

UNDERSTANDING REMOTE WORK & EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

A project to explore design interventions from the employee and employer perspectives



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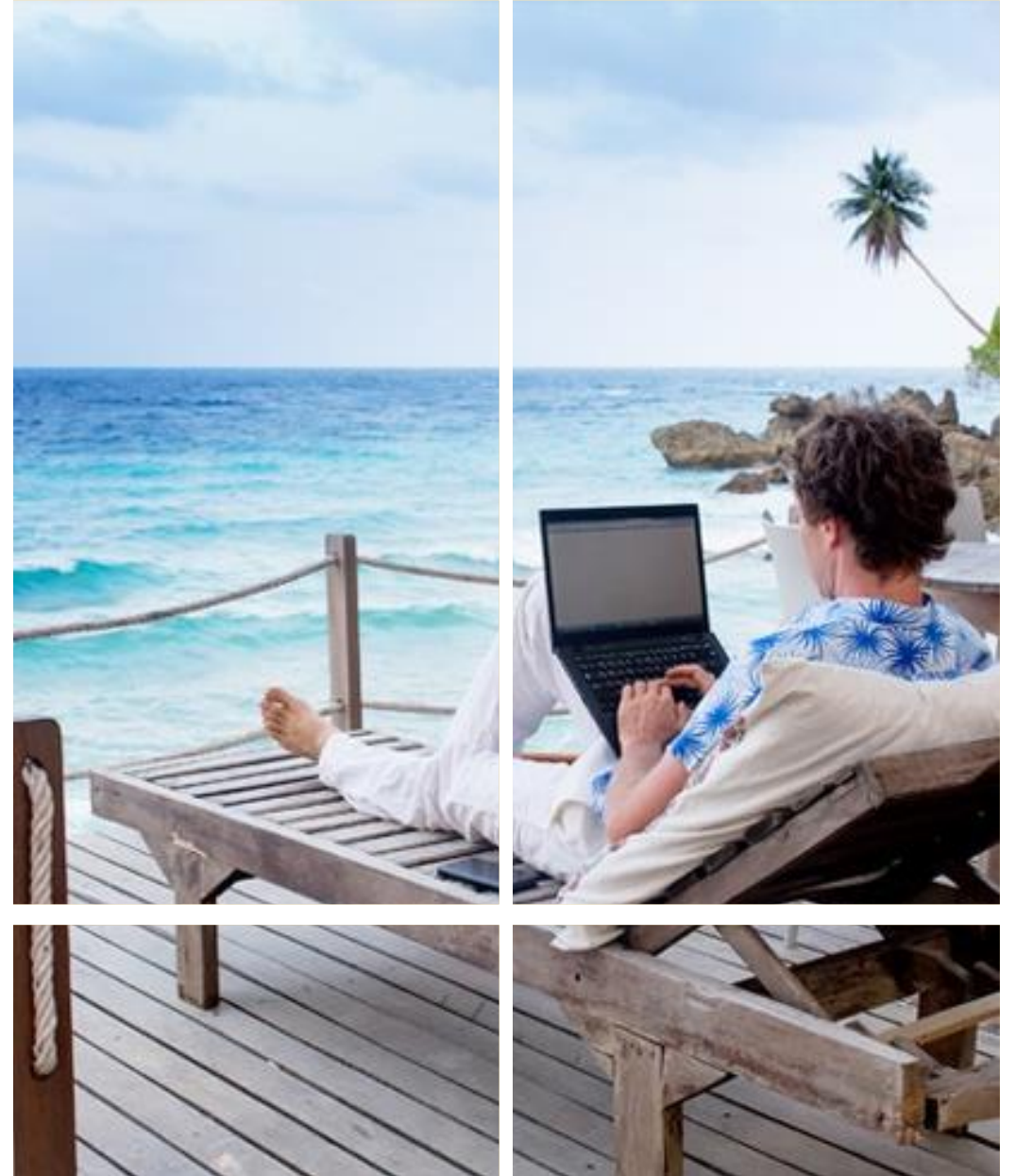
BACKGROUND

- Covid-19 forced many employees to shift to remote work
- Disrupted longstanding norms around the daily commute, the cubicle, and the water cooler
- For many, remote or hybrid work continued after pandemic subsided
- Remote work presents both advantages and challenges for employees and employers
- Difficult to balance multiple competing perspectives in remote work situations

