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2025

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Digital maturity and employee wellness programmes and the influence thereof on employee participation

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A research proposal submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in the field of Digital Business

Johannesburg, 2025

ABSTRACT

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been accelerated transformation in the workplace that has affected the overall wellness of employees. With a changing workforce and increasing expectations from employees, companies have had to expand their employee wellness initiatives to meet the needs of their employees (Bhaidkar, 2022). Even though organisations have expanded the scope of employee wellness programmes (EWPs) to include and support employee mental health and wellbeing, these initiatives remain underutilised and undervalued. While low utility rates can be associated with a variety of factors including a lack of awareness of EWP services, limited access and inadequate coverage of services offered, it is organisation-wide factors such as organisational culture and behaviours modelled by leaders that affect participation.

This paper explores digital maturity and Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs) and the influence thereof on employee participation by considering employee perceptions of the awareness, access, and utility of these services. This paper examines if the digitalisation of EWPs affects variables such as awareness, access, and utility in employee wellness initiatives. Using a qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews of volunteering participants and the Maturity Model of Technology Adoption for Educational Organisations (MMEO) as a framework to evaluate the digital maturity of EWPs in an organisational setting, this research suggests that employee perceptions and attitudes towards EWPs affect utility and participation rates despite increasing levels of digital transformation of EWPs.

Employee participation in EWPs is less influenced by their design (including the adoption of digital tools) and more by employee perceptions and attitudes, work-related demands, and concerns around confidentiality and trust of the EWPs. Organisational culture and leadership also play a critical role in shaping employee engagement where visible promotion and modelling from leaders enhance credibility and uptake, whilst a non-trusting organisational culture can hinder use.

KEYWORDS: employee wellness programmes, workplace wellness; employee wellness; mental health at work.

DECLARATION

I, Mbali Mzinyane, declare that this research report is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in the field of Digital Business at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Name: Mbali Mzinyane Signature: 

Signed at Johannesburg

On the 25th day of June 2025

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research report to my daughter, Zanokuhle. I carried and gave birth to you while completing this qualification.

Not only have you shown me the extent of my strength, but you've also illuminated a desire in me to live a life so full that you get to see what is possible for you.

You consistently show me that I can do hard things.

To God Almighty, the Alpha and Omega, my source of strength, thank you for your lovingkindness, your abounding grace and benevolent mercy.

Thank you for taking care of me and for continually making me an expression of your glory.

All of this is because of You.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to acknowledge my supervisor, Dr. Jenika Gobind for her patience. My journey has not been smooth with life's detours getting in the way of consistent communication and deadlines. Your professionalism kept me accountable.

To my mother, Petunia Mlotshwa your support has carried me in every season of my life. This time around, you cheered for a different reason. This is a first in our family.

A moment that re-writes our story. We are the ones we've been waiting for.

To all the participants who volunteered their time, insight and vulnerability – thank you. Without your contributions, this research report would not be possible.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of purpose

This qualitative study will explore digital maturity and Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs) and the influence thereof on employee participation by considering employee perceptions of the awareness, access, and utility of these services.

1.2 Background of the study

The workplace plays a crucial role for promoting health, wellness, and occupational safety. According to the World Health Organisation (Hall, Kelly, Burmeister & Merchant, 2017), the workplace is a priority setting for fostering health and wellness in the 21st century. Employees with health challenges and poor lifestyle choices create financial costs for employers because of an increase in healthcare expenditure and costs related to increased absenteeism, high turnover, decreased productivity and presenteeism. Evidence-based and well-designed workplace wellness programmes help to address health-related challenges of employees in the workplace.

A 2021 study by Price Waterhouse Coopers (Cowdrey & Ponniah, 2021), showed that employees are increasingly expecting their employers to provide better mental health support following accelerated changes in the workplace. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in transformation in the workplace, and this has affected the overall wellbeing of employees. The PwC study on *Rethinking Workplace Mental Health & Wellbeing* reported that a majority of the younger workforce i.e. Generation Y and Generation Z expect their employers to provide more mental health and wellness initiatives in the workplace. Similarly, Bhaidkar (2022) supported this notion stating that companies are responding to a changing labour force by expanding their scope of wellness initiatives to attract, retain and sustain employees.

The expanded scope of workplace wellness initiatives has meant that the original concept of employee wellness initiatives such as Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs) has evolved to be recognised as a formalised programme designed to improve the employee experiences at work by providing physical, psychological, social, emotional, financial, and instrumental assistance beyond the scope of standard HR benefits and support programmes (Grant et al., 2008 in Stefko, 2023). This recognises that innovations in EWPs have resulted in integrating EWPs with what employees require beyond the workplace.

Even though corporations have invested in workplace wellness services such as EWPs to support employee mental health and wellbeing, these services are still underutilised and undervalued. The low utility and participation rates can result in a delay in care and additional company costs related to loss in productivity and decreased employee engagement (Cowdrey & Ponniah, 2021). Bhaidkar (2022) notes that high utility, participation, and engagement of EWPs is a result of a well-designed programme that shows the commitment of the organisation to invest in the wellbeing and overall health of its employees.

These programmes must be designed to be relevant and easy for employees to understand, access and utilise. However, with the ongoing transformation in the workplace, many workplaces do not have support systems that meet the changing needs of employees. Thus, calling for employee wellness solutions that cater for the change in ways of work and transforming workplaces. According to Cowdrey and Ponniah (2021), many employee wellness initiatives still rely on traditional EWPs even though there seems to be a growing expectation for more contemporary services that are better suited to “employee needs, modern job design, and industry challenges".

This then begs the question about the level of digital maturity of EWPs and if the use of digital technologies to cater to employee needs will result in increased employee awareness, improved access, and higher utility and participation rates.

1.3 Research problem

With the ongoing change and transformation in the workplace, many existing employee wellness support systems in the workplace fall short of meeting employee needs and expectations. As a result, employee wellness services that support employee mental health and wellbeing are underutilised. This calls for viable solutions that consider the changing ways of work and the transforming nature of workplaces.

This introduces the possibility for the use of digital technologies in employee wellness initiatives to drive awareness, improve access and increase utility and engagement for employees. This study aims to evaluate the digital maturity and employee wellness programmes (EWPs) and the influence thereof on employee participation by considering employee perceptions of the awareness, access, and utility of these services.

1.4 Research objectives

The objectives of this research are:

i) To explore the relevance of EWPs in a changing job market and transforming workplace.
ii) To understand employee expectations regarding awareness, access, utility and participation in employee wellness services within a transforming workplace.
iii) To understand what constitutes as ‘digital maturity’ in the context of EWPs and how the level of the digital maturity of existing EWPs influence employee participation.

1.5 Rationale

This study seeks to contribute to the pool of research on the changing role of EWPs by understanding how the change in ways of work and employee expectations is inciting the need for the digitisation of EWPs. The changes in the workplace that have been brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and a digitally

transforming work environment have affected employee wellbeing. The adverse impact of this transformation in the workplace has resulted in a need for organisations to provide greater technical, physical, social, and psychological support for employees (Usman, Cheng, Ghani, Gul & Shah, 2023). Moreso, younger generations in the workplace are expecting their employers to provide more mental health and wellness support (Cowdrey & Ponniah, 2021)

Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs) can therefore play a pivotal role in providing employees with the relevant support and tools to mitigate the risk of chronic illnesses and to improve their overall quality of life (Hall, Kelly, Burmeister and Merchant, 2017). EWPs have been introduced by employers to encourage behavioural change in employees and to increase employee job satisfaction (Rubery, Ramirez, D'Agostino, Vasalos & Thirukumaran, 2022).

As such, employee needs, preferences and expectations need to be considered when employers respond to the support required to navigate a changing work environment. Haynes and Helms (2001) further support that providing wellness offerings that fit the unique preferences and needs of employees "enhances the likelihood of participation on a sustained basis."

Therefore, the strategies required to increase awareness, access, and utility of EWPs – including the digitisation of the delivery of these programmes – warrants further research. This study is therefore interested in exploring if the level of digital maturity of EWPs affects employee participation by considering the awareness, access, utility, and participation of these services offered by employers.

1.6 Delimitations of the study

This study seeks to evaluate the use of digital technologies in EWPs and its effects on employee participation. This study will explore the extent that the digital maturity of EWPs affects employee participation by considering the awareness, access, and utility of these services by experienced employees at mid-large sized enterprises. As such, there are limitations and boundaries that need to be considered to ensure that this study is robust and focused. The limitations and boundaries of this study are as follows:

i) This study will mainly research the effectiveness of EWPs from the perspective of the employee as it is evaluating employee participation in EWPs. This study will not research the employer or contracted EWP service provider to evaluate employee participation.

ii) This study will conduct research among a sample of experienced employees working for mid-large sized enterprises in South Africa. This study will not research employees who do not meet the requirements of this defined sample.

iii) This study will investigate the reasons why employees choose to participate in the current EWPs offered in their place of work.

iv) This study will consider employee participation in EWPs within the parameters of the awareness of services, access of services and utility of these services.

v) This study will seek to understand the current level digital maturity of EWPs based on the employees' experience or lack thereof. This study will not be researching the digital maturity of EWPs based on the organisation's digital transformation goals and objectives.

vi) This study will be using conceptual/theoretical frameworks that focus on how the change in ways of work have influenced employee expectations.

vii) This study will not be making recommendations on *how* organisations can digitally transform to meet employee expectations where EWPs are concerned.

1.7 Definition of terms

Digital maturity

Armstrong and Lee (2022) state that while there is no common definition of digital maturity, literature presents varying definitions that recognise it as the adaptation to a constantly evolving business environment that is driven by emerging technologies and developments. Digital maturity can be described as the readiness of an organisation to digitally transform how it does business through

the use, application, and adoption of digital technologies in its products, processes, and strategies (Da Silva, Lopes & Vasconcelos, 2024).

Employee

For the purposes of this study, an employee is “a person in the service of another any contract of hire, express or implied, oral or written, where the employer has the power or right to control and direct the employee in the material details of how work is to be performed” (Muhl, 2002). This definition is not to be mistaken for an independent contractor that exercises their contractual obligation within the bounds of independent employment.

Employee participation

Employee participation refers to the self-selection process of an employee to actively partake in an EWP in the capacity of the three dimensions of employee participation in EWPs identified in the problem statement. These are awareness, access and utility. According to Smit, Proper, Engels, Campmans, and van Oostrom. (2023) awareness refers to the employee’s knowledge about and familiarity of the services offered by the EWP whereas access refers to the points of entry and the ways in which employees’ approach to the services offered by the EWP. And lastly, utility refers to how often employees access and use the services offered by EWPs (Cowdrey and Ponniah, 2021).

Employee wellness

According to the World Health Organisation’s Constitution (2014 in Solnet, Subramony, Golubovskaya, Snyder, Gray, Liberman & Verma, 2020), wellness can be defined as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” and employee wellness considers these dimensions of wellness in the context of the workplace. Makhanya (2021) draws a definition of wellness from the National Wellness Institute (NWI) wellness model that considers wellness across six dimensions namely: physical, emotional, social, occupational, intellectual, and spiritual wellness. The

occupational wellness highlighted in this model places emphasis on employee wellness as it considers job satisfaction and wellbeing in the workplace.

Employee wellness programme

Employee wellness programmes (EWPs) are defined as employer-driven programmes that are designed to promote wellness at work "by providing employees with tools and support for reducing their risk for chronic diseases and for improving their quality of life" (Hall, *et al*., 2017). These programmes focus on lifestyle behaviours that seek to improve individual health and include initiatives such as onsite screenings for chronic diseases, mental health counselling, nutrition counselling, smoking cessation – only to name a few (Haynes and Helms, 2001). Although enhancing the employee's overall health is an objective for these EWPs, the primary purpose and goal is for organisations is enable employees to fulfil their job roles and responsibilities by providing the relevant support to do so (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023).

