



Reconfiguring Leadership in the United Kingdom: A Scoping Review of Remote Leadership in the Post-Covid-19 Era

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote and hybrid working across the United Kingdom, reshaping leadership practices and organisational design. Despite the increase in empirical studies on remote leadership, the breadth, patterns of methodology, and conceptual development of the evidence base are still patchy. This scoping review maps, critically appraises, and synthesises UK-focused evidence on remote leadership. Using the Arksey and O'Malley review methodology and Joanna Briggs Institute guidelines, a structured search was conducted on Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar databases for studies published between 2020 and 2026. Following PRISMA-ScR guidance and incorporating a structured quality appraisal, we analyse 38 studies across sectors. Findings indicate that effective remote leadership is a system-level capability defined by communication architecture, trust-based autonomy, relational capability, wellbeing orientation, and digital orchestration. However, the evidence base is methodologically heterogeneous, dominated by cross-sectional designs, and limited in sectoral breadth and longitudinal depth. We advance an integrative, multi-level framework and a research agenda for theory development and empirical testing in hybrid contexts.

Keywords: *Remote leadership; Hybrid work; United Kingdom; COVID-19; Scoping Review; Leadership Theory*

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly redefined work arrangements in the United Kingdom, leading to the swift and widespread integration of remote and hybrid work models (Office for National Statistics, 2022; Felstead and Reuschke, 2020). Before the onset of the pandemic in 2020, remote work

opportunities were generally limited in scope, often dependent on individual choice rather than organizational necessity. However, as health crises necessitated social distancing measures, remote work quickly evolved from a voluntary option to a critical requirement, resulting in an ongoing dependence on advanced digital tools for communication and management (Avolio et al., 2014).

Remote leadership, commonly known as e-leadership, is the process of guiding and influencing individuals and teams through the use of sophisticated information technologies across geographical distances (Avolio et al., 2000). E-leadership entails influencing and coordinating distributed teams through technology while sustaining performance, engagement, and culture (Contreras et al., 2020) unlike traditional leadership models that rely on physical proximity, in-person observation, and informal interactions, which allowed leaders to quickly build rapport and provide immediate feedback. Eyiolawi and Aremu (2026) noted that prior to the pandemic, remote work was primarily seen as an optional practice for a limited number of employees, as the organizational cultures in Europe favored traditional office attendance. These conventional and traditional approaches of leadership have faced significant challenges and required adaptation in the modern context defined by asynchronous communication, decreased face-to-face interactions, and an increased sense of psychological distance among team members.

This structural transformation in workplace dynamics has given rise to a heightened interest in remote leadership as an essential competency for effectively managing teams scattered across various locations. As conventional leadership strategies fall short in these distributed settings, leaders must develop new methods to foster engagement, establish trust, ensure high-performance levels, and promote overall well-being among their employees, all without the benefit of physical presence (Contreras et al., 2020). In the UK, policy support for flexible working and rapid digitalisation have entrenched hybrid work as a dominant mode, amplifying coordination complexity and equity concerns (CIPD, 2023).

Despite the rapid growth of empirical research focusing on remote leadership, there is notable diversity in the conceptual frameworks and unevenness in methodological approaches across studies. Consequently, a comprehensive scoping review is warranted to systematically explore the extent and nature of the current-based evidences. This review aims to examine remote leadership in the United Kingdom post COVID-19 pandemic with the focus on mapping UK evidence on remote leadership post-COVID-19, critically appraise methodological quality, synthesise findings into an integrative framework and propose a targeted research agenda aligned with contemporary management theory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Relational Leadership Theory

This leadership theory emphasizes identifying the qualities of individuals as they interact with one another. It adopts a relational perspective that sees leadership as a process of social construction, through which specific understandings of leadership are developed and granted special significance. (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Relational Leadership theory (RLT) deals with an entity (individual reality) and relational (multiple realities) perspective. Individuals are undeniably seen as “entities” that maintain a clear distinction between their internal selves and their external environments. They possess the essential capacities to reason, learn, invent, produce, and manage. This serves as a solid foundation for the understanding that “the ‘reality’ of management is clearly defined for. Whereas a relational perspective suggests that social reality is rooted in the context of relationships, it prioritizes the connections between people over focusing on separate, abstract phenomena (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000). According to Hunt and Dodge (2000), relational perspectives recognize that leadership can occur in various forms and is not limited to a few formal or informal leaders. In its most robust sense, this approach functions as a dynamic system that integrates leadership with environmental and organizational elements.