REMOTE WORK BENEFITS*

- Increased flexibility
- Reduced commute
- Improved work-life balance
- Increased productivity
- Reduced overhead
- Increased skill base

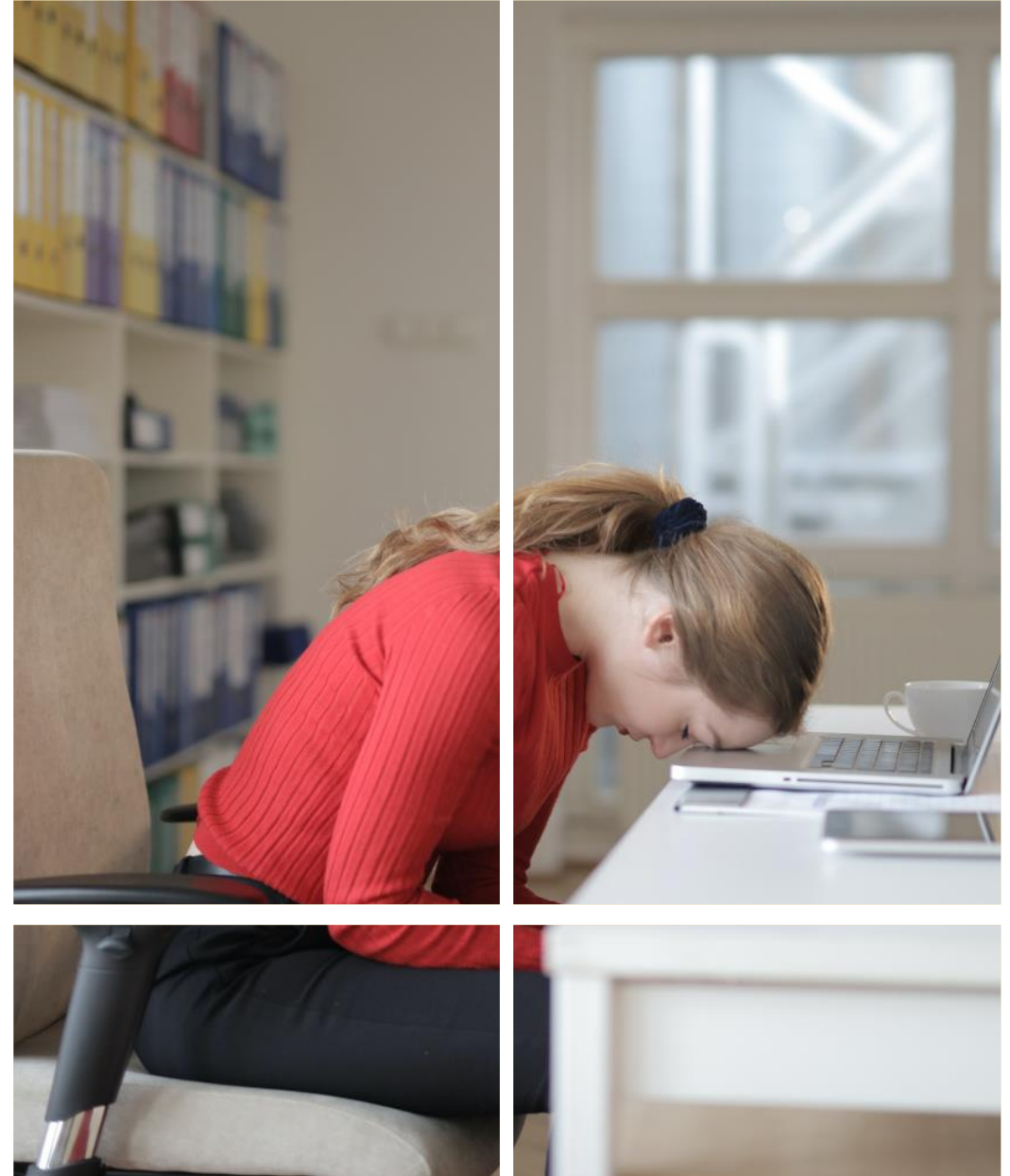
*Mann, Sandi & Holdsworth, Lynn. (2003). The Psychological Impact of Teleworking: Stress, Emotions and Health. New Technology, Work and Employment. 18. 196 - 211.10.1111/1468- 005X.00121.



