemic has led to a countrywide lockdown and office closures resulting in the working medium shifted online or virtual. The massive shift from office culture to remote working has had a significant impact on employee engagement. Disengaged employees are a debilitating factor for organizational performance (Adisaet al. 2021). Organizational management is finding it difficult to sustain employee engagement so the role of flexible working hours and employee flexibility would be analyzed to sustain employee engagement, especially within the retail sector in the UK.

#### ***Why is it an issue now?***

The organizations find it extremely challenging to implement policy frameworks that would be able to support employee engagement and help them be more productive whilst maintaining their work-life balance (Sekhar *et al.* 2018). Remote working has led to a culture of overworking, disengaged employees which could be mitigated by flexible working hours and employee flexibility. However, the change in the work culture poses a problem in the implementation of policies that would be able to sustain employee engagement within the organization.

#### ***What does the research shed light on?***

The research sheds light on the importance of flexibility in sustaining employee engagement because employees are the backbone of an organization (Como *et al.* 2021). The retail sector has faced mammoth losses due to the pandemic. The research would analyze the factors which have affected employee engagement and suggest ways in which it could be enhanced. The role of flexible working hours in increasing employee engagement would also be explored to provide recommendations to manage the changes posed by the change in the working culture and employee engagement.

#### **1.4 Significance and purpose of the research**

The organizations need to manage employee productivity and organizational productivity. The pandemic has led to numerous changes in the work culture, including changes in the organizational framework which has proliferated a need for sustainability in the working environment of organizations to maintain employee engagement which would, in turn, lead to organizational profitability. The research is significant because it aims to analyze and evaluate the impact of workplace flexibility on sustaining employee engagement which would be crucial in increasing organizational profitability and productivity.

The purpose of the research is to understand the role of employee flexibility in organizational profitability, and enabling employee engagement. Consumer behavior has drastically changed due to the pandemic so enhancing performance and engagement has become challenging for organizations. Flexibility, according to researchers, is key to innovation in organizations and a well-timed adaptation is crucial to sustenance (Jena and Memon, 2018). The research will be studying the role of leadership, changes in organizational policies, and the impact of flexibility on organizational profitability as well as employee engagement.

### **1.5 Aim of the research**

The research aims to evaluate and analyze the role of sustaining flexibility in employee engagement within the retail sector in the UK during the pandemic.

### **1.6 Research objectives**

The objectives of the research are as follows:

- To explore the role of sustaining flexibility in employee engagement within the retail sector in the UK during the pandemic.
- To analyze the impact of the reduction in labor cost during the pandemic.
- To identify challenges in sustaining employee flexibility during the pandemic.
- To make an analysis of the theoretical aspects of management of an organization and employee flexibility.
- To make a recommendation of policies and strategies for management of the challenges faced by the organizations in engaging the employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **1.7 Research question**

According to the significance and purpose of the research, the following research question has been considered.

‘What is the role of flexibility in sustaining employee engagement within the retail sector of the UK during a pandemic?’

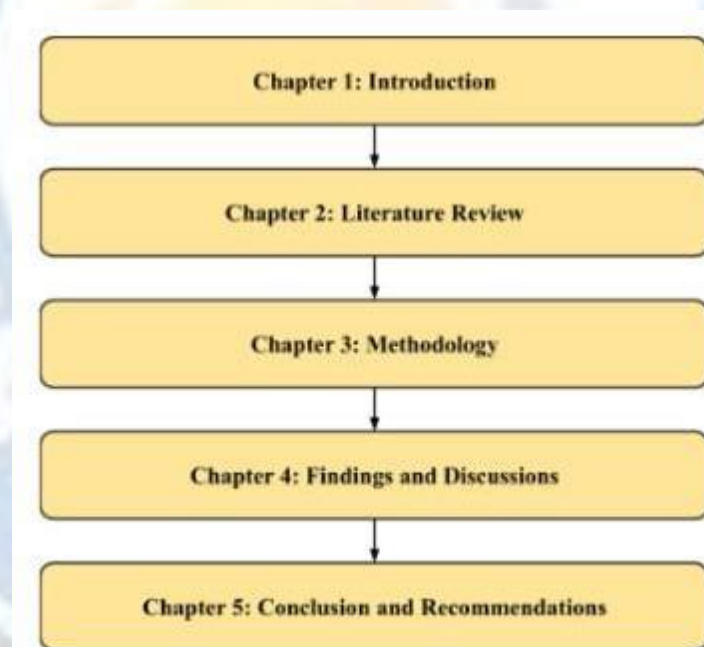
### **1.8 Problem statement**

Employee engagement has always been a major challenge for organizations. Flexible working arrangements have become popular in the organizational framework of businesses. Researchers conducted show a positive effect of the flexible working arrangements on employee productivity (Weideman and Hofmeyr, 2020). However, the pandemic has affected work timings, employee schedules and overall human resource management in organizations, including a change in leadership. The pandemic has impacted the retail industry of the UK severely so the role of work flexibility in mitigating employee issues as well as sustaining employee engagement contributing to organizational profitability would be evaluated and explored.

## 1.9 Overview of the methodology

The researcher would be conducting qualitative research where a systematic literature review would be conducted. The research philosophy which has been chosen is interpretivism and the research design chosen is descriptive design. The researcher has chosen a deductive research approach. Secondary data analysis has been chosen by the researcher, where the researcher has referred to journals authored by scholars, to understand and delve deeper into the topic. The researcher has referred to news articles, magazines, government records, scholarly journals and books as secondary data. The researcher has also tested the reliability and validity of the data (Williams *et al.* 2020). The sampling method used has been purposive sampling under non-probability sampling. The researcher has conducted a thematic analysis to analyze and draw patterns from the data collected.

## 1.10 Organization of the dissertation



**Figure 1: Organization of the dissertation**

(Source: Created by self)

### 1.11 Summary

The employee engagement has largely been impacted by the shift to the remote culture which has given rise to a culture of overworking, leading to disengagement of employees. Flexible working culture would enable innovation and organizational productivity which would sustain employee engagement.



## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The research would look at the aspects of employee engagement and how work flexibility has a crucial role to play in maintaining employee engagement. The literature review would source relevant scholarly journals to analyze the impact of reduction in labor cost during the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges in sustaining employee flexibility during the pandemic would be explored. Certain organization examples under the retail sector of the UK would be used to analyze the challenges and recommendations would be provided on how the challenges can be mitigated and the employees can be engaged in their workplace. The gaps in literature would be analyzed and a conceptual framework would also be presented.

### **2.2 Importance of work flexibility in employee engagement**

Work flexibility refers to the employees being given a significant amount of freedom where they can choose the location, time and manner in which they work, to help align the organizational goals with individual goals. Work flexibility is a crucial concept in employee engagement because it helps the employees be more resilient, engaged, versatile and acceptable of changes that the organization brings about in its working procedures. Larasati and Hasanti (2019). Opined that, effort and attachment of the employees to their work determine organizational productivity to a significant extent. The researcher also further posits that work life balance, rewards, work environment are crucial factors which enhance employee engagement. Work life balance according to the researchers refers to the instances where the employee is able to balance the demands at work including the demands of emotion, time and attitude. Work life balance enhances employee engagement, loyalty and satisfaction including lesser absenteeism and turnover rates at the organization (Adisaet *al.* 2021). Organizations such as Unilever, UK, one of the largest consumer goods companies, offer their employees with work flexibility because employee engagement can only be ensured when the employees have their psychological and social needs fulfilled. Work life balance is ensured through work flexibility where the employee can choose their timings and adequately provide time for other social and familial engagements, which comes as a major benefit for working parents. organizations have increasingly discovered that employee productivity and organizational success can be proliferated through flexible

working arrangements, promoting a skilled and motivated employee base who can handle both the work pressure and their family life as well, because higher levels of employee engagement reduced organizational turnover (Sekhar *et al.* 2018). Providing employees with a flexible working arrangement promotes employees' willingness to work. According to Maslow's needs hierarchy, the first need pertains to physiological needs where the individual requires timely payment from the organization for the maintenance of food and shelter which are the basic needs. The second stage pertains to the basic safety needs where the individual wants security for their resources, employment, property, and health. The third category refers to the psychological needs or that of love and belonging, where the individual wants to feel loved and valued. This is where the importance of work flexibility comes in. A flexible working arrangement allows the individual to commit to other engagements which don't revolve around work. This work-life balance and fulfillment of basic needs leads individuals to seek needs of self-esteem where the individual is regarded for their contributions and efforts. The esteem needs are met by the organization through appreciating the employees, promoting them, or financially compensating them. They can be achieved by the employee only when they are not bogged down by long hours and have a healthy schedule of work. The basic needs, when met, lead the employees to self-actualize where they reach their full potential and prove to be major assets of the organization.