2.2 Socio-Technical Systems

Socio-Technical Systems (STS) refer to an approach in organizational theory that emphasizes the joint optimization of social and technical components within a system. It recognizes that organizational performance is not determined solely by technology or human factors alone, but by the interaction between people, processes, and technology (Wang et al., 2012)

Leadership capability is often infused with technological capability and communication intensity. Effectiveness arises from alignment between social and technical subsystems as a leader must be able to efficiently use ICT applications to manage task and sustain productivity.

STS is built on two interdependent subsystems which are socio system and Technical system. Socio system involves employees and teams, skills, knowledge, and attitudes, organizational culture with communication patterns in leadership. Technical system however is about the; tools, machines, and equipment, work processes and workflows, production technologies, information systems and digital platforms.

According to Contreras et al. (2020), Socio-Technical Systems has: reduced resistance to new technologies, increased employee satisfaction and engagement and increased organizational performance.

Table 1: Socio-Technical Systems Interpretation of Remote Leadership Themes

Remote Leadership Construct	STS Interpretation
Communication	Interface between social & technical systems
Trust	Social stabilizer in low-visibility systems
Digital Tools	Technical enablers of coordination
Hybrid Work	Socio-technical configuration
Leadership behaviour	Social system-level design intervention

2.3 Transformational Leadership Theory

This theory presents a unique approach to leadership by involving followers in activities that focus on personal factors benefiting the organization and leading to better social outcomes. According to Bass and Riggio (2006), motivation and vision remain central but require digital mediation and adaptability. Transformational leaders have the ability to boost and improve the morale of both themselves and their follower (House & Shamir, 1993). However, Bass and Avolio (1997) argues that transformational leadership requires self-confidence since leaders must inspire followers to prioritize higher-order needs over self-interest.

Transformational leadership has been linked with positive results both at the organizational and individual levels. Such leaders motivate their followers to be more confident. They are also skilled at motivating their followers to prioritize the accomplishment of organizational objectives over their own interests, even if it means making personal sacrifices (Bass and Avolio, 1994).

It has been firmly established that leaders who are transformational achieve better outcomes than the autocratic ones (Cummings et al., 2010). Such leaders perceive themselves as individuals who are willing to take risks with prudence. They have faith in people and are empathetic to their needs. They abide by a set of well-defined core values that steer their actions. They are adaptable and open-minded,

constantly learning from their experiences. They possess strong cognitive abilities and have confidence in logical thinking. They are forward thinkers who trust their intuition.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

Scoping reviews serve as a valuable tool in research, particularly for investigating emerging and interdisciplinary topics. These reviews allow researchers to systematically identify and define key concepts within a field, providing a comprehensive overview of the available evidence. By mapping the existing literature, scoping reviews illuminate both the breadth and depth of research on a topic, while also pinpointing gaps and areas that require further exploration (McLeod, 2024). This process not only aids in understanding the current landscape of knowledge but also guides future research directions.

This study adopts the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) framework in order to systematically map out evidences on remote work in the United Kingdom in post pandemic era and synthesize findings into integrative framework. The review adopted the five-step approach outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), later updated by the Joanna Briggs Institute (Peters et al., 2020). The reporting of this review is consistent with PRISMA-ScR guidelines by Tricco et al. (2018) which involve identification of relevant studies, screening and selection of eligible literature, data charting, synthesis of findings, and reporting.

3.2 Search Strategy and Eligibility Criteria

A structured search was performed across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for publications from 2020 to 2026, as these platforms offer comprehensive interdisciplinary coverage of research on remote leadership in the United Kingdom. The search terms included combinations of the following terms: remote leadership, virtual leadership, e-leadership, telework, remote work, engagement, trust, performance, wellbeing, and United Kingdom. Boolean operators (“AND,” “OR”) were used to narrow down the search results.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria for a study is a crucial step in creating rigorous research protocols. These criteria define the scope and boundaries of a scoping review, ensuring clarity and consistency in selecting relevant studies (Munn et al., 2018). In order to ensure relevance and quality, clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied as follows:

Studies were included if they:

- UK-based empirical research
- Quantitative methodology
- Focus on remote or hybrid leadership
- Peer-reviewed journal articles written in English

Studies were excluded if they:

- Non-UK samples
- Conceptual or qualitative-only studies
- Grey literature

3.4 Selection Process

For this review, the search process identified 1370 records across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar databases and supplementary sources. Afterwards, 390 duplicate records were removed, 980 studies remained for title and abstract screening. At this stage, 660 records were excluded because they did not address remote leadership in the United Kingdom. The remaining 320 articles were subsequently assessed through full text review. After thorough evaluation, 282 studies were excluded primarily because they lacked quantitative or conceptual relevance to about remote leadership in the UK. Therefore, 38 studies met the inclusion criteria and were retained for the final synthesis, as illustrated in the PRISMA ScR flow diagram in figure 1 below.