Workplace wellness

Workplace wellness refers to any health promotion programme, initiative, activity, or policy that is initiated by the employer which seeks to improve the overall health and wellbeing of workers, and, in some cases, dependents. (Goetzel, *et al.* 2014). These initiatives and activities include health interventions that are designed to remediate and prevent the occurrence of poor lifestyle choices where their physical, psychological, social, financial, and intellectual health is concerned. Over the years, workplace wellness has become essential as the workplace has been viewed as an ideal setting to provide easy and regular access to positive peer and organisational supports toward wellness" (Cheon, Naufal and Kash, 2020).

1.8 Assumptions

The following assumptions have been made for this study:

i) The participants are full-time experienced employees who work for mid-large sized companies and have had exposure to an EWP.

ii) The participants are mentally fit to participate in the research being conducted.

iii) The participants have had exposure to the accelerated transformation in the workplace that has been prevalent following the Covid-19 pandemic.

iv) The participants have been affected by the accelerated change in the workplace and have had to adjust to the changing world of work.

v) The participants expect the delivery of EWPs to not only support their physical, psychological, and social wellbeing but to also be delivered in a manner that meet the technological requirements of a changing world of work.

vi) Traditional EWPs have not achieved a level of digital maturity that helps to promote employee participation in EWPs and meets employee expectations.

1.9 Chapter Outline

Chapter one focuses on identifying and defining the research problem with the supporting objectives, rationale, and assumptions about the study. This chapter also defines key terms to guide the reader and provide more context in this area of research. Chapter two introduces the literature review and theoretical framework for this study. This chapter further expands on the objectives set out in chapter one and provides a proposition for each objective. The theoretical framework presents theories that provide grounding for the proposed research topic and hypotheses.

Chapter three describes a detailed research methodology that will be applied to explore the propositions from chapter two and that were deduced as possible solutions to the research objectives mentioned in chapter one. This chapter concludes by discussing the ethical considerations for the purposes of data collection. Chapter four presents the research findings while chapter five explores the research findings and discusses if and how these findings support the propositions mentioned in earlier sections. Chapter 6 provides a conclusion and a discussion on recommendations based on the findings of the research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This section of the study is a review of literature that provide a theoretical grounding for the research problem in question. The section discusses key concepts and definitions related to the evaluation of digital maturity in EWPs and its effects on employee participation. The literature review explores the research objectives in chapter one and provides propositions guided by the literature. This review seeks to explore how the level of digital maturity of EWPs influences employee participation by considering the awareness, access, and utility as dimensions of employee participation in these services. This section also looks at the theoretical frameworks that will contextualise some of the key concepts and areas of research for this study.

2.2 Background discussion

In recent decades, workplace wellness programmes have been widely introduced by employers to improve and promote employee health. With employees spending a large part of their days at work, it has become imperative for employers to provide regular and relevant access to health-promoting initiatives as part of the organisational support towards creating a culture of wellness (Cheon, Naufal & Kash, 2020). With the World Health Organisation (WHO) pronouncing the workplace as one of the key settings for health promotion, employers ought to implement wellness programmes that provide employees with the tools and support that have a positive effect on their risk profiles and exposure to chronic diseases and improve their overall quality of life (Hall, et. al., 2017). Comprehensive and well-designed programmes have a positive impact on lowering healthcare costs, decreasing absenteeism and presenteeism, increasing productivity and boosting overall employee morale.

However, some employers question the effectiveness of EWPs and if these initiatives produce significant effects on behavioural change and improved health outcomes. According to Mukhopadhyay and Wendel (2013), although most organisations evaluate the effectiveness and outcomes of employee wellness initiatives using a return-on-investment (ROI) analysis, there needs to be more robust evaluation designs that determine the effectiveness of EWPs (Cheon, et al., 2020). The authors note that this evaluation metric presents limitations for employers offering EWPs stating that measuring the effectiveness of EWPs using ROI may lead to premature termination of viable programmes as such initiatives require major investments in earlier years prior to showing results in subsequent years (Mukhopadhyay & Wendel, 2013).

Furthermore, ROI analysis for workplace wellness programmes that are well-designed and that consider important factors such as the "self-selection of employees into programmes, high attrition rates, changes in employee demographics, benefit plan design modifications, alterations in third-party fee schedules, etc." are quite rare. Therefore, measuring the effectives of EWPs by considering financial gain and ROI form part of ongoing debates regarding the effectiveness and measurement of EWPs as it presents limitations in understanding and quantifying the overall impact of such a programme (Hall, Kelly, Burmeister & Merchant, 2017).

As such, there needs to be other firm-level analyses that evaluate the impact of employee wellness initiatives based on objectives such as the ability to i) drive employee participation in the programme and (ii) drive a change in behaviour that will result in long-term investments in individual activities that promote a healthy lifestyle (Mukhopadhyay & Wendel, 2013). Goezel, et al. (2014) note that other measurement frameworks consider various aspects of EWPs and more accurately demonstrate the relevance and impact of EWPs. These can be classified into three categories namely: structure and design of the programme, delivery of the programme and expected utilisation and productivity of employees participating in the programme.

The structure and design of the programme refers to whether the critical components of the programme are in place and if these components meet the

required standards and best practice. The delivery of the programme refers to the processes that have been implemented to facilitate the programme and if these processes are delivered and progressing as expected. And lastly, the productivity of the employees participating in the programme refers to an increase in output achieved because of behavioural change influenced by employee participation in the programme (Goezel, et al., 2014)

The above measurement frameworks noted by Mukhopadhyay and Wendel (2013) and Goetzel, et al. (2014) both highlight a key aspect of evaluating the impact of EWPs – one that relates to the self-selection process that an employee undergoes to opt into the programme. The voluntary nature of employee participation in the success of EWPs is pivotal and thus warrants further exploration when considering the different strategies that employers can use to increase awareness, access, and utility in such initiatives. However, given the change in the ways of work and changing employee expectations, Hall et al. (2017) note that organisations need to have a better understanding of their employee characteristics and preferences to be able to design programmes that are relevant and meet employee expectations.

Change in ways of work and changing employee expectations

Following the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, employees and organisations have had to adapt to new ways of work to meet the demands of a changing work environment. This has included adapting to remote and virtual work models, an increased use of technological tools such as video conferencing platforms and adjusting to digitally transforming work processes and systems in their day-to-day job roles (Botha & Coetzee, 2022).

According to Botha and Coetzee (2022), the drastic change in workplaces and change in employee expectations has resulted in the need for organisations to not only focus on the technical aspects of the workplace but to also prioritise the physical, social, and psychological needs of employees in the workplace. The authors further note that the accelerated transformation in the workplace requires organisations to play a pivotal role in managing the changes employees are experiencing in the work and social environment.

With remote work being one of the biggest transformations in the workplace post-Covid, employee expectations about where and how they work have changed. Employees have experienced several physical, social, and psychological benefits of virtual and remote work including improved work-life balance, reduced stress levels related to daily commuting, saving on travel expenses and increased autonomy (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Employees have further expected their employers to provide work conditions that prioritise additional support for their overall wellbeing. Additionally, younger generations in the workplace i.e. Generation Y and Generation Z expecting employers to provide educational, training, career, and greater mental health support (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021).

In virtual work environments, employees further expect their employers to provide support to help them navigate a digitally transforming workplace and for employers to provide the technology needed to perform their day-to-day tasks and tools that support their overall wellbeing in the workplace (Kaushik, 2020). When it comes to EWPs, there is an increasing expectation from employers to provide contemporary wellness services that meet employee needs, changing job design and industry standards (Cowdrey & Ponniah, 2021). This includes examining modern ways of delivering EWP services e.g. digitising how some wellness services are delivered, to meet employee expectations.

Cheon et al. (2020) notes that when designing EWPs, it is important to prioritise initiatives that consider employee needs, their health-related goals, and their readiness to effect behavioural change. Employee expectations should be considered when designing an EWP as the fitness of the programme in accordance with participant expectations can determine effectiveness. By considering different aspects of employee participation i.e. preferences, characteristics, health-related goals, etc., employers can improve how they target programmes to meet their employees' expectations, which can result in increased participation rates and overall program success (Hall, 2017).

The assumption here is that EWPs that meet employee expectations can expect increased employee participation where awareness, access and utility are concerned. If employees' expectations are that wellness programmes should meet digitally transforming workplaces, then the level of digital maturity of

traditional EWPs and use of digital technologies to cater to employee needs are to be explored and research in this area is worth conducting.

Based on this, the assumption can be made that when it comes to health-promoting interventions such as EWPs, employees will have expectations that align to a digitally transforming workplace and thus expect the delivery of EWPs to not only support their physical, psychological, and social wellbeing but to also be delivered in a manner that meets the technological requirements of a changing work environment.

2.3 Evaluating the relevance of EWPs in a changing job market and transforming workplace.

Over the years, workplace wellness initiatives, including traditional employee wellness programmes (EWPs) have been associated with an improvement in job satisfaction, increase in productivity and decrease in healthcare costs for organisations across the globe (Rubery et al., 2022). With increasing pressures in the workplace facing organisations and employees, there has been a significant shift in the attitudes and perceptions towards workplace wellness.

Traditionally, EWPs have been seen as a ‘perk’ or benefit for employees and not as a strategic imperative that can contribute to the company’s sustainability goals and bottom-line (Bhaidkhar, 2022). These programmes have mainly offered a range of basic and cost-effective initiatives, such as providing information on health and nutrition and smoking cessations programmes, to more high-touch and expensive initiatives, such as “providing access to professional health exams and workout facilities” (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023).

These EWPs have been implemented to help reduce the illness burden caused by unhealthy work-related and lifestyle-related behaviours of employees, therefore demonstrating that employers can influence the overall wellbeing of employees by implementing wellness initiatives that align with their strategic objectives and organisational culture (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). Some research has found EWPs to be effective in driving positive health outcomes for initiatives such as smoking cessations programmes, weight loss, mental health,

and disease management initiatives (Cheon, et al., 2020). This does not only display how EWPs contribute to reducing medical costs for employees but also shows how these programmes can create a culture that ensures that employees engage in sustainable habits and behaviours in the workplace.

More recently, the changing demographics in the workplace i.e. baby boomers retiring and younger generations such as millennials and Generation Z entering the workforce, has prompted companies to respond to this changing labour market by expanding their scope of workplace wellness initiatives to attract and retain employees (Bhaidkhar, 2022). Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy (2020) notes that younger generations in the workforce consider corporate health services as part of their benefits and overall compensation package - as such, employers looking to attract the best talent in the job market should prioritise employee health programmes and/or offer comprehensive corporate health insurance to ease the burden of healthcare costs and interventions for employees.

This change in employee expectations means that EWPs are relevant now more than ever, however the question of how these programmes are developed, designed, and delivered to meet employee expectations and how this influences employee participation remains to be explored.

Employee wellbeing post-covid

According to Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023), the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively affected employee wellbeing as it has changed working conditions for employees which has resulted in physical, psychosocial, and technical implications for employees. This has led to increased levels of stress with Hamouche (2020) highlighting that psychological distress and depression caused by the pandemic and the employees' inability to manage such a stressful life event as one of the main issues affecting employee wellness. Makhanya (2021) notes that these increased levels of stress have affected employee wellbeing and have had an overall negative effect on employee productivity and performance at work. The author further notes that work-related stress is in fact an occupational hazard and employee-centred interventions such as EWPs help to mitigate the risk of illnesses or injuries related to job stress.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic expedited digitisation in the workplace and normalised remote work, the rise in virtual work environments in a post-Covid era has also brought about its own challenges. On the one hand, employees experience advantages of working remotely such as flexibility, increased digital skills and cost savings related low levels of commuting (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021). On the other hand, employees still experience disadvantages that affect their mental and overall wellbeing such as social isolation, a work-life imbalance, working overtime and increased pressure to prove trustworthiness and perform when working remotely (Türkeş, Stăncioiu, Orzan, Jugănaru, Marinescu & Jugănaru, 2024).