### **2.3 Exploring the role of sustaining flexibility in employee engagement within the retail sector in the UK during the pandemic**

Sustenance of flexibility is a crucial factor that enables employee engagement because it helps the employees in maintaining a work-life balance. The professional world is undergoing rapid changes and the pandemic has led to several employees re-evaluating their working arrangements where they want to explore flexible working options. Employees are viewed as the most valuable assets of an organization (Dirani *et al.* 2020). Retail employers, who would be tackling shift or rotation systems, and the already streamlined work systems have been facing challenges due to the work flexibility. There are several retail organizations where the decision of flexible working is taken by the store or regional management and doesn't involve the human resources department in every case. Traditionally, retail working has always been attractive to people who have wanted to work flexibly. Agile working poses challenges however, equally contributes towards employee innovation, engagement, and dedication towards the organization

(Clydeco.com, 2021). In retail sectors such as Unilever, employees when working flexibly have been reported to have more productivity because they are satisfied with their working arrangements. In the retail sector, it is not uncommon for employees to swap their shifts informally and have a roster system or for the staff working from the office to work remotely, which is often prevalent for working mothers or fathers, in the UK. However, this flexibility is more of an informal nature than formal, where the organization allows it to make the working arrangement more plausible for the employees and help them manage their work as well as their personal responsibilities. Organizations that adjust quicker and function better under unpredictable circumstances are categorized as flexible, productive and it happens best-distributed leadership as well as less interdependence (Obrenovic *et al.* 2020). This is seen mostly in the case of the white-collared employees whereas the blue collared employees have to attend an office or the retail store. Work flexibility enables employee engagement in the UK retail sector which is ever flourishing and is one of the most prospective sectors of work.

#### **2.4. Post Pandemic scenario of the labor market**

The labor market suffered severely due to the worsening impact of the pandemic all across the world. Moreover, it can be also be seen that the labor market was almost suffering from scarcity and was empty because there were severe limitations and regulations in the migration of the laborers. During the pandemic, when there was a global lockdown announced by governments all over the world, the condition of the labor market was experiencing a downfall. The pandemic has almost developed a disruption within the global labor market which although, later experienced a recovery in the post-pandemic phase. Several changes were identified in the post-pandemic scenario within the labor market all over the world.

In the post-pandemic scenario, there was a complete disbalance in the labor market along with the supply chain crisis that was faced by most of the organizations. Despite, the recovery of condition, there was a high demand for the laborers, and yet a small number of laborers who are ready to work. The recovery stage of the labor market experienced a bit of tightness which also affected the services and the performances of the organizations. Further, the low number of labor also developed a rise in the price as well as in the wages of the labor through which there was an emergence of risk of inflation in the post-pandemic era.

Furthermore, after the pandemic, it has been seen that in October 2021, the labor market and the availability of labor was highly below the level of pre-crisis which indicates the fact that the participation level and rate of the labor was significantly low even after the pandemic because of the fear and the panic of the virus (ECB.Europa.EU, 2021). It can also be seen that due to the lack of labor in the market, there was high pressure on increasing the wages. Although, the condition was recovering the recovery was extremely slow.

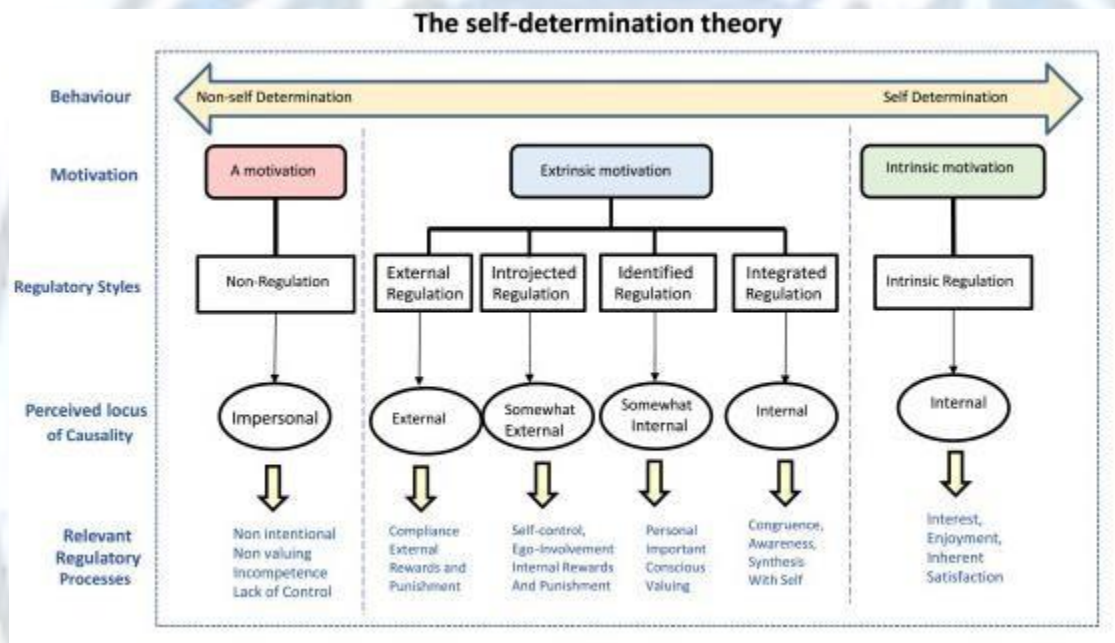
## **2.5. The impact of the lowering labor cost post-pandemic**

Along with the slow recovery of the labor market, the condition of the labor market was also making signs of recovery, which also resulted in lowering costs and expenses of the labor. Along with the recovery of the condition in the labor market, the labor costs lowered along with the overall costs of the production that is required which introduced a scope or opportunity for the organizations. Moreover, the lowering costs of labor were one of the significant signs of the post-pandemic recovery. After the pandemic, the organization was able to stabilize themselves which can be analyzed by the employments. Especially in the retail sector, many organizations such as Unilever introduced many employment opportunities like online recruitment and many more facilities. Through this way, the retail organizations were able to reduce the cost due to inflation or the challenges they faced during the pandemic.

Through many platforms, the retail organizations introduced and promoted distance working which helped the organizations in the reduction of the costs and the expenses of the labor (Contractor, 2022). Moreover, through the process of cutting labor costs, retail organizations such as Unilever were able to enhance their performances and also was able to stabilize the economic condition of the organization as well as the financial condition. Organizations like Unilever were able to make the process of recruitment more fun by using advanced technologies. Advancement and application of technology were one of the impacts of the lowering costs of the labors in organizations. Further, the organizations were again stable and were able to maintain the financial condition effectively of te organization Through the lowered costs of the labor, the organizations were also able to invest to enhance and improve the supply chain. Further, it can also be seen that the Job retention schemes that were introduced by the government, helped a lot. The schemes such as the Furlough, helped the organizations to bear the cost of the labor which was advantageous for the organizations (Ons.gov.uk, 2020).

## 2.6. Challenges that are faced in sustaining the employee flexibility during and after the pandemic

The organizations have experienced and faced several challenges in maintaining and sustaining employee flexibility in the organization. Working amidst the pandemic was quite tough for the employees. The challenges have been raised from the remote working and working from home. Maintaining the flexibility of the employees was tough because they couldn't be tracked physically and the flexibility can't be ensured through virtual presence. Further, it can also be seen that there were communication gaps between the organization and its employees.



**Figure 2: Self Determination theory**

(Source: Al-Habaibehet *al.*, 2021)

According to the self-determination theory, it can be seen and analyzed that the employees of an organization can be motivated to be flexible. In this case of remote working, the employees can't be motivated directly because they are not physically present in the organization. Hence the flexibility can't be incurred.

However, in the post-pandemic scenario, it can be seen that the organizations such as Unilever promote remote working and in this way, they are unable to ensure employee flexibility. Moreover, it can also be seen and understood that the organizations are still facing difficulties and hardships like a lack of management of the employees (Deloitte.com, 2022). Furthermore, it

has also been seen that the employees are less prioritizing the work and also are putting less effort which needs to be changed.

## **2.7. Strategies to overcome the challenges that are faced in sustaining the employee flexibility**

In the post-pandemic situation, the employees are the ones who have faced various situations, for this Unilever needs to make proper strategies to overcome the issues. The strategies need to be made by the company properly, so that the employees can get the chances to work properly in the company.

**Rewards facility:** The company needs to provide the employees with the rewards that the employees can get the courage to work. It helps to perform better, the employees can feel better also. The relation between the employees and the company can be made in a better manner. Rewards and recognition gives employees another level of courage to work (Cote, 2019).

**Motivation seminars:** As the company is going through a tough time, the employees also faced disruption in their work. For this, the company needs to help the employees on that matter. For this the upline members need to process the motivation seminars for the employees. The employees feel motivated towards the work. Motivation has also a significant and positive effect on career development (Niati *et al.* 2021).

**Job retention process:** if the company can adopt the retention process in their work process it can be helpful for the employees. The company can ask the employees to reduce the salary which they get in a regular manner, otherwise their job can be secured which they want. It helps to build the trust among the employees and they provide good work to the company as the company wants.

**Provides the holidays to the employees:** In the tough schedule of work[process, the employees can feel tired and exhausted. For this, the company needs to provide the holidays. It can help them to uplift their mood, they can spend this time with their family members and friends which can be a great initiative by the company. Moreover, the flexibility can be adopted by the employees in a proper manner.

## **2.8. The impact of the employees flexibility in the management of an organization**

The employees of an organization are the core of the work process, the organization especially the retail sector cannot be run for a long time without proper employees. The employees need to have a flexible attitude and they need to contribute to the work process to their potential as much as possible. After the pandemic happened the retail sectors need more flexible workers in their organization. Various types of flexible work processes can benefitted the employees and the organization properly (Ciarniene and Vienazindiene, 2018). In today's era, the consumer's purchasing process and behavior is unpredictable, to satisfy the customer's company needs to do a lot of hard work like investing more time in producing products or contributing to the promotion process in a more proficient manner. For this, the employees can play a great role, they can contribute their excellence and flexible process in their work process of the organization. It can be said that the organization needs those employees in their working sector who can help the company when the company needs it. As the companies are going through a tough time due to the shortage of employees, the employees can help them to overcome the issues. For example, if the company has a deadline to provide the products to the customers, they can ask for the employees to do extra work and even ask to stay more hours in the office. It can help the employees to maintain the business process. Besides that, if an employee has various skills at a time like the person knows accounts as well as the employees know how to do operations in the organization, then the employees can make a great impact in the business process. In this crisis of the pandemic situation, the flexible employees can cut down the cost of the organization as well. Along with that they can help to generate more revenue in the retail sectors, which is a biggest achievement for the organizations as well.