PRISMA ScR Flow Diagram: Scoping Review of Remote Leadership in the UK post COVID-19

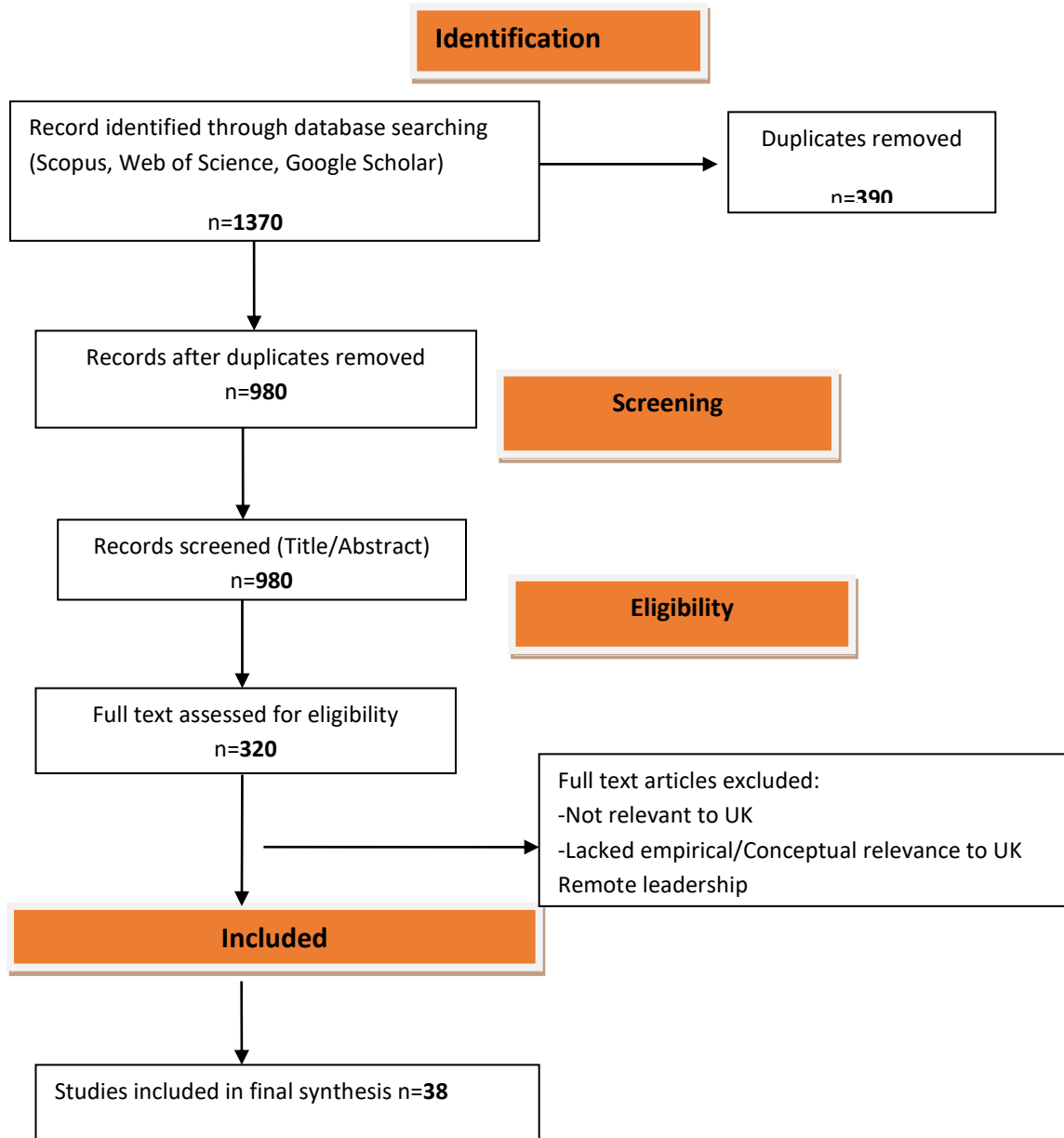


Figure 1: PRISMA-ScR flow diagram of the study selection process

3.5 Data Extraction and Data Synthesis

Data extraction was conducted using a structured charting framework designed to capture key characteristics of each study. The extracted data were then synthesised using a descriptive and thematic analytical approach that enabled the identification of recurring patterns, key themes, and critically appraise the methodological quality in the existing literature on remote leadership in the UK after COVID-19. This will help in synthesising findings into an integrative framework and propose a targeted research agenda that aligns with contemporary management theory.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Overview of Included Studies