REMOTE WORK CHALLENGES*

- Social isolation
- Presenteeism (working long hours, working when sick)
- Lack of support & connection
- Blurring of boundaries

*Mann, Sandi & Holdsworth, Lynn. (2003). The Psychological Impact of Teleworking: Stress, Emotions and Health. New Technology, Work and Employment. 18. 196 - 211.10.1111/1468- 005X.00121.



IMPACT OF REMOTE WORK ON MENTAL HEALTH

Feelings of **isolation** can cause employees to disengage and may lead to **anxiety** or **depression**. The blurring of boundaries between work and personal space and time can lead to longer working hours and feelings of **burnout***

An employee who is struggling with anxiety, depression, or burnout is likely **less engaged** with work, leading to **decreased productivity** and a negative impact the business.

*Figueiredo E, Margaça C, Hernández-Sánchez B, Sánchez-García JC. Teleworking Effects on Mental Health—A Systematic Review and a Research Agenda. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2024; 21(3):243.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21030243>



PROJECT GOAL:

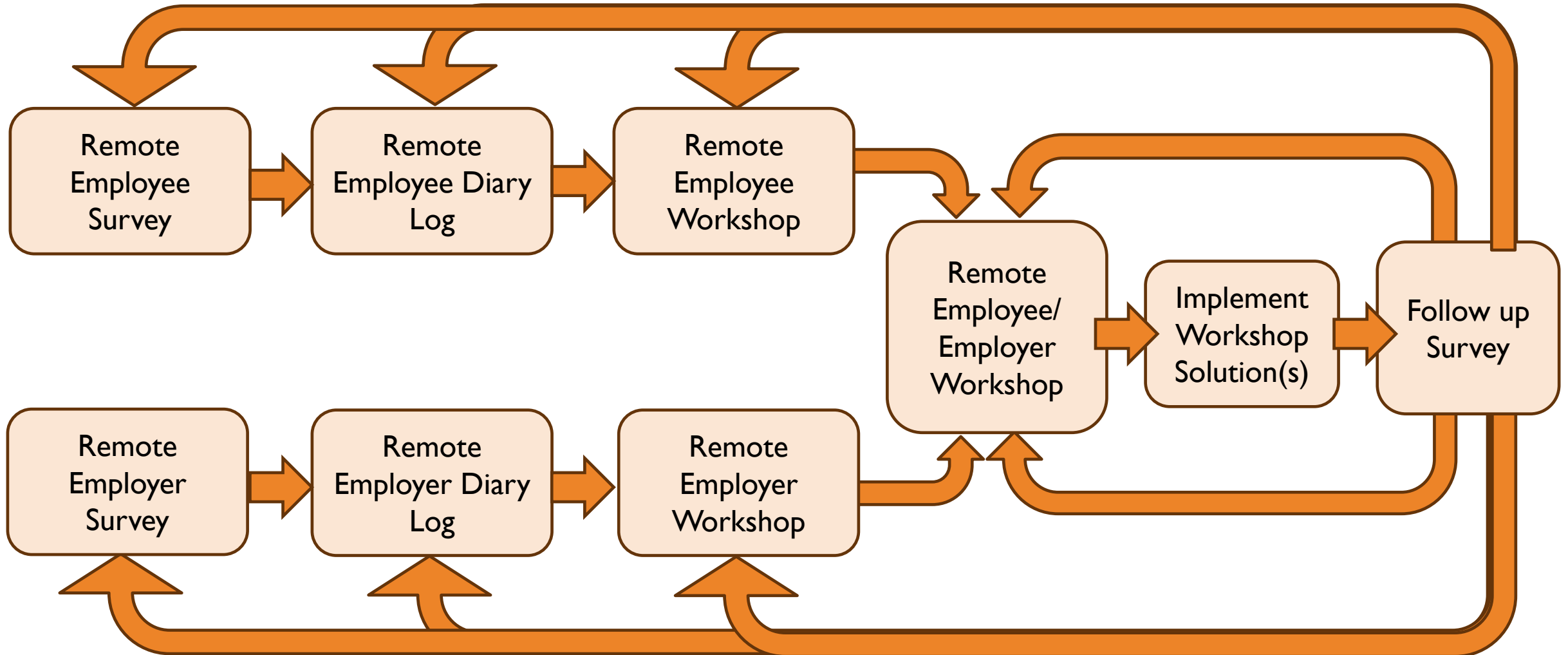
Gain insights from remote employees and employers to address remote and hybrid work challenges that lead to feelings of isolation, lack of support and burnout.