## **2.9. Analysis of the theoretical aspects of management of an organization and employee flexibility**

Job retention is an important approach which is maintained by various companies, especially after the pandemic. The reason behind it, the employees can feel more engaged with their work and perform properly. Like this approach, the management of the organizations take many initiatives to maintain the employees, flexibility in the working process. According to Mcclend's developed Theory X and theory Y, which states that the employees are different from each other and their goals are also different (Renata *et al.* 2018). Theory X defines only those

employees who have apathetic nature as well as they dislike their work, on the other hand theory Y defines that the employees are self-motivated towards the work. However, both of the employees can get courage to work in the company properly. For example, if Unilever paid a good amount of money to the employees then they can get the good courage in the working process. Moreover, that the management of the company needs to get equal support and motivation from the upline members, then the working process can be better. According to Herzberg's motivation theory, there are two aspects motivator and hygiene factors (Chiat and Panatik, 2019). The motivators are job satisfaction, responsibilities and growth. These processes need to be provided by the human resource teams of Unilever, which helps the employees towards the growth of the employees as well as the company. On the other hand, hygiene factors are low salary, bad working conditions, strict rules and policies, however the company needs to work on that matter. If the company gets into tough situations like the unpredictable situations of a pandemic, then the company needs to discuss the problems with the employees to process the work in a proper way. These small steps help the employees to perform their best and help the company to grow in a rapid manner. The management needs to understand that, when the company is going through tough times, they ask for help from the employees, in the same way when the company gets success they need to give rewards to the employees to perform better.

## **2.10 Policies and strategies to minimize challenges faced while dealing with flexible retail environment**

It is no wonder that during the Covid-19 pandemic the online retail shopping has increased significantly and therefore, according to consumer demand, the trend of the retail sector is seen in terms of flexible working hours in most of the companies. A change therefore has occurred in job demand, employees are now allowed to choose the location and timing of their work aligning with the degree to which particular tasks demand (Van Steenberg *et al.* 2018). As the process is being done with minimum interference of colleges and senior management, therefore, there remains a chance of getting loopholes in tasks, delay in delivery of services, technology disruption and communication gap.

In this regard, flexible work policy includes flex time, job sharing, split shift, alternative schedule, 100% remote environment to work and others. Among this, flex time is called adjusted

hours which in turn, support workers to start working and leave the work according to their requirements. On the other hand, job sharing refers to the single position full time which is shared by or splitted between two to three employees. Most importantly, the organization, while providing the facilities for working at home, must adhere to privacy and security. For example, in the arrangement of temporary remote working employees might be threatened from security risks such as poorly configured equipment for networking mixing personal and office devices and others. Also regulatory consent is another concern as a means of strategy to continue remote working for those retailers that executed the policy namely “work from anywhere”. As opined by Rai (2018), engagement is considered as a positive attribute of an employee towards the individual’s organization that also drives the employee to work with another employee and gradually improve performance. In the emerging new normal situation, Unilever has started a flexible program of working which added additional flux to develop the skills set of employees. For example, Unilever has implemented hybrid workplace policies which impacted on diverse working groups in the workplace. However, the U-work policy of the company is providing the flexibility to their employees what they exactly want. It allows the creation of new contracts with employees, which is not a part of the job (Forbes.com, 2021). Alternatively they get a minimum retainer on a monthly basis which represents a portion of their salary from their previous job.

### **2.11 Developing understanding on the flexibility that is desired to achieve sustaining engagement of employees**

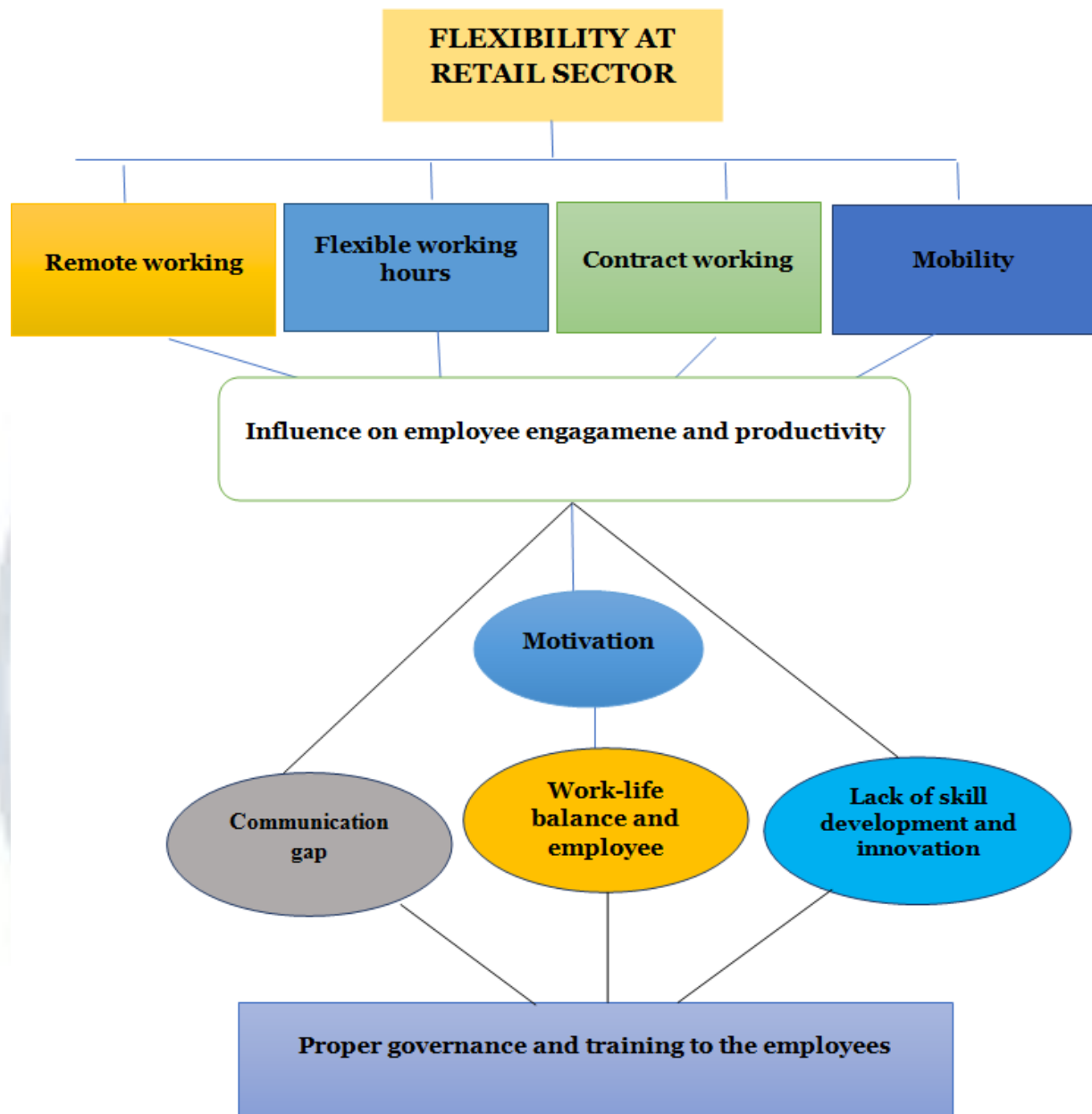
The employees and employer together need to develop an understanding regarding the flexibility type which is accepted as well as achievable by all. The environment of pure remote working is a kind of workplace flexibility that might alienate some employees who are prospective and eager to return to the office spaces and on the other hand, it might generate additional burden on the employees who are responsible enough to their work. Another dimension of flexibility is the time of starting and closing the office work, however, different people have different choices and ideas to maintain work-life balance. Therefore, the management needs to understand the choices of employees and set boundaries to what extent the employees can enjoy a flexible work environment. In this regard, a new flexible model needs to be developed by the management which must fit to the organization culture and last beyond the situation of pandemic, however, it needs examination of process, people and infrastructure. The research derived from the pre-

pandemic era demonstrates if the management allows workers to save time for commuting the work either by allowing flexibility in working hours or working from home (Stevenson, 2021). It has been analysed that women are impacted largely by lack of flexibility and stability in regards to retail jobs. Following this, Unilever has enacted the approach of inclusive sourcing in terms of “Enhancing livelihood” which is an initiative to provide opportunities to women and as well as facilitate inclusive business (Kalkanciet *al.* 2019). Currently, the flexible job market is robust in nature, it is because the job seekers feel empowered while getting flexible working opportunities. Gen Z and millennials are being drawn in the arrangement of flexible work. It is also found that approximately 39% of the total workforce in retail belong to the age group under 28, hence, the retail companies that offer flexible work opportunities have the chance of attracting a large variety of talented retail young adults (Retaildive.com, 2019).

## **2.12 Research gap**

From the discussion of the literature in the above sections, it has been found that the authors did not discuss the topic in terms of theoretical analysis. Therefore, it is needed to understand whether the policies and strategies to combat the challenges of flexible working qualifies the theoretical attributes. However, in this research the policies and strategies taken by the retail industry in terms of Unilever are to be assessed in terms of theoretical understanding to examine the validity for employee engagement.