Based on the above, it is evident that the pandemic not only altered the way the organisations and employees work but it has had long-lasting effects on the workforce. Hamouche (2020) identified three dimensions that are important in considering the mitigation of the impact of Covid-19 on employees' mental and physical health – all in which EWPs can play an essential role. The first dimension are the organisational factors which consider the working environment and occupational safety and management of the employee. Earlier, Makhanya (2021) identified work-related stress as an occupational hazard, and through the provision of EWPs for instance, the role of the organisation could be to provide relevant tools and support that would educate and train employees on stress management and its benefits in the workplace.

The second dimension are the institutional factors which consider the governmental programmes, policies and legislation that are legal frameworks for employers to support and promote employee wellbeing. In South Africa, there are legislations that support and promote employee health and workplace wellness namely: (i) Occupational Health and Safety Act, (85 of 1993); ii) Labour Relations Act (66 of 1995); (iii) The South African Constitution Act (108 of 1996); and (iv) Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998) (Makhanya, 2021). Despite a changing work landscape and effects of Covid on the workforce, employers still need to ensure that EWPs align to these legislations and support the goals of this legal framework.

The last dimension are the individual factors that consider the demographic, mental illness history/propensity and perception of physical health of the employee. Here, Hamouche (2020) argues that if an employee's perception of their physical health and understanding of mental health is poor then the role of EWPs would be to educate and support the employee through counselling and screening programmes for chronic illnesses. All in all, the above shows that there is an increasing recognition of the relevance and value of EWPs to address effects of Covid-19 on employee wellbeing and to provide the necessary support vital for the workforce to be productive (Yadav, 2021).

With this changing work landscape, employees similarly have different expectations from EWPs and their employers. Therefore, organisations will have to reform their wellness initiatives to include the changing needs of employees post-Covid.

2.3.1 *Proposition 1*

The following proposition can be deduced from the above literature:

EWPs have become a strategic imperative for organisations as a result of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on employee wellbeing and transformation in the workplace.

2.4 Expectations of employees regarding awareness, access, utility, and engagement of EWPs in a transforming workplace

With a shift in employee expectations because of a changing job market and transforming workplace, employers need to consider how EWPs need to be developed, designed, and delivered to meet expectations of employees. The proposition here is that meeting employee expectations in relation to the different dimensions of employee participation will result in increased employee engagement in EWPs. This section will look at the awareness, access, utility, and engagement as key dimensions to consider in employee participation.2.4.1. Awareness

In their research on the organisational and individual factors that contribute to the effectiveness of EWPs for frontline workers, Solnet et al. (2020) found that the success of an EWP is characterised by an active orientation in the design of the programme where the programme is (i) consistently visible and distinctive to employees and (ii) aligns to the needs and preferences of the employee. An important point that requires emphasis is the consistently visible and distinctive nature of the programme to employees and Bontrager and Marshall (2019) argue that there are two approaches that are important in raising awareness and driving adoption of EWPs.

The first approach is visibly involving leadership and senior management in EWPs to drive buy-in, and the second approach is communicating clear and consistent messaging to employees through internal marketing efforts. The involvement of senior management represents programme championship by leadership and contribute to a culture of wellness. The second approach refers to internal marketing which refers to “the efforts by organisations to encourage employees to accept the firm’s strategic goals and to perform in accordance with company policies and programmes in support of those strategic goals” (Bontrager and Marshall, 2019).

In their study on the challenges of implementing an employee assistance programme (EAP) in a municipality in the Limpopo province in South Africa, Mugari, Mtapuri, and Rangongo, (2014) noted that out of a workforce of 800 employees, 81% of the sample of fifty-two employees who participated in their study were made aware of the EAP through supervisors, workshops and general meetings led by management thereby confirming that the involvement of senior management is a key component of driving awareness and ultimately participation in EWPs. The authors further note that internal marketing efforts to employees is also an important component of driving the visibility and effectiveness of EWPs.

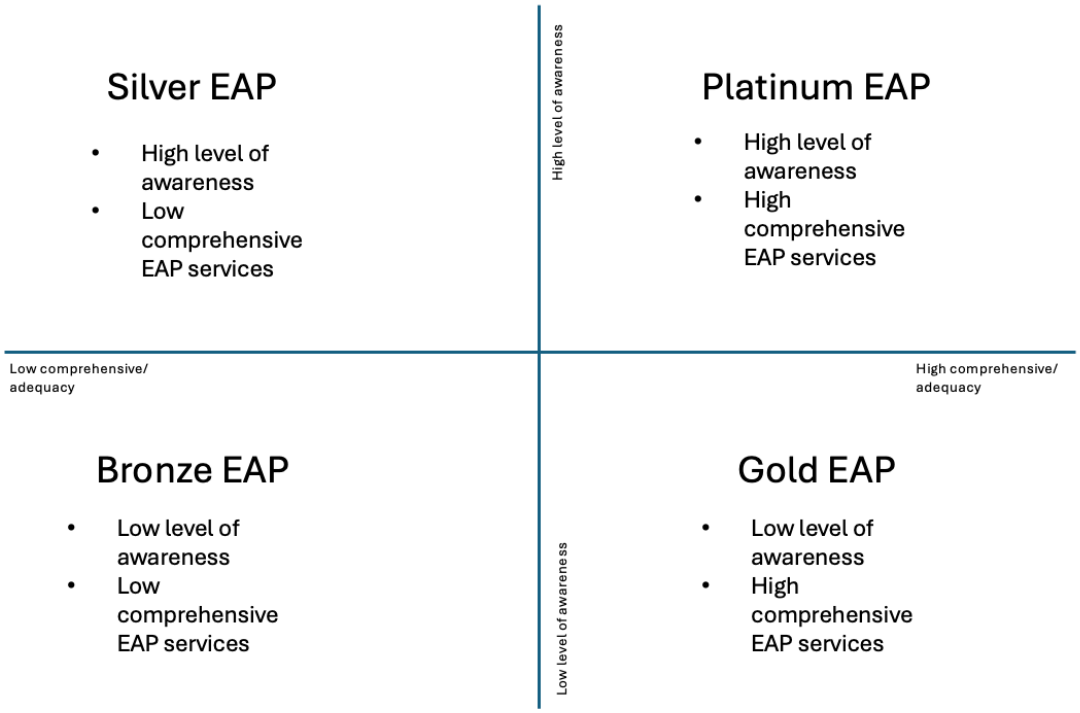


Figure 2.1: Perceptual Map of EAPs

Additionally, Mugari et al. (2014) developed the above Perceptual Map of EAPs where an EAP could be evaluated along two dimensions, namely the level of awareness and the comprehensive/adequate nature of the EAP services. From these dimensions, the authors identified four quadrants to classify EAPs according to the level of awareness that employees have of these programmes in their work environments and the comprehensive/adequate nature of the EAP services offered by the programme. Based on Fig. 2.1., the most effective EAP will be a Platinum type in the top right quadrant. This type of EAP has a high level of awareness among employees and comprehensive coverage. A Gold EAP is characterised low levels of awareness among employees, however it features a high level of / comprehensive coverage. On the top left quadrant is the Silver EAP which is characterised by a high level of awareness and has low levels of adequacy/comprehensive coverage. Lastly, a Bronze EAP on the bottom left quadrant, has both low levels of awareness and comprehensiveness/adequacy.

Therefore Fig.2.1. implies that awareness is a key factor in ensuring the success and effectiveness of an EWP. Thus, employers need to consider innovative internal marketing and promotional strategies that raise awareness and cater to

different workforce characteristics. Using digital means such as online presentations, the intranet, social media, email newsletters (Smit et al. 2023) will be viable to create a high level of awareness of a comprehensive EWP.

2.4.2. Access

Solnet et al. (2020) argues that the effectiveness of an EWP can be ascribed to the access of wellness services i.e. the opportunities to engage with these offerings in the workplace and employee's willingness to use or avoid these opportunities. Furthermore, Cowdery and Ponniah (2021) argue that an EWP's visibility and lack of awareness has an impact on access. The authors highlighted that in a survey conducted in 2020, among 14 frontline medical doctors at a hospital in Australia, 50% revealed that they did not know how to access the EWP offered by the hospital.

Mugari et al. (2014) notes that an EWP should not only be comprehensive in terms of the coverage of services and offerings, but it should also be accessible in terms of distance and channels. In the study mentioned in 2.4.1, Mugari et al. (2014) noted recommendations from the research participants suggesting that the EWP services offered by the municipality should be decentralised to other office locations to ensure that there is sufficient reach and access for employees in different locations. Although referring to physical access in this case, this recommendation highlights the importance of access in driving adoption and raises the question of what access looks like in a digitally transforming workplaces.

Cowdrey and Ponniah (2020) note that traditional means of delivering EWP services may no longer be relevant in a transforming workplace. Previously, EWP services were mainly delivered in-person and telephonically, however younger generations in the workplace are tech savvy and prefer a digital-first approach when accessing these services. The authors propose web chat features, web-based forums, and targeted self-help content as viable digital channels that provide the flexibility required for hybrid and remote workers.

2.4.3. Utility

According to Solnet, et al. (2020), the availability of an EWP in an organisation does not automatically result in employee participation, thus it is important to devise and implement relevant strategies that drive adoption and utility of such initiatives. This emphasises the voluntary nature of EWPs where employees self-select to participate in and utilise these services and thereby creating a need for organisations to better understand the employees' characteristics and preferences when developing, designing, and delivering EWPs. According to Hall et. al (2017), this is important for employers and workplace wellness promoters to help deliver relevant EWP services that will be used by employees.

With the changing ways of work and workforce demographics in contemporary workplaces because of digitalisation, the growth in remote and hybrid work environments continues to rise. Considering this, Errichiello and Pianese (2021) state that the 'work from anywhere' nature of the remote working requires employers to provide the relevant tools and training to increase digital skills required to use these tools. The authors further note that these tools serve a work-related purpose, that is, to support individual and collective work requirements and a relational-related purpose that supports the psychosocial processes with other colleagues working remotely and the organisation itself.

In the case of the relational-related purpose, the provision of EWP services through digital channels would support the psychosocial needs of employees and enable effective interactions with the EWP services provided by the employer. According to Schell (2012), the prevalence of mobile devices, apps and gaming technologies allows employers to develop personalised experiences that use these technologies and therefore can drive the utility of EWP services and increase participation and overall engagement.

2.4.1 *Proposition 2*

The following proposition can be deduced from the above literature:

Meeting employee expectations in relation to the different dimensions of employee participation i.e. awareness, access and utility using relevant tools and

technologies has the potential to result in increased employee engagement in EWPs.

2.5 Digital maturity in EWPs and effects on employee participation

Borrowing a definition of digital maturity from Kane et al. (2018), Armstrong and Lee (2022) recognise digital maturity as the ability of an organisation to adapt to the ongoing digital change in a systematic and consistent manner. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated digital change and has transformed workplaces thereby impacting how employees do their work. This change in the workplace has resulted in a shift in what employees expect from organisations and how organisations enable employees to fulfil their job roles and responsibilities.

EWPs are no exception to this ongoing digital change and a deeper understanding of employee expectations regarding the digital transformation of EWPs is required. This section will provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing employee participation and consider these factors when evaluating the digital maturity of EWPs from the employee's perspective.

2.5.1 *Factors influencing employee participation*

According to Solnet et al. (2020), when it comes to workplace interventions such as EWPs, employee perceptions of the work environment need to be viewed as a unit of analysis to understand the differing abilities and motivations of employees. The authors argue that employee abilities such as prior experience, knowledge and skills that translate to wellness-related behaviours, and employee motivations such as wellness needs, goals and values are likely to influence employee perceptions and ultimately participation in EWPs. For example, employees who prioritise job-related demands or those who do not have personal resources to support their home-related demands might find making time for wellness and health-related activities challenging or a waste of time. Whereas employees who prioritise health and wellness are more prone to have a positive attitude towards workplace wellness initiatives. Both these instances highlight the

differing characteristics of employees that inform their perception of EWPs. Thus, having a deeper understanding of workforce characteristics and preferences is vital in designing programmes that are relevant and effective (Hall et al., 2017).