We aim to use these insights to facilitate conversation and creative problem solving through workshops where employers and employees can collaborate, share perspectives, learn from each other, and generate solutions.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

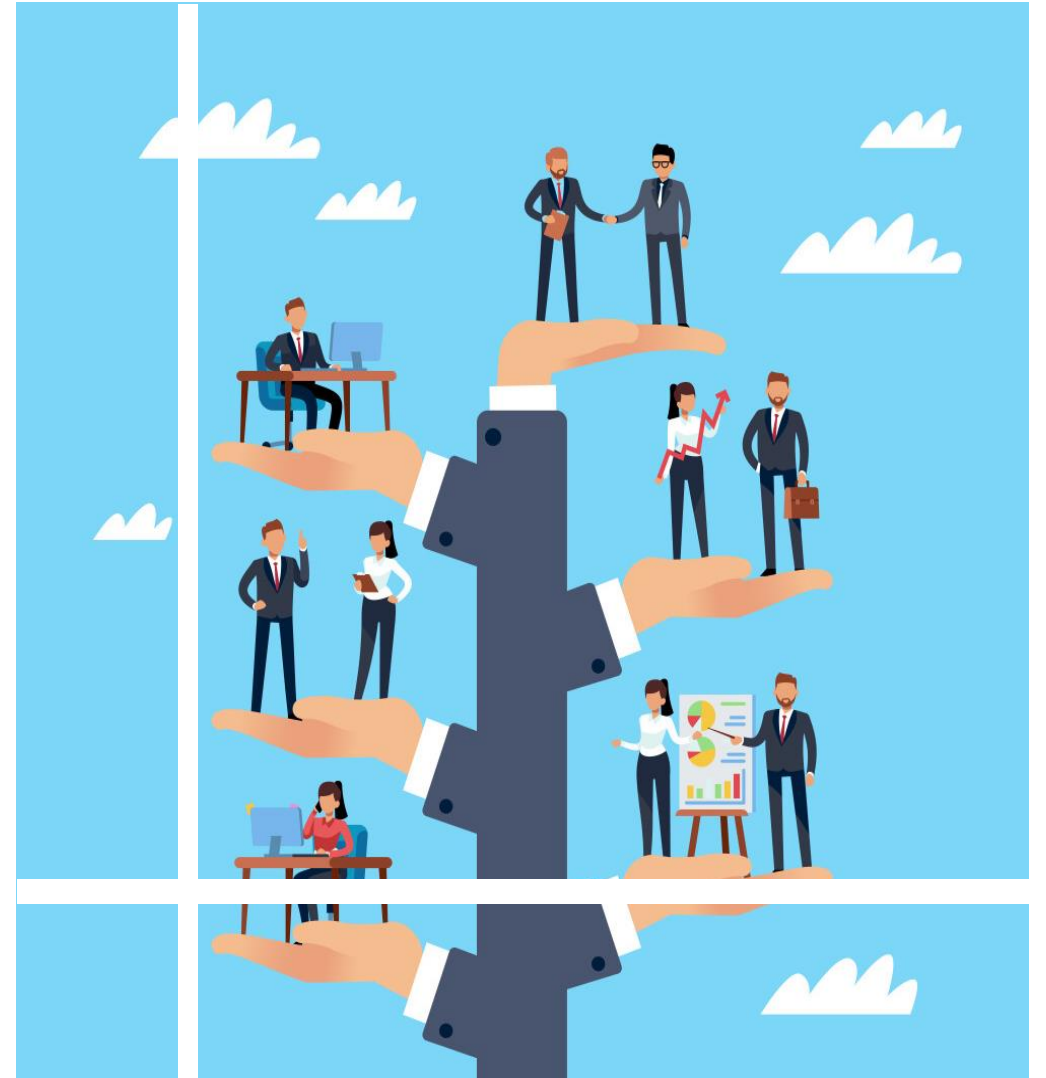
1. How does remote and hybrid work contribute to feelings of isolation and burnout?
2. What strategies and solutions can be implemented to decrease feelings of isolation and burnout?
3. Can you maintain the benefits of remote work while also addressing the challenges that negatively impact mental health?