### 2.13 Conceptual framework



**Figure 3: Conceptual framework**

(Source: Self- Created)

In the above figure, the connection between the variables of the research have been demonstrated. The findings which are derived from the literature review as a whole have been shown in the figure in a visualized form.

## 2.14 Summary

In this chapter, literature has been taken based on the concepts of flexible environment working, different flexible policies and strategies aligning with the challenges, employee engagement due to the influence of remote working and others. It has been found that in the retail sector, especially in the UK, employees are being benefited by this policy, however, the management needs to keep the process in continuous monitoring to improve the workplace environment. The research gap has been identified which states that the policy and strategies to be outlined must be supported by theories.

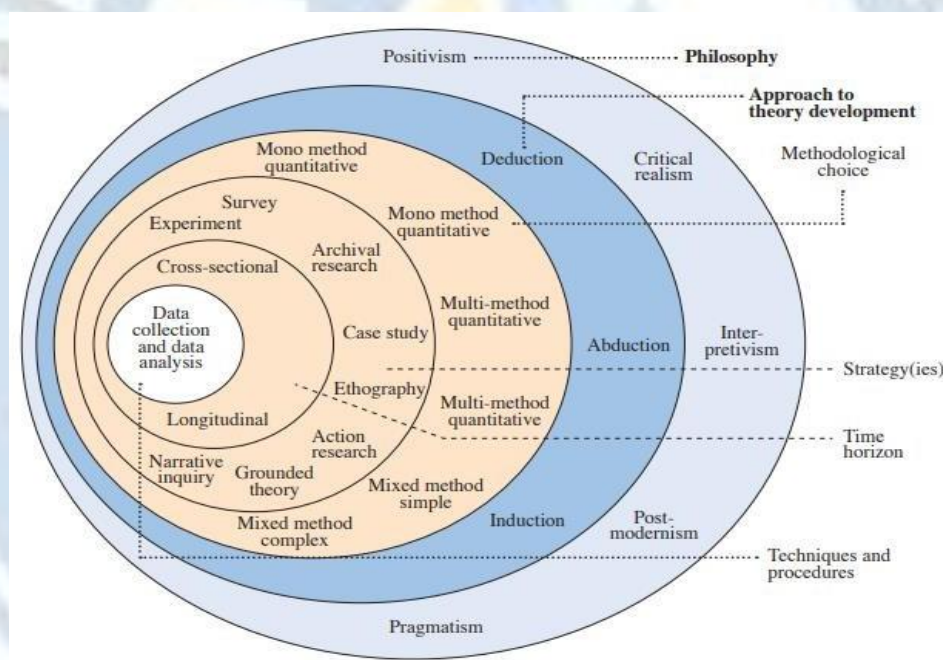


## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

### 3.1 introduction

The different research techniques and tools which have been used by the researcher to conduct systematic research have been discussed. The methodologies used for the research could provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic being studied. The chapter discusses the research philosophy, research design, and the method for data collection and would also state the data analysis methods, along with the justification for their use, in the research. The ethics of the research which have been duly followed by the researcher would be stated and the limitations faced in the completion of the research would also be provided.

### 3.2 Research Onion



**Figure 4: Research Onion**

(Source: Melnikovas, 2018).

The research onion has been demonstrated which is a useful tool and enables the researcher to consider the research methodologies holistically. It helps the researcher with the decisions that must be taken in terms of the research design that would suit the research purpose. The research onion is comprised of six main layers which pertain to the research philosophy to be chosen,

secondly, the research approach which highlights two basic categories, inductive and deductive approach, thirdly, choosing the methodology for the research, that is, whether the researcher would choose qualitative or quantitative methods (Melnikovas, 2018). The fourth aspect pertains to deciding and designing a strategy for data collection, the fifth is underlining and determining the timeframe for the research, and lastly, designing and determining the methods and techniques which could be used for data collection and its analysis. The research onion is important because it equips the researcher with the ability to go from the outer to inner layers of the research (Sahay, 2016). The research onion is of crucial importance for the researcher because it provides a clear idea of the processes and methodologies that must be followed by the researchers to reach the depth of the subject and gain an in-depth understanding of the topic.

### **3.3 Research philosophy**

philosophy in research refers to the belief which helps the researcher in the collection of information about the phenomenon which is being studied and can also be used to analyze it. The four types of research philosophies which are used to conduct research are interpretivism, positivism, realism, and post-positivism. Interpretivism has been chosen as the preferred research philosophy by the researcher. Interpretivism refers to the ontological assumptions that are subjective. Interpretivism was developed as a contradiction to positivism and is of the view that reality is a social construction and is evolving constantly, making the facts and knowledge subjective as well as relative (Melnikovas, 2018). Interpretivism is the claim that the social world cannot exist in isolation from human thought and perception.

#### ***Justification***

Interpretivism has been chosen as the preferred research philosophy because it concerns the in-depth factors and variables which are related to the context and considers humans to be different from the physical phenomenon. After all, they create meanings since the process of studying is different for humans and that of physical phenomena (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Interpretivism would be able to provide in-depth analysis and equip the researcher to study the role that flexibility plays in sustaining employee engagement within a rapidly changing industry such as the retail sector of the UK. Interpretivism would allow the researcher to perceive the issue from an unbiased point of view and analyze the role of sustaining flexibility within the retail sector of the UK.

### **3.4 Research design**

Research design helps provide a clarification for the overall strategies which have been chosen for the logical integration of the different components into the research. There are three types of research designs which are exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive. The researcher has chosen a descriptive research design. The descriptive research design refers to obtaining information for systematically describing a population, phenomenon, or situation. The descriptive design answers questions about how what, and when which informs the research questions rather than answering the why (Atmowardoyo, 2018).

#### ***Justification***

The descriptive design would enable the researcher to understand and elucidate on the different factors of employee engagement and how implementing work flexibility would benefit the employees and would be able to contribute to long-term employee wellbeing and employee engagement. Through the design, the researcher would be able to understand and comprehend why sustaining flexibility would lead to better employee engagement, within the retail sector of the UK.

### **3.5 Research approach**

The research approach is an important part of the research since it helps the researcher in formulating a research plan. Using a research approach efficiently would be able to provide insight into different theories and concepts which underpins the research subject. The two research approaches are deductive and inductive. The deductive approach is applied when the researcher applies the existing theories to current phenomena to gain insight and the inductive approach allows the formulation of a new theory based on the existing knowledge on the topic. The researcher has chosen an inductive approach for the research study. The inductive research approach begins by collecting the data that is relevant to the study and after the collection of enough data for the subject, the researcher analyzes the data to gain a comprehensive insight.

#### ***Justification***

The inductive research approach has been used to provide a systematic insight into the aspect of work flexibility and its impact on employee engagement in the retail sector of the UK. It has been used since it provides unmediated knowledge and information on the subject using

observation and analysis, including an insight into the future research outcomes that the researcher might encounter, in course of the research.

### **3.6 Data collection method**

There are two types of methods for data collection which are the primary and secondary techniques for data collection. For primary research, the researcher refers to only first-hand data collected from sources through interviews, surveys, or questionnaires among others. Secondary collection data, on the other hand, refers to the collection of data from secondary sources which are relevant to the subject being studied. Secondary data usually involves data that has been previously gathered and is under consideration for being used to address new research questions (Martins *et al.* 2018). The research has used a secondary data collection method which would make use of only the existing literature and relevant information from news articles, websites, scholarly articles, and industry reports.

#### ***Justification***

The researcher has used a secondary data collection method which includes sourcing relevant information from journal articles, newspaper reports, industry reports, magazines, and relevant government policy documents. The database chosen for sourcing the relevant scholarly articles is Google scholar. The secondary journals would be sourced from Google scholar while the industry records and others relevant industry reports would be sourced from consultancy firms such as McKinsey, Forbes, Deloitte among others. The researcher would be able to gain relevant information from the insights of the scholars who have worked on the subject in the past and analyze the current changes in the trends and arrive at a more comprehensive inference.

### **3.7 Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

The inclusion and exclusion criteria state which articles and data would be taken to take the research ahead and which won't along with its justification. The researcher has wanted to analyze current trends in employee engagement and the importance of work flexibility so, articles no older than five years have been chosen. The researcher has excluded data that are ambiguous, outdated, pirated, or don't have credibility and don't add to the clarity of the analysis. Data that are current and relevant have been chosen which could significantly contribute to the study and insight into the subject of study.

### **3.8 Data analysis method**

There are three available research methods to analyze the data collected which pertain to qualitative quantitative and mixed methods research. The researcher has used a qualitative approach to the analysis of the data collected. The data analysis method chosen is a systematic literature review to go on to thematic analysis.

#### ***Justification***

The researcher has chosen thematic analysis. It allows the researcher to identify themes within the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The researcher has applied thematic analysis to a set of texts and identified the common themes, including ideas, themes, and patterns that come up repeatedly in the course of the research. The technique is flexible, including the fact that the interpretations are supported by data, ensuring the validity and reliability of the interpretations.

### **3.9 Ethical considerations**

The researcher would adhere to and abide by the research ethics strictly. The researcher would not include data that is pirated or plagiarized. The work presented by the researcher would be completely non-plagiarized and would include authentic citations and due credit to the research scholars, whose work has been referred to.

### **3.10 Limitations of the research**

The researcher due to paucity of time and budget couldn't conduct mixed methods research. However, the budget has been a limitation since the researcher couldn't obtain certain information from sites that needed a subscription.

### **3.11 Research timeline**

[Refer to the appendix].