In a study about the barriers and facilitators for employee participation in workplace wellness programmes, Smit et al. (2023) identified the following as employee characteristics that influence employee perception of EWPs: knowledge and familiarity with the programme, beliefs and attitudes about the programme, intra- and interpersonal characteristics, needs, experiences, and available personal resources. These factors suggested that these characteristics might influence employee participation and programme impact.

Additionally, with younger generations such as Generation Y and Generation Z growing in today's workforce, the characteristics of these employees need to be considered when planning workplace interventions. Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy (2021) note that younger employees value mental health support in the workplace and with them being more digitally savvy and preferring a digital-first approach to access such services (Cowdrey and Ponniah, 2020), these are some workforce characteristics that need to be considered when developing, designing, and delivering EWPs.

However, the question of whether existing EWPs have achieved a level of digital maturity promotes awareness, access and utility remains. Cowdrey and Ponniah (2020) state that employees in certain industries such as retail and healthcare find it challenging to leave their place of work to attend in-person appointments or sessions with wellness practitioners, while employees in hybrid or fully remote environments prefer flexible services and want to access care anywhere and at any time. These workforce characteristics highlight the need for more digitised access for employee wellness services that would meet the abilities and motivations of employees to participate in EWPs.

2.5.2 *Proposition 3*

Traditional EWPs must undergo a process of digitalisation as they have not achieved a level of digital maturity that meets employee expectations and supports employee participation in the programmes.

2.6 Analytical Framework

According to da Silva et al. (2024) digital maturity refers to a transformation process that organisations undergo to achieve a desired level of digital transformation. It represents an organisation's *ability* to attain desired organisational and strategic outcomes (Armstrong & Lee, 2022). Digital maturity models are the tools used "to assess the current situation of technology use in the organisation, prioritising improvement measures so that the firm can reach the desired maturity stage" (Becker et al., 2009 in da Silva et al., 2024).

Digital maturity models evaluate the level of digital maturity of an organisation by evaluating several dimensions which Armstrong and Lee (2022) define as the factors that represent the status and the level of performance of that dimension in the organisation. Various literature has offered different digital maturity models to help organisations assess the level of maturity of digital transformation. While many of these models share common features, they also vary in certain areas of evaluation. For the purposes of this study, the digital maturity model that will be used is the Maturity Model of Technology Adoption for Educational Organisations (MMEO).

In a study conducted by Ifenthaler and Egloffstein (2020) for a European organisation, the authors use MMEO to assess the existing individual and organisational capabilities to determine a benchmark for organisational change and human resource-led interventions. This study used research questions that were employee-centric and would be relevant to the assessment of the digital maturity of EWPs and its effects on employee participation later in this section. The research questions that were addressed are:

i) What do employees know about digitalisation?

ii) How do employees' access and use IT tools and systems?

iii) What are employees' perceptions and attitudes digitalisation?

iv) What is the level of technology adoption within the organisation?

The above questions resulted in the use of the MMEO as a maturity model to address these areas of research. The MMEO comprises of six dimensions namely: Infrastructure, strategy and leadership, organisation, employees, digital learning, and teaching. Infrastructure refers to the IT-related equipment and technology required for organisational processes and systems. Strategy and leadership refer to the existence of a digital strategy and promotion and buy-in of this strategy by leadership and senior management.

Organisation refers to the internal structures and resources available to support a digital strategy. Employees refer to the knowledge and skills of employees as well as their attitudes towards and usage of digital technologies. Culture evaluates if the organisational culture is open to adopting new technologies and open to ongoing change. Finally, digital learning and teaching is the openness to use digital platforms to access and consume information. The table below shows the dimensions of the MMEO and the indicators/factors informing each dimension.

Table 1 Dimensions of the maturity model for educational organizations (MMOE)

Dimension	Indicators/Content
Equipment and technology	Equipment with digital devices, software
	Up-to-date infrastructure
	Homogeneous technology landscape, standards
Strategy and leadership	Existence and implementation of a digital strategy
	Managers promote digitalization with priority
	Analysis of new technologies
	Democratic leadership style, creative freedom granted
Organization	Sufficient financial resources
	Technical Support (internal vs. external service providers)
	Efficient procurement and maintenance
	Pedagogical Support
Employees	Knowledge/Skills in dealing with digital technologies
	Usage of devices and services
	Attitudes
	Readiness for further training
Culture	Openness to new technologies
	Openness for change
	Open communication, mutual support
Digital learning and teaching	Digital platforms, e-Learning offerings
	Working with digital devices in classroom settings
	Digital Education as an overall goal
	Data driven teaching and learning

Table 2.1: Dimensions of the maturity model for educational organisations (MMEO) (Ifenthaler & Egloffstein, 2020)

2.6.1 *Assessing the digital maturity of existing EWPs and effects on employee participation*

Based on the above, the MMEO can be used as an effective model for evaluating the digital maturity of EWPs and effects on employee participation. The first dimension i.e. infrastructure, looks at the IT-related equipment and technology required for organisational processes and systems. In the case of an EWP, the level of IT-related tools and equipment e.g. digital devices, software, etc. provided by the organisation to deliver wellness services offered by the EWP would be considered.

Errichiello and Pianese (2021) argue that in growing virtual environments, technology-related support includes both the provision of tools and technology as well as the training i.e. providing competencies on how to use the tools and technology, required for employees to fulfil their jobs. Goetzel et al. (2014) further note that EWPs which are poorly designed and poorly executed due to a lack of infrastructure and overall organisational support are ineffective and costly.

The second dimension is strategy and leadership and looks at the existence of a digital strategy and the leadership buy-in of this strategy within an organisation. In the case of EWPs, Mugari et al. (2014) states that employee wellness and health promotion need to be a strategic imperative for employers and to increase awareness and participation, senior management needs to be involved. Solnet et al. (2020) argue that line managers and senior managers should play an important role in promoting wellness by i) modelling behaviour that promotes a healthy lifestyle (e.g. engaging in wellness initiatives, not celebrating overwork/burnout, promoting efficiency instead of “face time” in the office); ii) supporting a culture of wellness e.g. encouraging teams to seek counselling when feeling strained, (iii) treating wellness as an aspirational state of being.

Additionally, Smit et al. (2023) states that information about the benefit of EWPs provided by organisations where supervisors and managers model healthy

behaviours themselves is more likely to have a positive attitude on employees. The third dimension, organisation, looks at the internal structures and resources available to support a digital strategy. With EWPs, organisational support not only refers to the resources e.g. financial and technical support to deliver effective EWPs, however it also includes the support required for employee job conditions, performance management systems, development programmes that can support individual and collective aspirations of the employee (Errichiello and Pianese, 2021). The authors further note that organisational support for strategic initiatives such as EWPs helps to promote positive attitudes.

The fourth dimension is employees, and it considers the knowledge and skills of employees as well as their attitudes towards and usage of digital technologies. In a study about the impact of an EWP on employee wellness and employee performance, Makhanya (2021) argues that an effective EWP should consider the degree that employees are able to function in their existing work environments including technical factors such as the utilisation of technology, expectations placed on employees and the nature of their roles and responsibilities. In this case, the utilisation of technology mentioned by Makhanya (2021) and the knowledge and digital skills required to use the relevant technology should be provided by the organisation.

According to Smit et al. (2023) the barriers of EWPs can be improved when employees are actively part of the implementation and design of an EWP and thus performance management systems such as EWPs must be employee-centric and consider the needs, perceptions, and attitudes of the employee. The fifth dimension refers to the organisational culture and Errichiello and Pianese, (2021) define organisational culture “as the values and beliefs that are shared by employees and are reinforced through organisational routines”. Schell (2012) argues that with regards to EWPs, building and promoting a culture of a healthy lifestyle normalises wellness and requires leadership support to be sustained.

Lastly, in a structural assessment to measure the success of an EWP, Goetzel et al. (2014) highlight the importance of how an EWP is delivered and how the operational requirements underpinning this delivery is key for the success of an EWP. This refers to the final dimension of digital learning and teaching that refers

to the openness to use digital platforms to access and consume information. Schell (2012) states that the prevalence of mobile devices, apps and gamification enables employers to develop personalised experiences to relevant wellness content through digital platforms.

2.6.2 *Digital Health and Wellness*

To expand on the dimensions of equipment and technology as well as digital learning, Ronquillo, Meyers and Korvek (2023) identify that the use of digital health and wellness tools and technologies not only helps to improve access to health and wellness services, but it also allows users to have personalised health care experiences. Digital health and wellness refers to “the use of information and communications technologies in medicine and other health professions to manage illnesses and health risks and to promote wellness.” (Ronquillo, et. al, 2023).

McGee-Lennon, Bouamrane, Grieve, O’Donnell, O’Connor, Agbakoba, Devlin, Barry, Bikker, Finch and Mair (2016) term this personalised nature of accessing health and wellness services using digital technologies and tools as a ‘self-care’ agenda. This ‘self-care’ agenda aims to enable users to take ownership of their health and wellness by utilising person-centred digital health platforms and devices such as telehealth, various mobile health applications and wearable technologies (McGee-Lennon, 2016).

Although a tailored framework specific to wellness programme implementation has not been presented, the adoption of digital tools and technologies in health and wellness initiatives are indicative of a move towards digital transformation and digital maturity in the wellness context.

2.6.3 *Work values theories and employee participation in EWPs*

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the work values theories and seeks to evaluate the research problem from the perspective of the employee. According to Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy (2021), work values are the preferences that employees consider important in the type of work they do and

the kind of environment they would like to work in. Parry and Urwin (2011) further add that work values are ‘‘evaluative standards relating to work or the work environment by which individuals discern what is right or assess the importance of preferences’’. Therefore, work values have an influence on the attitudes and behaviours of employees and informs their motivation in the workplace.

Park (2021) further distinguishes work values at two levels namely: intrinsic work values and extrinsic work values. Intrinsic work values refer to the internal rewards such as meaningfulness and self-actualisation that motivates an individual. Whereas extrinsic work values refer to the external rewards and material benefits such as job security, recognition, or social relationships at work. Various literature expands on the theoretical concept of work values by considering additional categories of work values such as altruistic values, social values and leisure values and note that these drive employee motivation and behaviour (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021).

To better understand individual employee work values, various literature further distinguishes work values by the different generations in the workplace. Kupperschmidt (2000 in Parry & Urwin, 2011) define generations as groups that can be identified by their birth years, age, location, and significant events at critical developmental stages. Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy (2021) identify four generations in today’s labour market namely Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y i.e. millennials and Generation Z. For the purposes of this study, the generations that will be considered are Generations Y and Generation Z.

The authors argue that when it comes to intrinsic and extrinsic work values, both these generations seek to opportunities for continuous learning and growth, work-life balance, meaningful work, are socially conscious and value wellness support in the workplace (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021). Both generations have been exposed to digitalisation and the digital technologies that have enabled remote and hybrid work post-Covid (Türkeş, et al., 2024).

Based on this, it is evident that there are both intrinsic and extrinsic work values that motivate the behaviours of both these generations and according to Park (2021) employees’ motivation can increase when external attributes of the work

environment align with their internal i.e. personal attributes. Therefore, when designing workplace wellness interventions, employers need to consider the characteristics and work values of the different generations in their workforce to appeal to their motivations and to influence a positive attitude towards EWPs.

2.7 Summary of Literature Review

The maturity model for educational organisations (MMEO) is a viable model that can be borrowed to assess the maturity of EWPs using its six dimensions namely: technology, strategy and leadership, organisation, employees, culture and digital learning and teaching. The study of this digital maturity model takes on an employee-centric approach and considers employee characteristics and preferences as one of the key dimensions for assessing digital maturity.