The included studies covered research conducted after the COVID-19 pandemic and involved employees from a range of public and private sector organisations in the United Kingdom. Quantitative approaches and cross sectional research designs dominated by 60% (Durham University Business School, 2025; Marstand et al., 2025; Bloom et al., 2024) while mixed methods and longitudinal research designs were like 40% of the included studies (ONS, 2024; CIPD, 2023). Remote Leadership was primarily assessed through employee-reported perceptions of supervisory support, clarity of communication, empathy, well being, trust, task performance and engagement outcomes. These constructs makes remote leadership in the United Kingdom relational, communicative and supportive.

4.2 Thematic Synthesis

4.2.1 Communication Architecture and Well-Being Orientation

Post-pandemic evidence from the United Kingdom indicates that leaders who excel in digital communication, employ adaptive coordination strategies, and prioritize employee wellbeing enhance trust, engagement, and productivity in remote and hybrid teams (Kniffin et al., 2021; CIPD, 2023; Dalton, 2025). Digital check-ins and communication routines play a major role in remote leadership in the United Kingdom (CIPD, 2023; Harper, 2025) although leadership behaviours directly influence stress, boundaries, and burnout (Wang et al., 2021; CIPD, 2021). Research from Durham University Business School (2025) revealed that leaders who genuinely care about employee wellbeing and clearly communicate their expectations are more likely to achieve higher performance and engagement among remote and hybrid workers. Across the evidence base, structured, frequent, and clear communication emerged as a key predictor of employee engagement and satisfaction. Remote workers who received consistent updates and clear expectations reported higher engagement and reduced feelings of isolation (Wang et al., 2021; Kniffin et al., 2021). Hence, communication quality and supports performance reinforces trust and psychological connection within dispersed teams.

4.2.2 Trust–Autonomy–Accountability

Trust allows workers to perform independently, according to Research from Durham University Business School (2025), remote leaders are more confident and perceive business inclusions when work independently as the organization trust is embedded in their daily work patterns.

Post-pandemic evidence from the United Kingdom clearly demonstrates that leaders who excel in digital communication, adopt adaptive coordination strategies, and prioritize employee wellbeing are instrumental in driving trust, engagement, and productivity in remote and hybrid teams (Dalton, 2025; CIPD, 2023; Kniffin et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Relational capability

According to Marstand et al. (2025), the remote construct was based on supportive and relational capability where Psychological proximity and wellbeing brings job satisfaction. Leaders who attend to individual circumstances and provide support mitigate challenges such as social isolation and workload stress are empathetic and reduce psychological strain (Oakman et al., 2020; Spurk & Straub, 2020). Remote employees in the United Kingdom reported increased satisfaction when leaders showed trust, promoted self-management, and provided timely feedback, which fostered psychological safety (Oakman et al., 2020; Spurk & Straub, 2020). Also, employee performance, engagement and coping mechanism improve when leaders actively foster connection and trust in remote environments (Bloom et al. 2024; Durham University Business School, 2025)

4.3 Critical Appraisal of Methodological Quality

From the above result of thematic synthesis, the strength of this scoping review on remote leadership is conceptual convergence around communication, trust, psychological closeness and wellbeing. Hence, increasing integration with organisational behaviour theory while the limitations of the review are cross-sectional bias, common-method variance, construct ambiguity, limited sectoral coverage and weak longitudinal evidence.

4.4 Integrative Conceptual Framework

After mapping out evidences on remote leadership in the UK in post COVID-19, thematic synthesis of these works highlight some constructs for proposing a conceptual framework as shown in figure 2 which shows the moderators, inputs, mediators and outcomes of the remote leadership.

Moderators: Hybrid intensity; sector; task interdependence; digital infrastructure

Inputs: Communication architecture; trust-based leadership; digital competence; work design; relational capability

Mediators: Psychological safety; role clarity; perceived organisational support; team cohesion