### **3.12 Summary**

The research has been conducted using interpretivism as the preferred research philosophy. The researcher has used the descriptive research design as the chosen research design and the inductive approach as the chosen research approach. The chosen data collection method is the

secondary data analysis method which would be using google scholar as its primary database for sourcing scholarly journals. The preferred data analysis method is a thematic analysis and a systematic literature review. The ethical considerations and the research limitations have also been stated including the provision of the research timeline in the form of a Gantt chart.



## Chapter 4: Thematic analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

The chapter deals with the identification of the themes relevant to the topic associated with the impact of sustaining flexibility on employee engagement within the retail sector of the UK. The chapter also covers the various aspects of flexibility, the concept of employee engagement within the retail sector as well as the impact of both within the retail sector. Analysis of the themes has provided a ground for relating the literature studied with the main research made.

### 4.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis refers to a qualitative method to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the available set of data corpus. The thematic analysis method, as stated by Braun and Clarke is an iterative process that consists of six steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating coding categories, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) locating exemplars (Scharp and Sanders, 2019).

#### ***Theme 1: Critically evaluating the necessity of employee engagement within the retail sectors of the UK***

It is usually noted that employees who are engaged, have a higher level of commitment and motivation and are thus interested in sustaining their involvement with the organization while performing activities which are beyond their assigned and regular duties (Ghlichlee and Bayat, 2020). Their motivation helps in serving multiple aspects of an organisational growth

#### ***Increase customer satisfaction***

Siddiqi (2015) cited in Borah and Barua, (2018) pointed out that customer satisfaction and loyalty are direct outcomes of employee engagement, thus establishing a strong positive relationship between employee engagement and customer satisfaction and loyalty. The high engagement among the employees ensures their job satisfaction, and their scope to make free decisions within an organisation. For example, in the case of Unilever, the company considers the people bringing their personal purpose to the workplace which makes them feel engaged and affirmative regarding their overall well-being as well as development in Unilever. This provides a scope for the employees to be more innovative in their approach thus improving the services they provide. Engaged employees are genuinely enthusiastic and passionate about the

organisations they work for and their services, and mission allowing them to take pride in representing the company. This creates a scope for the engaged employees to be more invested and strongly willing to take their time with customers and personalize their experience. This ultimately leads to increased customer loyalty and retention. For example, Unilever has 37 in-house People Data Centres that analyse data collected from social media platforms, their Consumer Carelines as well as digital marketing allowing the company to provide spontaneous responses to customer feedback. In 2021, Unilever executed over 4 million interactions through Consumer Careline calls social media, letters, webchats and email (Unilever, 2022).

#### *Enhance brand image*

Engaged employees tend to spread a positive message regarding organisations. Currently, word of mouth exerts ample influence. If organisations do not follow their promises towards their employees, people shall eventually find out (Quist, 2021). With a gross value added (GVA) of almost 92 billion British pounds in 2019, the UK economy is largely dominated by retail sectors. Evidently, the customers have multiple choices in order to choose a suitable brand. The plus point of the retail sector that aids in putting one firm above the other is the way the employees are performing to portray the best value of a brand.

Thus, it can be stated that employee engagement is extremely necessary to ensure the enhanced organisational outcome

#### ***Theme 2: Analysing the impact of low flexibility on employee engagement within the retail sectors of the UK***

Implementing flexibility in the workplace can be regarded as the strategy of a company undertaken with an aim of maintaining the members of the organisation, in a way that the balance between their personal and professional life is well maintained (Capnary *et al.* 2018). The lack of this flexibility adversely affects employees and results in an overall degradation of organisational productivity

#### ***Lack of motivation***

A flexible workplace allows employees to switch between full time and part-time working facilities, depending on the situation. The lack of this flexibility often dissolves the scope of employees to enjoy their family time or to indulge in their leisure activities. Lack of a flexible work environment also forces the employees to get involved in rush hour disapproving remote working that further creates monotony as well as frustration among the employees, reducing their

motivation to work. In the case of retail firms, employees turn out to be the face of the organisation they work for, as they interact with the customers predominantly. The lack of motivation results in decreased job satisfaction, making the retail employees less loyal to their responsibility, leading to customer dissatisfaction in the long run.

### ***High employee turnover***

Especially during the pandemic, the retail sector faced a high turnover rate as many retail firms were not aware of the workplace strategies that can ensure effective working procedures keeping in mind the necessity of remote working. As most the retail sector employees are required to come into direct contact with customers, a flexible work pattern becomes mandatory, such that the entire duty is segregated into multiple shifts, allowing employees to interact with only a limited number of customers. Additionally, most of the retail outlets are usually located in urban areas, forcing the employees to commute long distances to reach their workplaces. Such lack of concern has often made the retail employees leave their job, showing abortion towards retail firms as employers.

The theme thus concludes that low flexibility reduces employee engagement, and the situation is further worsened due to the recent pandemic outbreak, that has made the working section more vulnerable. The research question regarding the role of flexibility in retaining employee engagement is thus answered expressing how the lack of this aspect can lead to organisational degradation.

### ***Theme 3: Examining the role of transformational leadership in ensuring flexibility within the retail sectors of the UK in the post-pandemic world***

Menges (2011) as cited in Winasis (2020) explains that transformational leaders who pay individual attention to the employees, support them and respect them reciprocally shall satisfy the employees by creating emotional attachment. Consequently, a transformational leadership climate shall provide impetus to any impending change within an organisation. During the pandemic health crisis, almost all organisations were forced to bring about changes to the workplace practices like implementing work from home (WFH) policies, adopting social distancing, daily noting the body temperature of the employees and reporting cross border travel accounts (Lee, 2021). Certain retail companies grabbed the scope of change implementation within the organisational functioning, by taking up the transformational leadership approach. For instance, Tesco recently announced a flexible working trial in collaboration with the office

service provider IWG. The initiative further strengthens the notion of transforming the traditional office set-ups since the pandemic and incorporating a hybrid workplace. It was announced by IWG that the trial with Tesco was to satisfy the strong demand of the employees to acquire suburban alternatives that can be close to home, rather than commuting to far off urban sites (McFarlane, 2022).

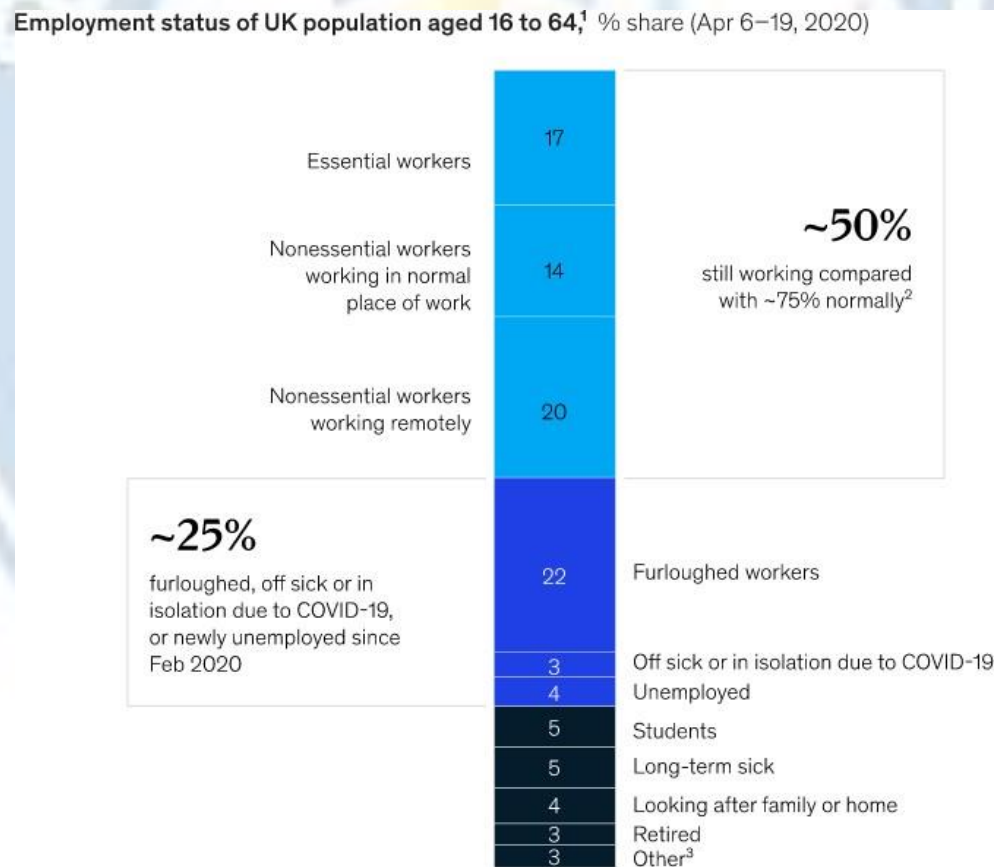
Another instance of transformational leadership ensuring employee benefit is the initiative taken by Unilever. During the pandemic, it was observed that a record number of employees, belonging to the late 50s opted for early retirement. Such early withdrawal from the workforce, if continued, might contribute to a huge brain drain, thus adversely affecting the economy. Unilever thus introduced U-Work, in order to enable people to gradually progress towards their retirement without the company losing their stock of knowledge, experience and networks (Wittenberg-Cox, 2021). U-work has transformed the concept of people having a fixed job role. Instead, their assignment varies, allowing them to do other activities of their choice. However, these workers have been ensured a monthly retainer and particularly tailored benefits even if they are not working. The employees are even allowed to choose their own working pattern, be it a few days in a week or a few months, irrespective of the fact whether they execute concentrated bursts of full-time work or with intermittent breaks (Unilever, 2022).