This approach provides a basis for exploring theories about employee work values to understand the motivations that drive employee perceptions, attitudes and goals towards their work and work environments. The literature considers the work values theory considering Generation Y and Generation Z and how understanding both the intrinsic and extrinsic nature of these values can assist employers with developing, designing, and delivering relevant wellness programmes and services.

The diagram below represents the conceptual framework for this study:

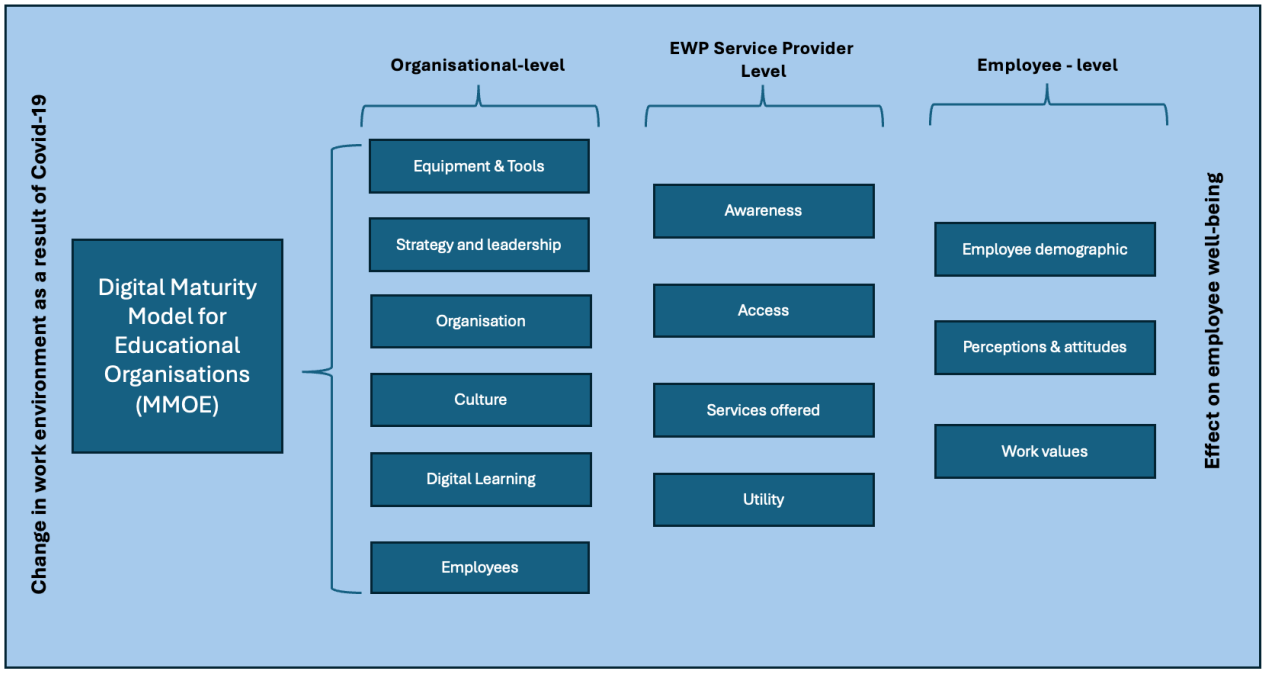


Figure 2.2. The Conceptual Framework of the study

The above diagram highlights the different components of the conceptual framework considered in this study. These components consider the factors that contribute to the level of digital maturity at an organisational level, at the level of the EWP service provider and at an employee level. The digital maturity is evaluated in the context of a changing work environment as a result of Covid-19 and the effect that the digital transformation has had on the employee.

2.8 Summary of propositions

The propositions for this study can be summarised as follows:

2.8.1 *Proposition 1*

EWPs have become a strategic imperative for organisations as a result of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on employee wellbeing and transformation in the workplace.

2.8.2 *Proposition 2*

Meeting employee expectations in relation to the different dimensions of employee participation i.e. awareness, access and utility using relevant tools and technologies has the potential to result in increased employee engagement in EWPs.

2.8.3 *Proposition 3*

Traditional EWPs must undergo a process of digitalisation as they have not achieved a level of digital maturity that meets employee expectations and supports employee participation in the programmes.

The following section will outline the research methodology that will be used to test and/or validate the propositions mentioned above and further explore the research problem outlined in Chapter 1.

Table 2.7 below is a consistency table providing a summary of the research objectives and propositions of this research study.

RO #	Research objective	Proposition
1.	To explore the relevance of EWPs in a changing job market and transforming workplace.	EWPs have become a strategic imperative for organisations as a result of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on employee wellbeing and transformation in the workplace.

2.	To understand employee expectations regarding awareness, access and utility in employee wellness services within a transforming workplace.	Meeting employee expectations in relation to the different dimensions of employee participation i.e. awareness, access and utility using relevant tools and technologies has the potential to result in increased employee engagement in EWPs.
3.	To understand what constitutes as digital maturity in the context of EWPs and how the level of the digital maturity of existing EWPs impact employee participation	Traditional EWPs must undergo a process of digitalisation as they have not achieved a level of digital maturity that meets employee expectations and supports employee participation in the programmes.

This chapter has discussed the relevance of EWPs in a changing job market by exploring the impact of Covid-19 in the workplace and how this has affected employee wellbeing. The literature also unpacked how these changes have influenced employee expectations regarding awareness, access and utility in employee wellness services. The chapter further explored the use of the Maturity Model of Technology Adoption for Educational Organisations (MMEO), to evaluate digital maturity in the context of a changing work environment as a result of Covid-19 and the effect that the digital transformation has had on employees. Using a qualitative methodology and an interpretivist approach, the propositions deduced from the literature will be addressed and validated in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To explore the research problem outlined chapter one and validate the propositions in chapter two, this section will outline the research methodology that will be followed to address the suggested propositions. This section will justify the methodological choices for the study with reference to relevant literature. This section will start by detailing the research approach that will qualify the research objectives.

It will then look at the research design to describe how the study will be conducted and further outline the data collection methods, population and sample, research instrument and the data analysis strategies and interpretation. The section will conclude by outlining the quality assurance measures and ethical considerations for the study.

3.1 Research approach

This study will take on a qualitative research method and draw on interpretivism principles as an epistemological framework. A qualitative methodology is the most appropriate to conduct this study as it will take on an inductive approach to explore concepts and ideas as they emerge (Hignett & McDermott, 2015). The descriptive nature of qualitative research provides a deep understanding of the participants' thoughts, beliefs, and their point of reference (Vanderstoep, & Johnson, 2008).

As this study seeks to get a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of employees working for mid – large-sized organisations and their experiences with EWP services, a qualitative approach will provide in-depth insight into the characteristics, preferences, and attitudes of employees. It will take on an exploratory perspective that will consider the employees' individual characteristics, preferences, and attitudes towards workplace wellness services. Furthermore, Njie and Asimiran (2014) state that qualitative research allows the researcher to unravel complex phenomenon through thorough questioning and inquiry, therefore it is not an ideal methodology if the researcher is looking to get "quick results and easy answers."

According to Creswell (2014 in Makhanya, 2021), qualitative research takes on an interpretivist approach which explores the lived experiences of participants from the perspective of the participants. Through observations, interviews and case studies, qualitative research allows for the researcher to explore the meanings of the participants' experiences and the relationship between these experiences and the setting/context the research is taking place (Njie & Asimiran, 2014).Thus, in light of this study, this research approach will provide detailed insight of the employees' experiences and perceptions about their use of EWPs and if these perceptions have influenced their participation in such programmes.

3.2 Research design

The research design that will be used for this is study is a narrative inquiry. According to Bayuo, Aziato, Wong, Su, Abu, and Wong (2024), qualitative research design is used to explore, describe, and understand human experiences within a specific context, and it sets out the plan in which data will be collected, interpreted, analysed, and reported. The authors identify a narrative inquiry as one of the qualitative research designs and state that this research is used "to capture the life stories/ experiences - particularly behaviours, emotions and motivations that are not explicitly expressed" (Bayou et al., 2024).

Narrative inquiries focus on the individual's lived experience and use interviews and diaries as a data collection approach (Bayou et al., 2024). According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), a narrative analysis is useful to identify core narratives and themes when interpreting and analysing the data and seeks to provide a comparative analysis of the data. In this regard, a narrative analysis will be best suited to get a deeper understanding of the individual characteristics, preferences, and attitudes towards EWPs and if these factors have contributed to their perception of the digital maturity of EWPs and their participation in such wellness initiatives.

3.3 Data collection method

The data will be collected using a semi-structured interview schedule. According to Edwards and Holland (2013), a semi-structured interview is an interactive dialogue between two or more participants that is fluid and flexible in terms of structure. The interview can take place face-to-face, telephonically or on a virtual video conferencing platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Although the interview is fluid and flexible, the interview takes on a thematic and narrative approach where the researcher covers specific themes and topics during the dialogue. As such the interview uses open-ended questions i.e. questions that do not provide response categories to solicit information (Martin, 2006).

With the use of a semi-structured interview schedule, the study will be guided by the same questions that will be addressed to different participants with the aim of obtaining comparable information for analysis. The semi-structured interview will be facilitated in-person or on a virtual video conferencing platform such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet with one participant at a time to allow for comprehensive questions and dialogue. The interviews will be recorded and saved on a password-protected cloud server and will later be transcribed for analysis and interpretation.

3.4 Sampling

3.4.1 *Sample*

To gain an understanding of employees' experiences and perceptions of EWPs and their level of digital maturity, this study will be using a probability sampling method. According to Sharma (2017), probability sampling is the process whereby everyone has the same probability of being selected as a participant. This is also known as random sampling. With this technique, each member in a population has an equal chance of being selected as a participant or to voluntarily participate in the study. Sharma (2017) further notes that an advantage of random sampling is that it is representative in nature and allows the researcher to draw

conclusions from the results that are reasonable enough to make generalisations about the population.

The selected sample will consist of participants who are full-time experienced employees who work for mid-large sized companies and have had exposure to an EWP service post-Covid. The sample size will consist of up to 10 participants who will volunteer to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview with the researcher.

The sample will consist of individuals who (i) are full time employees (ii) work for mid-large sized companies (iii) are generation Y and generation Z who have had to adjust to the changing world of work post-Covid and (iv) have had exposure to an EWP service post-Covid. Individuals who do not fit the above criteria will be excluded from the study.

3.5 The research instrument

The research instrument that will be used for this study is a semi-structured interview schedule. The interview schedule will be set out in a thematic manner to cover key topics; however, it will be fluid and flexible to allow for follow-up questions. This will be facilitated in-person or on a virtual video conferencing platform such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet with one participant at a time to allow for comprehensive questions and rich dialogue.

The interview schedule will consist of five sections that will cover the research objectives outlined in Chapter 1. The first section will cover the relevant demographic information to ensure that the participant meets the criteria for the sample. The second section will focus on the participant's experience in a changing work environment post-Covid and seek to understand if these changes in the workplace have influenced their needs, preferences, and expectations in a work environment.

The third section will focus on the participant's experience with EWP services post-Covid. This section seeks to gather information about the participant's attitudes and perceptions of EWPs and if this has played a role in their

participation or non-participation. The fourth section will look at the participants perception about the level of the digital maturity of the EWP services that they have been exposed to. In this section, the questions are guided by the MMOE digital maturity model mentioned in Chapter 2 and will be structured in line with the dimensions of the model i.e. technology, strategy and leadership, organisation, employees, culture, and digital learning, to understand the participant's perception of perception about the level of the digital maturity of the EWP in their place of work. The final section will consist of an open-ended section that allows participants to add additional comments to the topic at hand.

3.6 Procedure for data collection

As previously noted, a semi-structured interview will be used to collect data for this study. With the use of a semi-structured interview schedule, the study will be guided by the same questions that will be shared with different participants with the aim of obtaining comparable information for analysis. However, before conducting the interview, participants will be recruited via referrals or on social media. Once participants have expressed interest to participate in the study and meet the criteria for the sample mentioned in section 3.4., an interview will be scheduled with each participant individually at a time of their convenience and a meeting invite on the preferred virtual platform or in-person will be shared via email.