PARTICIPANT POPULATION

We plan to recruit both U.S. **employers** and **employees** working for organizations that are entirely remote or hybrid.

Identify issues from the top-down AND bottom-up to find solutions in the middle.





RECRUITMENT METHODS

Participants will be recruited via multiple methods that specifically target remote workers, including:

- Local Coffee Shop Bulletin Boards
- Co-Working Spaces (Co-Hatch, Kollektiv, etc.)
- Social Media Posts/Advertising
- Word of Mouth (employers providing survey to other employees)

Participants will all complete a virtual survey to understand more about their:

- *Rogers, K. The effects of remote work on organizational culture: Examining the effects of external social support to mitigate social isolation within organizations. Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2022. https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/6473

[illegible]

Aside from our contact, I often feel "together" with my co-workers somehow.

I often think of my co-workers.

Even when we are not in each others' company, I often feel "together" with my co-workers somehow.

I am often aware of my relationship with my co-workers.

I derive little satisfaction from my contact with my co-workers.

I feel that my co-workers do not understand me well.

My contact with my co-workers feels superficial.

I feel that my co-workers share my interests and ideas.

I feel I have a lot in common with my co-workers.

I feel on the same wavelength with my co-workers.

I often know what my co-workers feel.

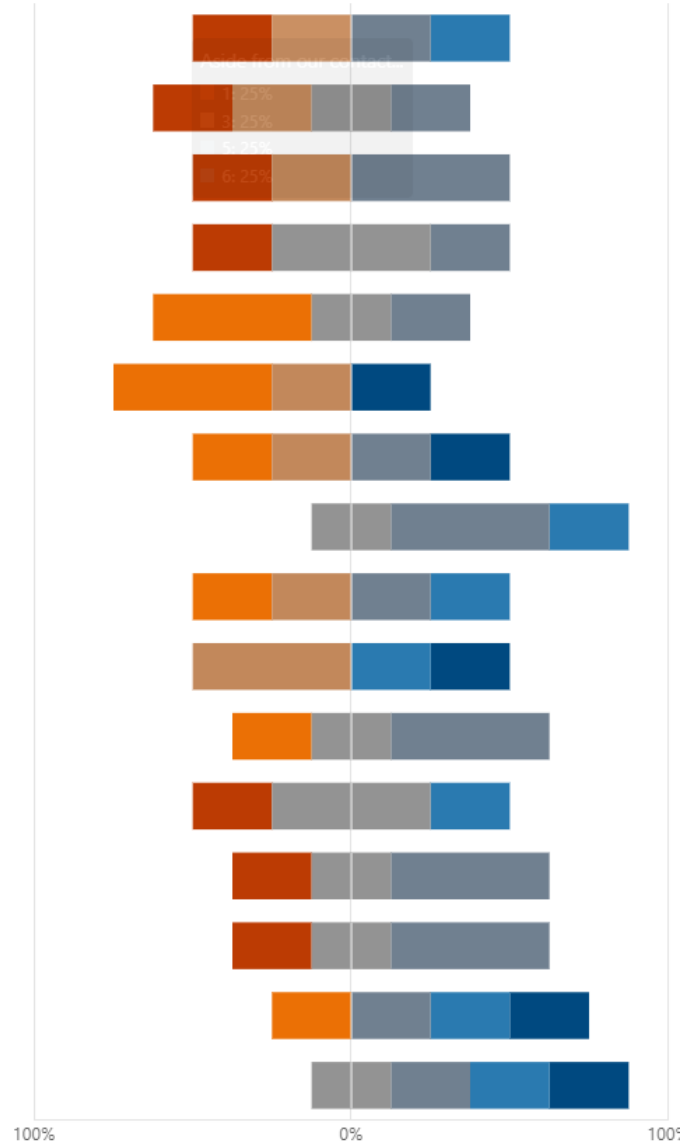
I often know what my co-workers think.

I feel that my co-workers often know what I think.

I sense that my co-workers often know what I feel.

I feel I can talk about anything with my co-workers.