The discussion of the theme thus provides an idea regarding how leadership can lead organisations to be more inclined towards employee benefit and workplace flexibility, thus ensuring employee engagement. The research question is answered from the perspective that employee engagement as a result of flexibility can be ensured only if an effective transformational leadership style is followed by the organisations.

#### ***Theme 4: Critically analyze the challenges experienced by the employees working during the pandemic in the context of the UK retail sector***

Following the above-stated discussion, it has been identified that the pandemic has disrupted the lives of professionals of a large number of individuals. It has also impacted the business sectors by reducing its sales and the performance of the employees. The retail sector has experienced the heat of the pandemic in the form of disruption of logistics, declining customers demand products, shortage of cash holds and labour problems (Sahu, 2020). Accordingly, it has been identified that

the Front Line Employees and the BaseLine Employees are quite conflicted and the most they are experiencing is a threatened amount of stress (Voorhees *et al.* 2020). The inability of coping with the stress experienced during the crisis has shown a significant impact on the performance of the retail sector. As the sector has to bear challenges it has also reduced the motivation of the employees in giving their best. Significantly, the outbreak of the pandemic has also enabled the government to foster restrictions and regulations on the operations of the retail sector and the mobility of products. The retail sector of the UK was highly impacted by the imposition of the government restrictions including social distancing and lockdown (Khaliq, 2021). Due to the imposed restrictions, the organisations within the retail sector were bound to reduce the number of employees working in the firm and divide their work into shifts. Shifting duties or limited numbers of workers has increased the work pressure on the employees that have led them to experience threatening stress. Approximately 7.5 million jobs (24 per cent of the UK population) were at high risk due to the covid-19 crisis ([Mckinsey.com, 2020](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/economy/employment-status-of-the-uk-population-aged-16-to-64)).



**Figure 5: Employment status of the UK**

(Source: [Mckinsey.com, 2020](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/economy/employment-status-of-the-uk-population-aged-16-to-64))

Following Figure 5, it can be analysed that 25% per cent of the UK workforce has experienced sickness, isolation and unemployment during the covid pandemic. Significantly, the fear of the pandemic or disease and unemployment has enabled the employees to face extreme stress. The hinges in the approach of business operations have also changed the employee's behaviour towards their work or performance. Significantly, identifying consumers' needs and demands and appropriate collaboration with the workforce can effectively help the retail sector to overcome the challenges and enable them to enhance their performance for better results (Pantano *et al.* 2020). Considering the research question, it can be stated that sustaining employee engagement is highly required to sustain the retail organisations' performance in the global competitive market.

***Theme 5: Critically evaluating the challenges regarding sustaining employee flexibility during the crisis***

The world of working in the retail sector is rapidly changing after the pandemic. In accordance with the above-stated discussion, it can be effectively examined that the workforce within the UK retail sector has experienced an adverse impact from the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic. It has enabled the employees to face challenges regarding threatening stress, excessive work pressure, and fear of unemployment. However, the organisations have also experienced severe challenges in sustaining employee engagement and flexibility during the crisis. Workplace flexibility is highly required among the employees of the retail firms as it can help them to enhance their ability to adapt to changes. Flexibility among the employees enables them to increase their motivation and performance in the firm. Employee flexibility is highly effective for business firms as it helps to retain the employees and enhance their loyalty, engagement and productivity. The crisis of covid-19 has enabled a large number of employees to re-evaluate their working patterns and explore the scope of flexibility in their jobs. However, during the pandemic and post-pandemic, the retail sector has to go through a lot of challenges in maintaining employee flexibility. As it has been identified from the above-stated discussion that the imposed government restrictions such as lockdowns, social distancing and isolation as ade vast changes in the retail industry due to which the employees have to experience workplace stress, workload and many more. Accordingly, making the employees adapt to the changes was also difficult for the management. As the retail industry has also faced the loss of financial growth and employees, it was quite difficult for the sector to provide proper support and facilities to the

employees during the pandemic in order to retain them in the firms. It can be considered that individuals work better when they feel supported and valued and are provided with the flexibility to work (Forbes *et al.* 2020). Accordingly, it has been identified that the human resource management of the retail industries has also faced problems in managing the employed in coping with the new working environment (Carnevale and 2020). Before the pandemic, the employees used to spend their whole day working inside the organisation's physical environment, but after the outbreak of covid, they shifted to work in shifts or from home (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). However, working in a homely environment was also difficult for the employees and managing them to work properly was a difficult task for the management. Therefore, it can be stated that the pandemic has adversely disrupted the working pattern of the retail sector and raised challenges for the management in providing working flexibility to the workforce.

***Theme 6: examining the strategies and initiatives to be taken to address the challenges***

According to the above-stated discussion, it can be effectively examined that the retail sector and the employees within it have experienced severe challenges in managing their performance and working patterns. Most of the stores were shut down throughout the world except for medical stores and other essential stores (Khaled *et al.* 2020). The employees have experienced changes in their working shifts, working pressure and pattern. However, the management has experienced challenges in providing appropriate support and facilities to the employees in order to maintain employee retention and organisational performance. Significantly, it is highly required to address the challenges and develop appropriate strategies and initiatives and enable the firms within the particular industry to recover from the losses. In order to address the stated challenges and with proper strategies, the retail sector can effectively consider the following initiatives and strategies:

***Flexible time and compressed work weeks***

Flexible timing for working hours can help the employees to have their own freedom to choose and structure their working time. It has been identified that facilitating employees with flexible working time effectively helps to balance work-life and enhance organisational performance (Austin-Egole *et al.* 2020). Accordingly, the retail industry can also consider compressing work weeks, as it will help them to provide employees with a short working week with working hours.

***Sharing jobs***

As, it has been identified that during the pandemic the employees have to experience tremendous work pressure and related stress due to limited workforce and government restrictions for maintaining social distancing. Thus, job sharing will lead the firm to divide the work pressure among the employees equally which will effectively help to maintain employee motivation and retention. It can be also contemplated that job sharing for employees also helps to increase workplace diversity and enable the employees to make use of the part-time working time for better development of ideas and decisions such as innovation (Rover, 2018). Job sharing will help the employees to reduce their working pressure and stress and focus on other important aspects in enhancing their performance.

### ***Remote working***

Following the challenges experienced by the employees and the management of the retail sector, it has been identified that enabling all the workers to work at the firms was quite difficult during the pandemic as the government has imposed restrictions on social gatherings. Thus, facilitating the employees with remote working can help them to work from home and any other location. It will be beneficial for both the employees and the firms as it will enable the employees to continue their work according to their requirements and provide appropriate performance and service for the betterment of the firms. It has been examined that remote working facilitates work life balance and work life integrity that helps to maintain the motivation of employees and the performance of the firms (Popovici and Popovici, 2020).

Therefore, contemplating the research question it can be stated that considering the above-stated initiatives and strategies to address the challenges can help the retail industry to influence the growth of business performance during or after the covid-19 crisis.

### ***Theme 7: Critically investigating the effectiveness of employee engagement for organisational performance***

In accordance with the previous discussion, it can be argued that the retail sector of the UK can consider imposing flexible timing and compressed workweek, job sharing, and remote working to address the challenges associated with managing and sustaining employee flexibility. Based on the above-stated discussion it has been examined that managing employees is one of the key factors that helps a firm to enhance its effectiveness in the competitive environment. Employee engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling, work associated state of mind that is characterised by dedication, absorption and vigour (Adekoya *et al.* 2019). Management of employees helps to

manage the operations with proper decision making and planning for future growth with involvement and engagement of the employees. Significantly employee engagement also helps an organisation or industry to develop an organisational environment that influences and encourages appropriate communication and interaction between the employees, managers and other staff. Proper management of employees helps to develop a positive relationship among the workers and managers that further impacts the overall performance of the firm. It has been examined that employees' behaviour and their engagement in organisational operations are highly related to the success and goal of the firms (Johnson *et al.* 2018). Hence it can be contemplated that engagement of employees is significantly required to make them achieve the success and goal of the organisation. However, meeting the needs and requirements of the employees can also be a part of organisations' way of managing employees. Meeting their goals and requirements can make them motivated to meet the goals of the firm and sustain them in the competitive market environment. Therefore, considering the research question it can be contemplated that maintaining employee engagement is highly required to sustain the organisational performance. Employee engagement can be efficiently managed by sustaining employee flexibility and providing them with proper financial and non-financial requirements.

#### ***Theme 8: Analysing employee flexibility with the theoretical framework***

Following the above-stated discussion, it can be analyzed that employee engagement and management are highly required in the organization of the UK retail industry. Accordingly, it has been also examined that employee engagement is highly related to the organization's performance and success. Significantly, the effectiveness of employee flexibility can be analyzed with the theoretical framework of Kahn's employee engagement theory. The theoretical framework explains that employee engagement can be defined as the exploitation of organization members and employees to their work (Kular *et al.* 2018). Following this, it can be contemplated that employees can be involved and engaged in organizational operations by supporting, challenging, and inspiring them. It can have a significant impact on increasing satisfaction and enhancing the output of the staff. However, Khan's employee engagement theory has three dimensions that include physical, cognitive and emotional. The theory argues that employees' performance can be enhanced and they can be engaged by fulfilling their physical, cognitive and emotional needs (Al Ahad and Khan, 2020). Accordingly, considering the pandemic situation, employees were highly intent to get appropriate physical and emotional

support from the organizations they were working for. In order to sustain employee engagement in the organization, it is also required to provide the employees with flexible working hours, financial incentives to meet their physical needs and a supportive environment that can make them feel valued to meet their emotional needs. Therefore, it can be stated that employee flexibility is also an important element for an organization that helps it sustain employee engagement and competitiveness within the industry. Employee engagement and flexibility is also required to be sustained in order to sustain the success of the firms.