Before facilitating the interview, the participant will have to complete the consent form to agree to participate in the study. The interview will then be facilitated in person or via a virtual video conferencing platform such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Meet with one participant at a time. The interview will follow the guide outlined in Appendix B however, the semi-structured nature of the dialogue will allow for follow-up questions and further inquiry into specific responses. The interview will be recorded and saved on a password-protected cloud server and will be later transcribed for analysis and interpretation.

3.7 Data analysis strategies and interpretation

The data analysis process that will be used is a thematic analysis. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), a thematic analysis is a suitable method of analysis where a researcher seeks to understand the thoughts, behaviours, and experiences within a data set. This method of analysis seeks to describe and interpret the data by identifying and constructing themes across a set of data. This study will use a thematic analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006 in Kiger and Varpio, 2020) that identifies six steps to describe and analyse data. The six steps of analysis are as follows:

i) *Familiarisation with the dataset* – this step entails reading and understanding the data in detail.

ii) *Identify and generate initial codes* – this step entails organising the data into codes. Guided by a coding framework, a code is a well-defined identifier that segments the data to derive meaning from raw data (Braun and Clarke, 2006 in Kiger and Varpio, 2020)

iii) *Search for themes* – once the data has been organised into codes, search for themes by comparing, contrasting, combining, and analysing the data. The themes are meaningful independently but also provide a coherent understanding of the entire data set.

iv) *Review themes* – this step entails reviewing the codes and themes that have been identified in the previous steps. The themes can be re-arranged and re-sorted if there is no meaning or coherence that can be derived from them. From this, a thematic map is constructed and refined.

v) *Defining and naming themes* – This step entails creating a narrative from the identified themes and relates them to the overall research objectives and questions.

vi) *Writing the report* – the next step entails presenting the findings through a written analysis and report. This section will provide a discussion of the findings and highlight implications, assumptions, and limitations of the findings.

3.8 Possible limitations and challenges of the study

The following limitations for this study were identified:

i) **Methodology:** The research methodology presents limitations as the procedure for recruiting participants for data collection purposes may be too broad and open to individuals who do not fit the criteria.
ii) **Sampling:** The criteria for the sample may be too narrow as it focuses on a specific demographic, and this may pose a challenge for obtaining relevant data from the desired sample.
iii) **Data integrity:** The data in the study relies heavily on participants' self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by memory, emotion, or social desirability bias and thus affecting the trustworthiness and reliability of the study.
iv) **Data analysis:** According to Kiger and Varpio (2020), a limitation of thematic analysis as a method of data analysis is that it is subjective to the researcher's interpretation. The process of analysing qualitative data (coding, theming, interpreting) is inherently interpretive and can therefore present inconsistencies.

3.9 Limited generalisability: The interpretivist nature of this study uses a small, context-specific sample to gather deep insights from participants and can therefore limit the generalisability and transferability of the study.Quality Assurance

The quality assurance of this study will ensure that there is trustworthiness of this study. According to Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, and Kyngäs (2014) the trustworthiness of qualitative research is evaluated based on the following transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. This criterion of trustworthiness supports the argument that the research study is rigorous and that its findings are worth noting. Furthermore, it ensures that the trustworthiness of the data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation is upheld throughout the study.

3.9.1 *Transferability*

According to Anney (2014) transferability is the extent that the results of a qualitative study can be transferred from one context to another. Bitsch (2005 in Anney, 2014) argues that for transferability to occur, the researcher needs to provide a detailed description of the purpose of the research and describe the selection process of the participants. In the case of this study, a detailed description of the purpose and the process of facilitating the research including the research methodology, data collection, context of the study to detailing the analysis process for the final report. This detailed description will enable other researchers to replicate this study in a similar context in other settings thus permitting generalisability (Anney, 2014).

3.9.2 *Credibility*

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the study and the plausibility of the research findings (Macnee and McCabe, 2008 in Anney, 2014). The credibility of the study represents the insight drawn from the original data and if the participant's responses were interpreted accurately. With regards to this study, credibility will be maintained by ensuring that the process of data collection is consistent and meets the criteria of the sample outlined in section 3.4. Additionally, the methodological process of analysing the data i.e. thematic analysis will ensure that there is a structured approach in organising and interpreting the data from the participants' responses. By carefully interpreting the data using a coding framework and constructed themes (Kiger and Varpio,2020), this will help maintain the integrity of the data and ensure that the study remains rigorous and credible.

3.9.3 *Dependability*

Bitsh (2005 in Anney, 2014) describes dependability as "the stability of findings over time." and involves the evaluation of the findings, interpretation, and recommendations of the research to ensure that this is consistent with the original data from the respondents. Elo et al., (2014) further adds that to ensure

dependability, the stability of these findings should be consistent under any condition. To maintain the integrity and reliability of the original data, an audit trail of the individual participant responses will be referenced and cross-checked for accuracy (Bowen, 2009 and Li, 2004 in Anney, 2014). The use of the thematic analysis as a method of interpreting and analysing data will ensure that the records collected from the questionnaire remain reliable and dependable.

3.9.4. *Confirmability*

As a criterion for the trustworthiness of a study, confirmability refers to the congruence and objectivity of the study regarding the accuracy, relevance and meaning of the data (Elo et al., 2014). Anney (2014) further adds that the confirmability of a study is when other researchers can corroborate and confirm the research findings to check for congruence and objectivity. For this study and as suggested by Anney (2014) confirmability can be achieved through a reflective journal, an audit trail (i.e. interview recordings, transcribed notes, and observation notes) and triangulation. To maintain confirmability of the research study, the interview recordings, observation notes and transcribed notes will be used to keep record of the data that will be collected, interpreted, and analysed.

3.9.5. *Trustworthiness*

According to Elo et al. (2014), trustworthiness in a qualitative study supports the position that the research findings are noteworthy. This is quite significant in cases where the categories of themes of the study are gathered from raw data in absence of a “theory-based categorisation”. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher provided a detailed description of the context of the study and carefully outlined the assumptions that were integral to the study. The researcher ensured that there was a suitable sample size that would provide adequate data to answer the research questions and objectives set out by the study. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that the willing participants were aware of the nature of the study and were made aware that the data gathered from the interviews would be later analysed and interpreted to answer the research questions and objectives of the study.

3.10 Ethical considerations

In line with the requirement to receive ethical clearance from the Ethics Research Committee, an application to continue with the data collection for this study will be completed. Once the application is approved, a call for participants to be part of the study will be sent via email and on social media. Once participants have expressed interest to voluntarily participate in the study and meet the criteria for the sample mentioned in section 3.4., the participants and researcher will agree on a date for the interview and a meeting invite along with the consent form will be shared with the participants.

The interview will be conducted on an online video conferencing platform such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet or Zoom. To ensure adherence to ethical guidelines, the researcher will detail the purpose of the study and interview with the participant before the interview. The researcher will then conduct the interview using a semi-structured approach and record the interview for the purpose of analysing and interpreting the research findings. Once the data has been collected, this will be interpreted using a rigorous methodological process to ensure that the integrity of the data is maintained. Due to the digital nature of collecting this data, this data will be stored and secured on a cloud platform and only used for the purposes of the study.

3.11 Summary

In summary, this study takes on a qualitative research method and draws on interpretivism principles as an epistemological framework. To get a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of employees working for mid – large sized organisations and their experiences with EWP services, a narrative inquiry will provide in-depth insight into the characteristics, preferences, and attitudes of these employees.

The data will be collected using a semi-structured interview schedule to allow for a fluid and flexible dialogue between the researcher and the participant. A probability sampling method will be used to select the required samples. The selected sample will consist of participants who are full-time experienced

employees who work for mid-large sized companies and have had exposure to an EWP service post-Covid. The participants will volunteer in the study following a request for participation on social media or email.

The interview will follow the guide outlined in Appendix B however, the semi-structured nature of the dialogue allows for follow-up questions and further inquiry into specific responses. The interviews will be recorded and will be later transcribed for analysis and interpretation. To analyse and interpret the data, a thematic analysis will be used to understand the thoughts, behaviours, and experiences within a data set. The quality assurance of this study will ensure that there is trustworthiness based on the transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability whilst maintaining adherence to the ethical considerations as outlined by the Ethics Research Committee.

The next chapter presents the findings of the qualitative research. The research findings which were collected using the methodology in chapter three are presented according to the prevailing themes that emerged related to the research propositions discussed in chapter two. The following chapter presents the qualitative data that was collected during the participant interviews with the participants who met the sample criteria outlined above.

CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS / FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

To address the research objectives guiding this study, the findings of the qualitative research are presented in this chapter. In analysing these research findings, a thematic analysis was conducted to interpret the qualitative data that was collected during the participant interviews with the eight participants who met the sample criteria described in chapter three. The research findings are presented according to the prevailing themes that emerged related to the research propositions discussed in chapter two and listed below. The key themes that emerged during the participant interviews will also be discussed in this chapter.

Some of the key conversation areas that emerged during the interview include change in work environment post-Covid, the role of leadership in promoting mental health in the workplace, factors influencing employee participation in EWPs and overall participant perceptions and expectation of EWP services offered by employers.

The key themes that emerged from the participant interviews are outlined in the table below and will be discussed in the subsequent sections detail pertaining to the propositions mention in Chapter 1.

Table 4.1.1 Key Themes for the study

Key Themes	Sub-themes
4.1.1.1 Change in work environment post-Covid	a. Effect of Covid-19 on mental wellbeing of participants.

	b. Digitisation of work processes and upskilling as a result of change in work environment c. Introduction of EWP services as a response to changes in work environment caused by Covid-19.
4.1.1.2. Participant's experience with EWP services post-Covid	a. Awareness of EWP services b. Access of EWP services c. Services offered d. Utility of EWP services e. Factors influencing employee participation
4.1.1.3. Participant's perception of digital maturity	a. Equipment and technology b. Strategy and leadership c. Organisation d. Culture e. Digital learning f. Employees

Initially nine participants agreed to be part of the study. However, due to work-related challenges, one participant decided to opt out of the study after signing the participation form and consent form. Since the study was voluntary, the researcher respected and understood the participant's decision to withdraw from the study. The participant's decision to withdraw from the study is relevant data that could allude to how work-related demands can be a limiting factor that influences the participation of employees in wellness initiatives outside of their work schedules.

To maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, each participant is referred to according to their participatory role as 'Participant 1', 'Participant 2', 'Participant 3', etc. The table below lists the demographics of the participants.

The data regarding the demographics of the participants is relevant as provides background information related to the study of each individual participant. It also evaluates if younger generations in the workforce i.e. Generation Y and Generation Z consider corporate health services a priority (Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy, 2020), if larger organisations based on size of employees offer more comprehensive wellness programmes and by extension, have digitised the delivery of these programmes to meet employee expectations and lastly, if there are industries that indicate trends in employee wellness services due to the nature of the work within that industry.

Table 4.1.2 Demographic of participants

Participant's ID	Age	Gender	Years of Experience	Industry	Size of organisation
Participant 1	28	Female	6	Financial Services	13,800
Participant 2	32	Female	7	FMCG	7,500
Participant 3	32	Female	11	FMCG	10,000
Participant 4	38	Female	12	Healthcare	6,000
Participant 5	30	Female	6	FMCG	10,000
Participant 6	28	Male	6	Financial Services	40,000
Participant 7	38	Female	15	Financial Services	5,000
Participant 8	30	Female	5	FMCG	35,000

The findings, as per the research questions posed are presented below and are discussed in detail.