I feel that my co-workers and I can communicate well with each other.



USER TESTING

Results showed wide variation on metrics of perceived isolation and job satisfaction.

Test participants provided feedback that the survey was concise and covered a lot of different areas.

Additionally, feedback indicated that the Likert scales formatted strangely on a mobile device, so future iterations would recommend completing the survey on a laptop/desktop computer.

EMPLOYER & EMPLOYEE DIARY LOGS

Participants are selected based on survey responses and placed in 1) employer group or 2) employee group

- Receive diary log instructions
- Complete diary log for one week to document:
 - remote/hybrid work schedules;
 - scheduled interactions with supervisors, colleagues, or other people
 - serendipitous/unplanned interactions with supervisors, colleagues, or other people;
 - feelings of isolation, lack of support, or burnout





EMPLOYER & EMPLOYEE WORKSHOPS

Employer and employee groups will first meet separately:

- Opportunities for individual participant interviews
- Small and large group guided discussions
- Record qualitative data, themes and attitudes
- Broad, divergent approach
- Document all themes and ideas for future analysis



COMBINED EMPLOYER & EMPLOYEE WORKSHOP

Bring employer and employee groups together to:

- Guided discussion of themes and ideas from individual workshops
- Opportunities for individual discussion and connection
- Participants have opportunity to build awareness and empathy for individuals in the other group
- Collaborate and identify potential solutions or opportunities for experimentation



IMPLEMENTATION

- Employee and employer participants will implement potential solutions identified at the workshops
- Participants will be asked to complete a weekly log to document:
 - implementation details
 - remote/hybrid work schedules
 - planned and unplanned interactions with supervisors, colleagues, or other people
 - feelings of isolation, lack of support, or burnout

FOLLOW UP SURVEY

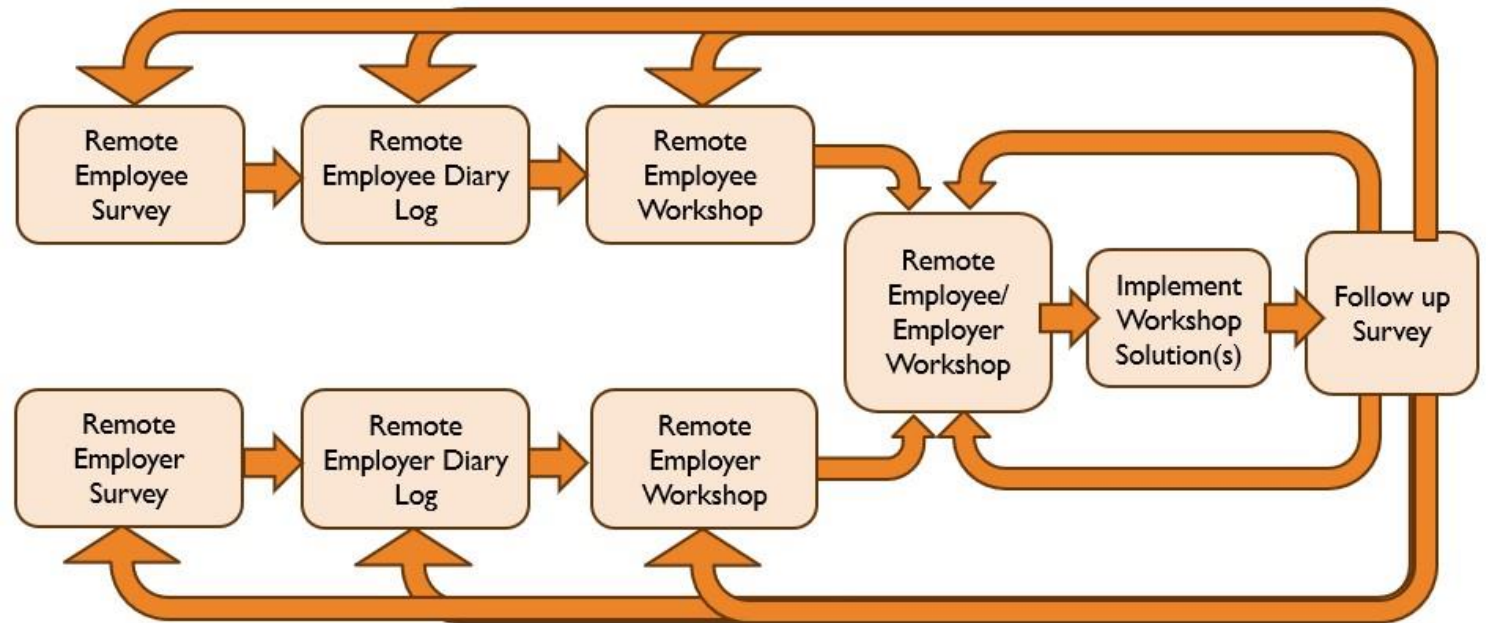
3 months following implementation of the solutions, employers and employee groups will complete a follow up survey