***Theme 9: Impact of work flexibility on the motivation of the employees***

COVID-19 has been harrowing for people all over the world. The countrywide lockdowns and shifting of office work to remote working including their stress regarding the health of their own and family members had taken a major toll on the employees' mental health and wellbeing. It had been a difficult period for the employers and managers where they had immense difficulty in engaging the employees. However, motivation is one of the major factors which plays a crucial role in engaging employees. The employees would feel more engaged if they are provided with their basic needs and are taken care of by the organization. Organizations such as Unilever had made complete sick leave payments to their employees and stood by them, in the face of adversity. The employees being supported by the organization helps them trust and stay loyal to the organization that they are working for. Employee engagement refers to a fulfilling and positive work-related state which is characterized by dedication, vigor, and absorption. Employee engagement is fuelled by intrinsic motivation where the employees on their own accord put effort into getting the work done and goes out of their way to fulfill organizational expectations. Employee engagement is when the employees feel satisfaction and inherent pleasure from participation in the organizational task or activity. Intrinsic motivation leads to employee engagement, increased employee productivity, and employee creativity, all of which result in increased organizational productivity (Ghosh *et al.* 2020). Flexible working is taken to provide several benefits to the employees however it might also pose significant difficulties to the employers. Researchers have concluded that employee motivation acts as a mediation between flexible hours of working and employee engagement. Employees through flexible hours can also be motivated because the employees can maintain a work-life balance for the same (Setiyani *et al.* 2019). Sustained flexible work timing would enhance engagement to a significant extent because the employees can maintain a work-life balance which helps them be more

motivated. Sustained flexibility of work timing helps the employees to maintain their personal and professional engagements successfully, which enables them to have a healthy work attitude. The concept of the well-being of employees is embedded in the social exchange theory which emphasizes the role that supervisors or managers play in ensuring the health and mental well-being of the employees. The satisfaction of the employees with their managers and organizations fosters a sense of trust, loyalty, and empathy towards them and intrinsically motivates the employees to work towards both personal and professional development (Haider *et al.* 2018). Sustained flexible timing helps the employees to maintain their personal and professional lives however, flexible work timings can also pose challenges so the arrangement must be mutual and to both parties' advantages. Work-life balance allows the organizations to enhance the employees' performance because a flexible and supportive work environment affects the employee's psychological well-being positively. Moreover, the capabilities of organizations such as Unilever to minimize and mitigate conflicts in maintaining work-life balance is crucial in maintaining employee engagement even in times of COVID-19 remote working culture.

***Theme 10: Analyzing the impact on employee engagement of sustaining work flexibility through Maslow's need hierarchy***

The affective events theory is one of the most effective theories which can be used to explain the mediating role played by flexible working in ensuring the psychological wellbeing of the employees. Human emotions can have several consequences related to their personal and work life. Internal as well as external forces are responsible for evoking positive emotions, one of which is work-life balance. A direct response to positive emotions is psychological well-being. Positive emotions evoked from work life balance can enhance the individual employee's psychological well-being which engages the employees better and improves their performance at their jobs. In the retail industry, where salespersons and retailers have to continually deal with customers and their changing preferences, in a stressful work environment, flexible work timing is a welcome change because the employees would be able to focus on both their personal and professional lives (Haider *et al.* 2018). Maslow's needs hierarchy theory has been used since it is the most impactful theory which provides an insight into the different dimensions of human needs and its impact on the work life of the individuals. Following the affective events theory, Maslow's need theory can be applied to study employee engagement and motivation through

sustained flexible work timing in the retail industry. Maslow's need hierarchy focuses on five aspects that pertain to physiological needs referring to air, water, clothing, and the basic needs which any individual requires to sustain and live a physically healthy life. The second is safety needs which refer to security, employment, financial resources, and a healthy body. The second stage of the needs is fulfilled by timely payment by the organizations to their employees. The third stage is love and belonging where the employee looks for romantic relationships, forge close friendships with colleagues, has a supportive work environment, and wants to feel loved. The fourth stage is esteem where individuals want to feel respected, gain status, and be given autonomy. The last stage is self-actualization where the employees self-actualize, that is to be the best versions of themselves.

Relating flexible work timings to Maslow's need hierarchy provides a significant insight into the role played by flexible work timings in ensuring the psychological well-being of the employees. As mentioned earlier, the retail sector is extremely stressed which had increased due to the pandemic and the rapid economic decline all over that took place due to the pandemic. Flexible work timings allow the employees to fulfill their caregiving duties, focus on their engagements and feel loved by spending time with their loved ones. The employees can invest time into building personal bonds and relationships which motivate them to focus on their professional lives as well where they want to feel powerful, have autonomy, and self-actualize. Self-actualization leads to organizational commitment where the employees are emotionally involved with the organization and showcase organizational citizenship behavior (Gopinath, 2021). Flexible work timings allow the employees to focus on social engagements, indulge in recreation, and do things that they want to. Imposition of work at odd timings and burdening employees with additional work demotivates them because they are unable to fulfill their psychological needs. Maslow highlights three categories of needs which are psychological, emotional, and professional and are inextricably linked to each other. Psychological and emotional well-being is extremely important for employees to attain their professional goals. Isolating any one category of needs while ignoring the others would anyway affect the individual's mental health.

### ***Theme 11: Impact of sustaining work flexibility on organizational culture***

Organizational culture is inextricably linked to work performance and organizational culture. Work engagement is perceived to be an extremely important quality of the employees in a workplace. Work engagement leads to personal, professional, and organizational well-being. Engagement is the culmination of the efforts given by organizational management in providing their employees with the required help. Leaders play a crucial role in increasing as well as reducing work for the employees. An organizational culture where the employees are given considerable autonomy, respect, and given creative space enhances work engagement (Robin *et al.* 2020). However, flexible work timing reflects the fact that the management respects employees' time and provides them with the work-life balance that they need. Work-Life balance is important because the employees can focus on their personal lives as well. Working individuals, both men, and women face ample challenges in integrating care and work and it is often claimed by media and research that flexible working arrangements are one of the most critical resources that help parents manage their caregiving responsibilities, thus facilitating effective management of competitive demands across the different domains and aspects of their lives (Fuller and Hirsh, 2019). Work is crucial for earning a livelihood and as posited by Maslow's need hierarchy, the other needs to require to be fulfilled for psychological well-being. This consideration by the employers leads to the creation of a healthy organizational culture. This culture helps employees respect the organizational management and put effort into their work, thus enhancing productivity. Organizational culture refers to the shared values and the vision that the managers portray of the organization and allows the employees to connect with it. The organizational culture is crucial to maintaining the healthy participation of the employees where they are engaged and motivated (Paais and Pattiruhu, 2020). The social exchange theory posits that individuals weigh the expense of a social interaction against the reward or punishment levied on it. According to the social exchange theory, as long as the employees are rewarded and helped to meet their own needs, the employees contribute positively to the employer.

Taking the example of Unilever, the organization has implemented a flexible work arrangement for its employees which has led to an increase in their employee engagement, because the organization supports and provides the employees with the required training and flexibility that they need to maintain a work-life balance. Motivation underlines the support of the organization to their employees and the managers paying attention to the employees' individual needs and helping them meet them. It is fundamental to increasing the competence of the employees as well

as relational relationships. The employees who are motivated are more oriented to develop opportunities that could benefit them. However, the managers must make regulations that cover the employees' needs for flexible working arrangements. Healthy organizational culture is underpinned by employee engagement, mutual respect, motivated employees, and supportive leadership.

***Theme 12: Strategies that can be provided for engaging employees during the COVID-19 pandemic***

Employees who have been working amidst the pandemic have been extremely tough for them, primarily because the employees have been burdened with the security of their health as well as their family members. Moreover, during the pandemic, several organizations have had to slash employee wages as well as to conduct mass job cuts because of the economic disruption brought about by the pandemic. The employees have been burdened with the increasing pressure about the security of their jobs and are unable to focus on their work because of the stressful situations, especially in retail sectors where the salespeople had to be physically present in warehouses, employees who had to be there in the offices to make sure the goods were delivered online amongst others have been burdened with the increasing pressure of contracting the virus and of their health as well as their caregiving responsibilities. However, employees who have been working remotely have had to face ample challenges as well. The managers too faced challenges in engaging the employees because they have been under immense pressure due to the pandemic. The managers, as well as the employees, have had difficulties in coping with the stress, communication issues, and the change from in-office to remote working. The ways through which the managers can engage employees are by allowing them to work flexibly under certain regulations and rules. The imposition of additional work would hinder the work-life balance of the employees so distributing work in a manner where every employee can maintain their work-life balance is important. Implementing a rewards facility where their employees are rewarded for the work that they do and are compensated for any additional efforts and hours that they put in. Paid sick leave is important in employee engagement because if employees fall sick they would be unable to work and they would get a pay cut, which could demotivate them. Hence providing the employees with paid sick leaves and helping them cope with their situations are essential for the managers to engage the employees at work (Gopinath, 2021). Another major

factor that impacts employee engagement is intrinsic motivation. The managers must collaborate and maintain communication with the employees. Provision of counseling and mental health help is crucial for understanding where the employees require help and how the organization can provide that to them. Providing the employees with technological assistance and helping them through the entire adjustment procedure to remote working and later sustaining the work flexibility so the employees can be engaged as well as retained. Identification of employees who take the flexible arrangement for granted and terminating them to maintain the rigidity of rules for flexible working to maintain organizational integrity and establish autonomy as well as employee engagement.