4.2 Change in work environment post-Covid

The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic changed the ways of work in many organisations, and this has affected how employees are able to fulfil their day-to-day tasks post the pandemic. The findings suggest that there has been a change in the work models where some participants have had to adapt to virtual work environments where they are experiencing an increased use of digital tools and digitised work processes and systems to fulfil their daily tasks. This is evidenced by the participants quoted below:

I had never worked from home before. I didn't need to because all the previous jobs I had required me to be in the office. But post-Covid... I've worked for two companies, one being where I was working full time at home. Where I work now, it's a hybrid model. (Participant 6)

Post-Covid, the nature of my work has changed quite drastically to be honest. I was a site-based employee pre and during Covid. So, I was heavily based on site and post-Covid, I find myself more remote. So, I'm a hybrid worker now. I work more from home if I'm not traveling to different sites. But yeah, post Covid there has been a significant change of me not being on site much more. On average I would go to the office in a month, about two, three times. (Participant 3)

There was a lot of adaptability, a lot of adapting that needed to be done, but I appreciated the flexibility of being at the office and being at home. (Participant 1)

Some participants cited the benefits of a virtual work model and how it has positively impacted their work-life balance:

Personally, I have a lot more time on my hands. I've got a lot more work-life balance. I've also got a lot more, you know, I can call it room to play with in terms of, you know, how I can structure my life, how I can structure how things work. But for me again, the anomaly is that my job can be done almost completely virtually. And I work with an international vendor so I can choose the times and

the places and all that stuff. So, for me it has, it has personally improved my life for the better. I'm able to do to balance quite a few things. (Participant 3)

(These changes have benefitted me) Positively as well. You don't have to wait for the weekend to run your errands. You don't have to wait for the weekend to see friends. You can do all of that during working hours, working week as well. And work life balance...amazing.

Both Participant 5 and 8 highlight the longer working hours and increased workloads as one of the major stressors during and post pandemic and how this had an effect on the mental, emotional and physical wellbeing of employees as discussed in the next section:

Just the increase in, in the workload and accessibility is because now there's all these digital channels that, you know. I guess, managers in head office can access you online at any time. These digital channels that have made things easier for you to be able to connect, you know, with your supervisor or manager. But then what it's also done is that it's affected the effectiveness of a team. (Participant 5).

Before Covid it used to be eight hours. But I realised that working from home is usually more than that because you end up knocking off at 10. But also, you don't have to get up early and prepare yourself and all that administrative [stuff]. So longer hours post Covid. (Participant 8)

This data reveals that there are advantages and disadvantages that have been brought about by the change in work environment post-Covid. While some have adjusted seamlessly to this new work environment, others have had to bear the weight of new stressors that emerged because of working in a digitised environment. These are stressors have influenced the mental, emotional and sometimes, physical wellbeing of employees.

4.2.1. Effects of Covid-19 on mental wellbeing on employees

The findings suggest that the experience of navigating the pandemic while balancing the demands of the workplace during an event had a negative effect on the mental wellbeing and overall health of the employees. Some participants indicated that the change from working in the office full time to working remotely resulted in longer working hours and increased workloads while others who were expected to work from the office during and post the pandemic also reported an increase in workload.

Despite the uncertainty of such a life-changing event, participants recall the expectation for performance and productivity even though in some cases it came at the cost of their mental wellbeing:

So, when we started working from home in March during Covid, we had to work from home but also communicate quite extensively because there were a lot of regulations and rules that people needed to abide by that they didn't know of. So, the comms really increased quite a lot. So, my job got like, a lot more difficult. But also like, the frequency that I was doing my daily tasks was a lot higher. (Participant 2)

I think for us, and I speak for my team as well, we had to basically park our emotions. You can't be stressing about being overwhelmed, burnout and the likes. No, we had to park and just work. So, it's only after, you know, post Covid… you know, where we started experiencing the aftereffects and that's when it hit. (Participant 4)

It made us feel like we're just slaves and the bosses never really cared about us. They just wanted the work done and want it done now. They never really cared about whether we can contract the disease while we are coming to the office every day. Because the boss was also coming in every day, you know, and people were being wheeled out every other day because of their illness. So, it took a toll on us mentally. It made us feel like, okay, we're just a number here, you know, you go the next one comes. (Participant 7)

The experiences highlighted by these participants indicate that the increase in work demands affected their mental wellbeing. Participant 7 reveals the important

role of leadership in modelling and shaping behaviour and how employees were looking to leaders to create a supportive and caring environment during a time of crisis.

Participant 7 also shared some underlying feelings experienced by the employees that came from a lack of support and care from their leaders quoting that *“It made us feel like a number here, you know, you go the next one comes.”* Participant 2 also alluded to the lack of support and empathy from leaders and the broader business during the pandemic and its longstanding effects on employees by stating that:

We must first acknowledge that Covid was traumatic. And I think there isn't a big realisation of that. There isn't really empathy in business that, “Guys, we [collectively] went through a traumatic experience.”

Highlighting the direct effect of navigating an increasing workload in a fast-paced environment during a stressful life event, Participant 1 shared how this kind of work environment led to a decline in her overall wellbeing in the comment below. In another section, she cites this is one of the reasons she sought out the wellness services provided by her employer.

The pace at which we, we used to work quite fast and I mean I'm a fast learner, I'm quite adaptable, reasonably adaptable. But I think the team dynamics were a bit too demanding for me to keep up with. And I learned later that I was presenting with signs of burnout. So, I realised that I needed an intervention, and time was not on my side. My health was on the decline. (Participant 1)

Based on the above data, it is evident that there is a consistent theme that indicates that the way organisations responded to the uncertainty and pressures on the business during the pandemic affected employee wellbeing and the employees’ ability to perform and be productive during such an unprecedented time.

4.2.2. Digitisation of work processes and upskilling as a result of change in work environment

The Covid-19 pandemic led to the digitisation of work processes and normalised remote and hybrid work environments post the pandemic. In reflecting about her experience in the workplace, Participant 7 notes the physical, social and technical implications of adjusting to the change in work environment caused by the pandemic.

Resources were available, but it was a case of getting used to the technological aspect of it. Okay, remember, we are used to working in the office on a desktop computer, right...Now suddenly you find yourself at home with their desktop computer connectivity issues. Internet was a problem. Remember, everybody was working from home. The bandwidth was an issue. And internet was not stable.

Now you're getting penalised because of your lack of connectivity or connectivity issues. And it created a lot of anxiety while you were working at home because now if you're not available or if, if your VPN drops sometimes because you are not used to working, dealing with those technical glitches, even if it drops, you are sometimes not even aware that you are disconnected. And then they'll call you that you've been disconnected for like an hour. You're not aware, you're just going on working, working, working, you know, and you find yourself being very anxious throughout the day to say, "Okay, you stay at your desk."

You can't even take lunch because... it's like "Big Brother" is watching, you know, and even for some employees who have the integrity, you know, they will log in at 8am and do what they have to do up until 5 o'clock, but there was still that lack of, of trust, you know, and in the midst of that, you get warnings, whether verbal or routine warnings about. So, we have to deal with the pandemic and work and work different dynamics that come with working under those conditions." (Participant 7)

In the above response, the disadvantages of the digitisation of work processes are highlighted with the participant citing the mental and emotional stress caused by technological challenges that result from a virtual work environment and the increased pressure to prove trustworthiness and perform when working remotely.

Noting an important response to the increasing work demands of working in a virtual environment and the nature of the industry she works in, Participant 4 emphasised the need to upskill and requirement to increase staff compliment to meet workload demands:

So, we were faced with a lot of demand in terms of having to upskill or basically bump up our staff, especially the support staff. So, we had to hire more, you know, employees to offer the support to the sites. Because of the nature of the demand, they had to hire more staff. We had to bump up our staff compliments as well, just so there's enough people to give them support. So yeah, that was the first one. We got more funding which was a benefit for us, for the company. We grew within the organisation, and we basically doubled this in terms of the staff compliments due to Covid.

And just in terms of the nature of the job or how we did things, we obviously needed to move to, you know, the digital platforms. We were obviously forced to work from home then. So, as it stands, we are currently still on the hybrid model. (Participant 4)

Highlighting the ease in which she was able to adjust to a virtual work environment as an employee who is of a younger generation i.e. Generation Y, Participant 1 alludes to the fact that the level of upskilling to perform day-to-day tasks in a digitally transforming work environment is also determined by the demographics of employees and their familiarity with working in a virtual work environment.

I was a recent graduate, so I was already on, on the ball and you know, so I wasn't someone who had been in the workforce for a few years. And I remember that when I halted work to pursue my postgraduate studies, that was also virtually. I think I only went to campus once. Yeah. So, my entire year, academic year was online. So, I didn't have any challenges adapting and needing to upskill. (Participant 1)

Participant 6 mentions the increase in use of digital channels such as mobile applications that have not only been used to perform daily job-related tasks, but

these tools have also been used for the promotion of employee wellness during and post-Covid.

We use a lot of apps now when it comes to our lives at work. There have been like eight apps I think since I've joined that have been implemented to take care of the well-being of employees. (Participant 6)

Despite being able to adjust easier than most to the technical upskilling requirements because of the increased use of technological tools, Participant 1 cites that there was a need to prioritise soft skills such as adaptability to adjust to a fast-changing environment:

There was a lot of adaptability, a lot of adapting that needed to be done, but I appreciated the flexibility of being at the office and being at home. (Participant 1)

Based on the above data, it is evident that participants did not only have to adjust to the external requirements of a changing work environment by upskilling and gaining technical skills, but they also had to adjust to the changing work environment by investing in soft skills that would support their adjustment in a digitally transforming workplace.

4.2.3. Introduction of EWP services as a response to changes in work environment caused by Covid-19

The changes in the work environment during and after the pandemic have had an effect on the mental and emotional wellbeing of employees. This decline in the overall health of the employees - as evidenced by the findings in the previous section - resulted in the introduction of EWP services to address concerns related to employee wellness in organisations and encouraged utility of these services where there were existing programmes.

Some participants noted that their workplaces did not have an EWP prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and that it was the effect on the wellbeing of employees caused by the pandemic that resulted in an introduction of the EWP services. This is seen in the statement by Participant 4 below:

Yeah, so we didn't have one prior to Covid. So, it's only after Covid where we actually came to the realisation that we needed this programme... So, you know, we needed to prioritise the well-being of staff and just ensuring that, you know, there's enough psychosocial support for them as well. And like I said, because we had neglected a lot just in terms of well-being, we needed to ensure that people have, you know, like proper coping mechanisms and strategies of dealing with, you know, with the, the aftermath of Covid...One of the reasons why we started, you know, or we, we had to introduce this program is because the concerns that came about and one of them was that they felt like they were operating like machines. (Participant 4)

Participant 7 also points to a similar motivation for the introduction of employee wellness services at her place of work:

I think that those events triggered mental health issues that were probably underlying. But the treatment, the work environment and how everything was at work, it triggered a lot of mental health issues which from there it was just a down spiral. And then at a later stage, once we're fully back, I think the beginning of 2024, that's when they introduced their employee wellness services. (Participant 7).

Additionally, Participant 7 noted that during and shortly after the pandemic, her employer offered group counselling services facilitated by an Industrial Psychologist to address the mental and emotional distress caused by Covid-19 - albeit that was ineffective as a long-term employee wellness solution and thus leading to the introduction of the EWP in 2024.

I remember they used a Teams' meetings, where it was supposed to be a mental check in with the industrial psychologist and it was a group setup. So, I felt like it was not enough because yes, we're all suffering from grief and unknown Covid issues and we needed more one, one-on-one consultations instead of group sessions, you know. So, I think from that realising that it was not as effective, maybe that's what prompted them to incorporate employee wellness. (Participant 7)

Participant 3 expressed that the changes within her organisation, some that were brought on by the pandemic resulted in help-seeking behaviour and use of the existing EWP in her organisation to support her mental and emotional wellbeing:

You know, the factors that led to me needing it could have an indirect link with Covid. And by that, I mean, at the time I used the service, there were quite a lot of changes in the organisation. And these changes directly impacted me and the space that I was in. But because tensions were so high, it then started, you know, creeping into personal attacks because of these changes. And so, um, yeah, I think that's what brought it about. So indirectly, because of the changes that came about because of Covid using these services. (Participant 3)

4.2.4. Summary relating to Proposition 1

Based on the findings above, it is evident that there is a need for EWPs as a response to the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on employee wellbeing and transformation in the workplace. Employees not only require technical support to perform their daily tasks, but they also require psychosocial support that helps them navigate a dynamic work environment and the transforming nature of the job market.