- Collect data on success of solutions (decreased feelings of isolation and burnout, increased employee engagement)
- Compare data to initial survey results
- Recognize opportunities for improvement or revision
- Identify any new or secondary problems



ITERATE & IMPROVE UPON SOLUTION

- Analyze employee and employer logs and survey data to determine next steps in process:
 - Continue with solution
 - Implement alternative solution
 - Collect additional data via workshops, surveys or interviews

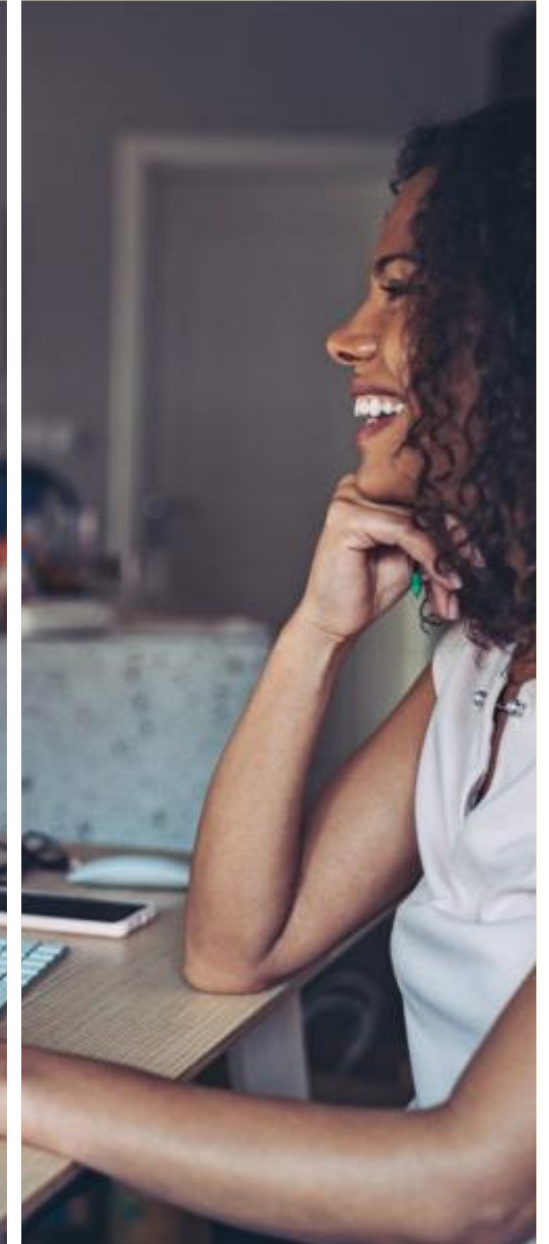


ACTIVATION STRATEGY:

Research participants could implement potential solutions identified at the collaborative employer-employee workshop. After a solution is implemented, a follow-up survey should be circulated to collect feedback on whether:

- 1) the solution decreased employee feelings of isolation or burnout,
- 2) the solution increased feelings of support and connection,
- 3) the solution could be improved upon,
- 4) alternative solutions should be explored.

This iterative feedback strategy can be repeated until both employees and employers are satisfied with the solution. This approach allows freedom to experiment and make changes to the solution. By continuously collecting feedback, this approach ensures that the solution remains focused on the problem and the people involved.



KEY LEARNINGS

- A Design Thinking approach is **flexible** and can be adjusted throughout the process depending on the outcome
- A **human-centered** approach to data is key: exercise empathy and get to know the people who know the problem
- Innovate – allow for **experimentation, exploration, and iteration**. Gather data along the way to support decisions