### **4.3 Summary**

The thematic analysis has explored the different themes that have been identified within the research which provide significant insight into the research problem and inform the research questions. The analysis has covered the importance of work flexibility in organizations and its impact on employee engagement. The challenges faced by managers in engaging employees have also been explored. The importance of employee engagement and its impact on organizational performance has also been evaluated along with the importance and role of transformational leadership in handling employee engagement in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategies through which the challenges can be mitigated have been mentioned. The concepts of motivation and its link to flexible work arrangement have been explored through theories and the concept of organizational culture underpinning every facet of employee engagement and work culture has been explored.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendation**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

The dissertation consists of analyzing the role of sustaining employee engagement within the retail sectors of the UK during the recent pandemic that is COVID-19. The situation and the pandemic were very crucial thus the system of employee engagement got affected to a great extent. General research of the issue during this situation, describing why it has been considered an issue is thoroughly described regarding the employee engagement and their flexibility to work and the organization. Employee engagement has been considered a challenge for business leaders globally (Men *et al.* 2020).

The labour cost got to the lower extent that states the situation was a very setback which has somehow affected the employees and their engagement to their workplace. Some theories and objectives are taken into consideration to create a link between the management and the organization, where the key issues and the factors affecting the relationship between the employees and the employers have been analyzed. Some of the policies and strategies are analyzed to face the challenges and deal with them more effectively. This states that the employees and the employer have to maintain a good relationship. The belief in the well-being attitude with the performance of the organization has a significant relationship (Ibrahim *et al.* 2020).

The gaps of the organization faced during the pandemic situation are analyzed with the help of certain frameworks along with a methodology with the various data collection method have been provided to show how the research over the situation has been conducted to get the idea of the thematic analysis of what the whole topic is about stating a clearance of the involvement in the employee management. The role in increasing the performances of the employees in achieving their goals is considered the variable of organizational commitment and employee engagement (Anindita and Seda, 2018.).

### **5.2 Linking with objective**

***Objective 1: To explore the role of sustaining flexibility in employee engagement within the retail sector in the UK during the pandemic.***

The link to this objective can be done with themes 1 and theme 2. The reason that can be stated about the link is that both the themes discuss the aspects of employee engagement in the retail sectors during or after post-pandemic. The continuity of sustaining organization flexibility, speed, and performance toward change can also be termed agility (Zainal *et al.* 2020). Theme 1 discusses the necessity of employee engagement and the contribution it makes toward organizational performance. It has been observed that the employees who are engaged in these sectors have higher stands of commitment toward their job but the flexibility varies during the pandemic situation. Theme 1 paves the ground for Theme 2, which discusses the negative impact of the flexibility of work on employee performance. The employees often lose interest due to a lack of motivation, which is not provided by the employers thus the sustaining flexibility of employees reduces with time. The organizations have taken up a strategy to retain these workers by providing them with the flexibility of work better known as Flexible Work Arrangements (Capnary *et al.* 2018).

***Objective 2: To analyze the impact of the reduction in labour cost during the pandemic.***

This objective can be related to theme 2, as they both states a common factor that is the impact of the change in the leadership of the employers resulting in the reduction of the labour cost. Despite the significance, responsible leadership has received minimum empirical concern (Mousa et al. 2019). The linkage shows that due to the change in the leadership the company often ends up cutting the price of the labour to maintain a balance between the expenditure and expenses. A particular leadership develops a group of labourers but when there is a sudden change in the leadership the benefits that are provided to the labourers tend to change alongside, resulting in the reduction of the labour cost as most of the labourers choose to move out then to be under a different leader. The negative impact of the coefficient of labour cost in manufacturing results in a negative effect on economic growth (Mongale, 2019). The flexibility of the employees is highly needed thus an atmosphere where the employees can work freely is highly preferable.

***Objective 3: To identify challenges in sustaining employee flexibility during the pandemic.***

The themes that are linked with this objective are theme 4, theme 5, theme 6, and theme 7. Theme 4 and theme 5 state the critical analysis of the challenges faced by the employees while working in the pandemic situation, which reduces the sustaining of the flexibility of the employees. Sustainability in the field of human resources, as compliance with the requirements,

does not lead to sustainability (Van der Heijden *et al.* 2020). Theme 6 and Theme 7 examine the strategies taken to address the challenge than trying to resolve them. The effectiveness of flexibility in the workplace has a positive impact on the workings of the employees. It is stated that proper management tends to develop a positive impact on the employees and the organization. The proper management of the leaders influences the firm (Naqshbandi and Jasimuddin, 2018). Thus the challenges faced by the employees while working during the pandemic can be changed using proper guidance, provided by the employees or the leader.

***Objective 4: To make an analysis of the theoretical aspects of the management of an organization and employee flexibility***

The themes that are linked to this objective are theme 8, theme 9, theme 10, and theme 11. The theoretical aspects of the management of an organization are done using a framework, in which the organization has been well analyzed as per the working style of the employees. The motivation of the employees is the key factor thus they can say that proper guidance provided if provided can let the employees engage more in their workplace. Communication changes have put employees ahead of various new challenges (Chrysoula *et al.* 2018). The impact of the employee engagement and sustaining the work flexibility of the employees have been generated, where the employer has been asked to provide guidance and motivation to the employees and encourage them to sustain and be dedicated to their workplace. Many organizations have elected to prioritize and adopt diversity in the workplace to face certain challenges (Cletus *et al.* 2018).

***Objective 5: To make a recommendation of policies and strategies for management of the challenges faced by the organizations in engaging the employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.***

The theme that is linked to this objective is theme 12. The strategies for better working are provided to the employees only to see the change or the development they do in their workplace. The organization engaged in employee management is facing job cuts and economic disruption while in a pandemic situation. Due to the shortage of staff, extra pressure on the existing employees is provided to just go with the flow. The variable pressure created by the employees on their performance works partially (Winarja *et al.* 2018). The thing that has been mentioned for the benefit of the employees is the paid sick leave that the employees deserve to get when they are engaging themselves totally in the organization. The employees should be provided with counselling so that the employee can keep their minds stable while working in the workplace.

The first mismatch is between the capabilities and the mindset creating a firm imbalance (Winarja *et al.* 2018).

### **5.3 Recommendation**

The recommendation that can be provided to the researcher for the better conducting of the research is the method of primary data analysis through which the researcher can gain the information directly from the real world which would have benefitted the researcher to get more specific and detailed data collection regarding the condition of the employees during the pandemic and its after-effect on the post-pandemic situation. The primary data collection is considered to be the basic step for preparing a proper relationship (Franzitta *et al.* 2020).

The flexibility in the workplace that an organization can adopt for providing better results is flextime where the employee can choose their preferred working time where the freedom is in the hand of the employees to choose their starting and ending hours of work. Some studies focus on the impact of flextime on working performance and wage differences in productivity (Rahman *et al.* 2022). The freedom of time selection helps the employees mainly live for the freedom to travel. Thus, by adopting these two recommendations the employees, as well as the researcher, would gain benefits such as freedom from the excess workload and a proper data collection about the research, that is been conducted.

### **5.4 Future scope of the study**

The future scope of this research can bring a change in the overall development of the workplace and the employees dealing with it. The employees that have left working during the pandemic situation can be further brought back only if they are provided with these opportunities, so that they can further get to work and earn their living. There is always a scope for further research on a topic that has been provided thus, further detailing of the study can be conducted to get more updated views of the study during that phase. Future conducting of research can have involvement of modern technologies that are yet to be used. The future scope of the researcher regarding research is a vast aspect (Hemshorn de Sanchez *et al.* 2022). With this scope when further analyzed the quality of the research gets improvised.

## 5.5 Summary

The overall description of the chapters is done to see the advantages and disadvantages of the sustainability of the employees during the pandemic and its impact on the organization. Five main objectives have been linked with the themes taken as per the research reports. The brief on the future scope of the research is done to see the future goals that can further be generated. The recommendation is also provided with the analysis to minimize the gaps that have been identified earlier in the report. The report also contains the future guidance that can be provided to the researcher to do a more detailed and direct mode of data collection.



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## Appendix

| <u>Activities during research</u>                   | <u>1Week</u> | <u>2</u><br><u>Week</u> | <u>3Week</u> | <u>4</u><br><u>Week</u> | <u>5</u><br><u>Week</u> | <u>6</u><br><u>Week</u> | <u>7</u><br><u>Week</u> |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Developing the research topic</i>                |              |                         |              |                         |                         |                         |                         |
| <i>Formulating aims and objectives</i>              |              |                         |              |                         |                         |                         |                         |
| <i>Collection of secondary data for research</i>    |              |                         |              |                         |                         |                         |                         |
| <i>Literature search and review</i>                 |              |                         |              |                         |                         |                         |                         |
| <i>The methodology followed in the research</i>     |              |                         |              |                         |                         |                         |                         |
| <i>Qualitative Data Analysis and interpretation</i> |              |                         |              |                         |                         |                         |                         |
| <i>Formulating conclusions and recommendations</i>  |              |                         |              |                         |                         |                         |                         |
| <i>Final submission of the dissertation</i>         |              |                         |              |                         |                         |                         |                         |

**Table 1: GNATT Chart**

(Source: Created by self)