Outcomes: Engagement; wellbeing; performance; retention

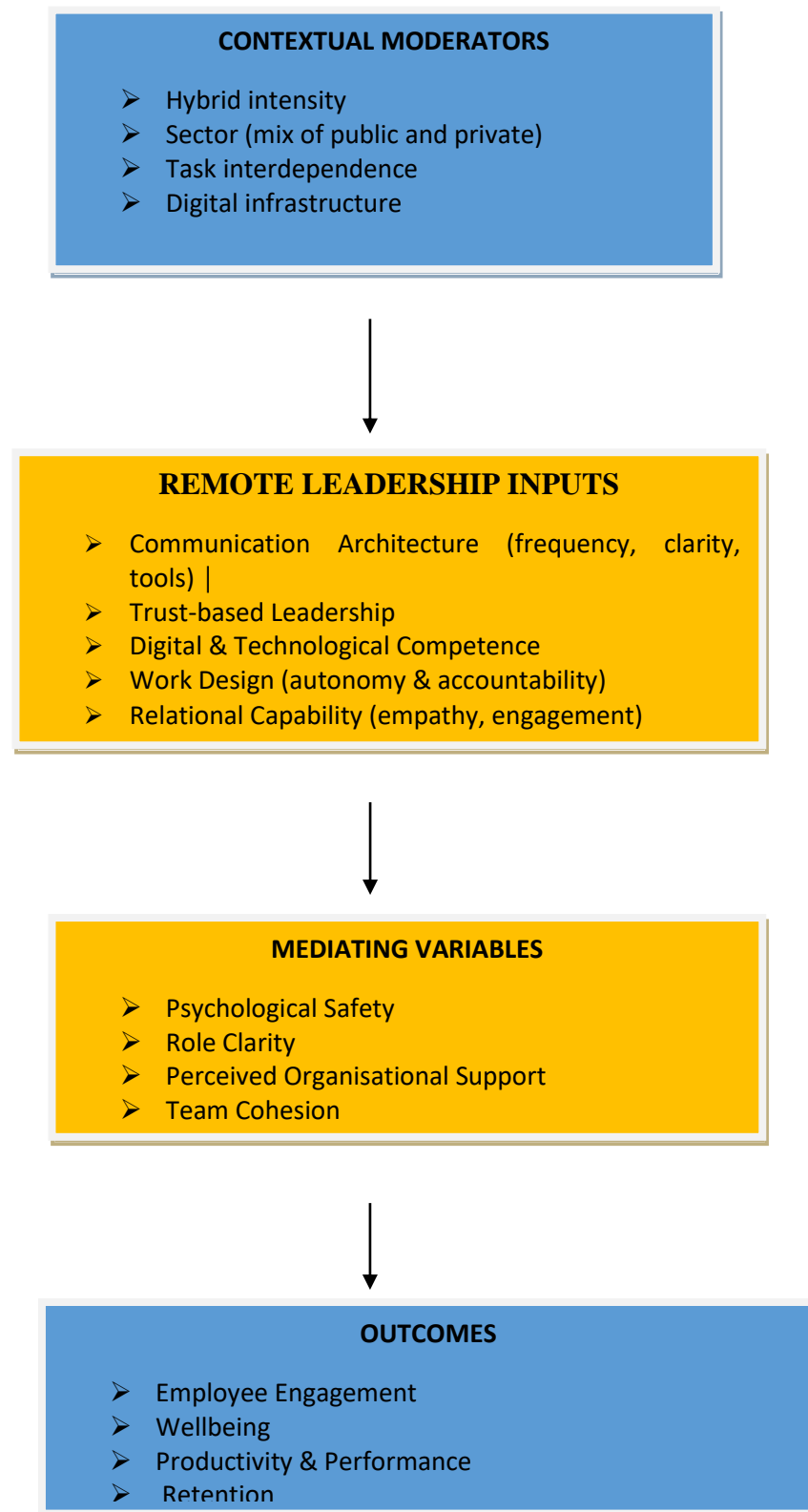


Figure 2: Integrative Conceptual Framework for Remote leadership after COVID-19

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Remote leadership represents a shift from traditional supervisory control to the orchestration of social and technical elements. Evidences from this study has shown that In the UK, effective remote leadership is characterized by strong communication systems, trust-based autonomy, relational strength, a focus on wellbeing, and digital fluency. Despite this conceptual shift from technological coordination to relational and adaptive competencies, existing body of evidence remains methodologically narrow and dominated by cross-sectional survey research which are not conducive to causal inference as the dominance of employee self-report data raises issues of common-method variance. Evidence from the UK indicates that hybrid work has become a lasting structure that necessitates equitable management and thoughtful system design.

5.2 Implications and Recommendations

This study indicates that remote work has moved from being an emergency response to becoming an established organisational practice. Consequently, leadership now depends less on direct physical supervision and more on relational presence and structured digital communication with remote leadership post COVID-19 being a combination of empathy and trust building within supportive organisational systems. However, there is still need for more rigorous and longitudinal UK based research that isolates leadership constructs, applies validated measures, and compares outcomes across defined sectors like manufacturing companies and Fast Moving Consumer Good (FMCG) companies as thematic synthesis of this study indicates that there is a big gap in Longitudinal UK studies.

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