4.3 Participant's experience with EWP services post-Covid

To evaluate the participant's experience with EWP services post-Covid, the following areas were considered: awareness, access, services offered, utility and factors influencing participation. Based on the findings, the participant's perception of employee wellness services and the effect that this has on help-seeking behaviour will also be considered.

4.3.1. Awareness of services

The visibility and distinctive nature of an EWP in an organisation influences the access, utility and ultimately success of the programme. Participants highlighted the various channels that they came to find out about the employee wellness services within the organisations that they work for.

Participant 2 shares that the launch of the EWP in her organisation shortly after she joined created the right level of visibility about the service and its offerings. Additionally, due to the nature of her role in Internal Communications, she also notes that she has insight into a lot of the company offerings. This indicates that the nature of an employee's role and proximity to information and other services related to employee engagement creates another layer of visibility.

So, it's publicised everywhere. We've got posters everywhere, like in the bathrooms, at, you know, random spots in, around the office. But when I joined the company, they just launched or named our employee service. They call it Phefula. They did a whole big launch of it, you know, roadshow. So, when I joined it, the launch had already happened, but it was still prevalent. You know, there's posters and stuff everywhere. So, yeah, I knew about it. But also, because I'm in comms, I'm privy to a lot of the business's offerings. So, I work closely with the wellness specialist and, you know, to host wellness events. We do a wellness event every week. I mean, every month, you know, and I support her in that function. (Participant 2)

The above statement also highlights that internal marketing drives and campaigns contribute to creating awareness of these services among employees. This is further evidenced by the statements below:

During Covid, there was a promotion of these employee wellness services, [to say] remember that we have the service available. They gave away coasters that, your coffee cup could sit on. So, there was a bit of marketing that was done by our organisation. And yeah, I think it came out in the weekly company newsletters. It was always a banner at the bottom and in all the comms around Covid, it was a service that we were always reminded was available to us. (Participant 3)

So, we have to do a lot of awareness drives from the office and just making sure that there was awareness. There's you know, posters in the relevant, you know, sections of the building. So, your posters. We utilised the WhatsApp services. So, we would send out, you know, communication via emails, via WhatsApp by SMS. Just so people have, you know, just that influx of information because we didn't

want people saying that, you know, they didn't get the information, or they were not made aware. We had a few wellness events and in the first year, that's when we introduced the EAP services. And you know, we had the consultants from the service provider sitting in and just basically sharing about, you know, EAP, what EAP is about, the benefits of it. (Participant 4)

So, on site drives where they obviously created awareness about what the service is, how you can access it, how it can benefit you and all of that. And then also through like internal communications via email, internal comms. (Participant 5)

In absence of active marketing drives, some participants highlighted that they came to know about employee wellness services in their workplace during inductions and onboarding, while others relied on internal communication platforms to find out more information by these services:

So, one of the other ongoing things that we, we, we currently doing, like on a monthly basis, we have induction programmes. And for new staff, part of the program for the day, we have, you know, our consultants also presenting on EAP to new staff. So, they know what the service is about, the offerings. (Participant 4)

They let us know during our induction process. Okay. To say, these are the benefits we have. If you need a therapist, reach out to this person. But what I didn't have was her numbers or how to reach out to her. I had to find out from another colleague. Okay, these are the numbers. Just WhatsApp her. (Participant 8)

You had to learn about it through the intranet because I don't know if they thought maybe if they, if they elaborate on it and tell us more about it and encourage us to do it. I think maybe they thought we would misuse it or something like that. I don't know. But they didn't quite put it out there. Yeah, it was just a case of whoever read it, read that email, got it. (Participant 7)

Word-of-mouth and referrals from colleagues or team leaders who are aware of or have previously used the services are also instrumental in creating awareness of these services:

*Through a colleague. Through a colleague. She was working in a different department, the health insurance side of things. And there are multiple in-house schemes. It's someone who's outside of my team, someone had said, "They mentioned it in passing that, you know, have a chat with such and such, this umbrella in-house scheme, they might be able to help you." So not my direct management, not anybody in my team. There wasn't much awareness creation around the different channels and how to access them. (*Participant 1)

So, I found out about the programme in the app through my team leader and she actually briefed me through it and showed me the steps, showed me the offices in the building. Actually, I didn't even know we had an office for that department. I thought it was in another, you know, building from where I'm located for the organisation. (Participant 6)

The above data demonstrates that visibly involving leadership and senior management to drive buy-in is essential in driving awareness and visibility of EWPs. Additionally, communicating clear and consistent messaging to employees through internal marketing efforts using different channels where employees have access is equally important in driving visibility of such services.

4.3.2. Access of services

The findings suggest that the effectiveness of an EWP can be ascribed to the access of the wellness services i.e. the opportunities to engage with these offerings in the workplace and employee's willingness to use or avoid opportunities. Based on this description of access, the findings indicate the EWPs provided by their employers have provided different opportunities i.e. channels to access their services – some of which have been digitised.

It is important to note that access in this case refers to both the booking process to sign up for the services as well as the channels available to engage with the delivery of the services. With regards to the booking process, participants

indicated that there were different channels to book an appointment with the EWP namely: telephonically, email bookings, bookings via an app and in some cases via a WhatsApp line. This is evidenced below:

The booking process all happened telephonically. I just placed a call, they found out what services that I needed, and then I obviously set up an appointment based on my availability. (Participant 5)

Okay, there was a step-by-step booking process and how you do it, which times to book, what the do's and don'ts and what time you can do it when you can't do it. So, everything was on the intranet. And then you just schedule a meeting with a counsellor and then she will confirm availability.

So, I think there was a line, a number that I had to call and then they just did pre-screen and then I was sent a link via email, my work email address. They just needed some personal information and then I was allocated a counsellor who then got in contact with me to say that "Hi, we've reviewed your application for our services, and this is the person that we're assigning you to. And then we just want to make sure that the times that you've provided us with are the times that you're comfortable to meet and such and such a person will be in contact, or I will be in contact with you going forward." (Participant 1)

Although traditional methods of booking an appointment such as booking telephonically are still prevalent, some EWPs are using digital channels for their booking processes.

I've always had the app. I just didn't know that the programme was in the app. I thought I needed to fill in some information in another [platform] and all of that. But it's accessible in your hand. You can talk to somebody, and they can set up an appointment for you on that day or maybe when you're ready and then you go there. (Participant 6)

So, there's different ways you can go via the app, or you can send them a "Please Call Me" or an SMS or you just call them. There's a toll-free line. But it won't be like the full scope (on the app). You can't really do counselling on an app. So, you

will give them more information and they'll call you back. So, the app for is not really counselling. It's more like for them to contact you. (Participant 2)

With regards to the channels available to engage with the delivery of services, there were also a variety of channels that employees could access, however the findings indicate that there is a preference for talking to counsellor telephonically or in-person sessions:

So, the interactions are either face-to-face or how we are conducting this interview [on a video conferencing platform]. And yeah, they're very helpful also, if you don't want to show your face, it's also fine. They cater to that, and they used, they use [Microsoft] Teams for such situations. (Participant 6)

They were not face-to-face. It was just telephonic. We were on a phone call and were having the session and obviously treated like a regular consultation. (Participant 1)

You had two options. Either to use the counsellor on site or to call the ICAS line. (Participant 7)

Okay. So, there were, if I'm not mistaken, three channels available. There's a WhatsApp line, there's a phone line, and then there's the in-person sessions that can be held. I initially used the phone line. So, I called in and I had a conversation over the phone with the counsellor, and then I had a follow up conversation with the counsellor. And then within which she then recommended that I go see someone in-person. And so that's how I was recommended to someone within my area who was available for in person sessions. (Participant 3)

Both Participant 3 and Participant 8 highlight a benefit extended by the both their respective company's wellness services for employees to have in-person sessions with a counsellor of their choosing at an off-site location. Thus, indicating access to location and proximity to such resources as an influencing factor for both access and utility.

So, I contacted ICAS and then had the session with the counsellor, had the two sessions with the counsellor over the phone, and then they arranged everything for the in-person booking. I just had to drive there. (Participant 3)

I had an in-person, but you get to choose. If over the phone works for you, you do that. If you wanted to come to the office, you do that. But I went to her offices. Offices off site. So, she's not based at no offices. But she does come, I think once a week to our office. (Participant 8)

The aftermath of the pandemic has also impacted the delivery of these wellness services with Participant 2 noting the change in how services were accessed pre- and post-Covid.

Before Covid you made a call and then you set up a face-to-face session. And then since it's been Covid, it's only been on the phone. I haven't really had a face-to-face or even a virtual session with them. But then also I have my own therapist now, so theirs [the employee wellness service] would kind of be for emergencies and then. (Participant 2)

Participant 4 also highlighted the introduction of a new feature of the delivery of their employee wellness services that promotes ease of access and use for employees:

There's a chat function on the app where you can chat with a coach... I'm trying to find or access it here. But there is an app. So, you're able to interact with the coaches electronically. There's the option of calling in. They also have. So, with those that go through counselling services, they have. They have an option of, like, face-to-face counselling sessions with a coach or therapist. (Participant 4)

The data above suggest that EWPs have expanded the channels that employees are able to access their services by incorporating both traditional (i.e. face-to-face and telephonic sessions) and digital channels (i.e. mobile apps and chatbots) for both the booking and delivery of these services.

4.3.3. Services offered

Based on the findings, different organisations offer a variety of employee wellness services. Not all the services provided by the organisations or external EWP service provider contracted by the company for the provision of these services fit the criteria of a traditional EWP. Some participants described variations of services that sit under the umbrella of employee wellness but do not strictly or neatly meet the requirements of an end-to-end wellness programme. This is evidenced by the statements below:

So, it's quite a comprehensive guide. We use ICAS. They are called Lyra now. We kind of use the full scope. So, we do wellness days, and like I said, we do the monthly wellness webinars. So, every month, they choose a different topic depending on that month. Like, now we're doing mental health and disability month.

So, we got wellness newsletters that come from them, and then we distribute that to the business, and then we have the app as well. There's a fitness app and a wellness app. And, you know, we run a lot of competitions. The competitions are run by us, but they give us the content. So, it's not just the counselling, which I use, like, I'm saying, quite frequently. (Participant 2)

What I know is at the health hub, we had the therapist, and we had the nurse. The nurse was there every day of the week. So, whenever you're feeling fluish or whatever, if you're feeling unwell, you can just go to the nurse. And there was a doctor who came every Thursday. (Participant 7)

They do offer financial advice in case your mental health issues are related to a financial crisis. I don't know about the legal advisory one. I've never seen it, but I know one way where if you are a person who has been in a situation where you are dealing with a lot of legalities and you have maybe court dates and all of that, they do offer counselling for that as well.

With the physical, I think that is more aligned to staff with chronic, you know, illnesses. They would, you know, offer, like, your assessment. I know there's educational talks on how to deal with, like, things like your HIV management, your

diabetes management, encouraging them to, like, you know, do physical, you know, activity. They would share different types of, you know, activities or physical activities that they should, you know, consider because we are linked to Discovery. (Participant 6)

For some participants, the employee wellness services provided by their organisations extended a benefit of the services being available to their immediate families.

I know that they do financial counselling, and they do family therapy as well, because the service was available to our immediate families. (Participant 3)

All the employees are linked. So, the people that have access to this programme or the services is the direct employee and they direct family members (Participant 4).

Incentive programmes to drive utility of the services also featured as a key component of the service offering for some organisations. Participants referenced Discovery Vitality as a popular incentive and loyalty programme used by employee wellness service providers to encourage employee participation the health promoting programmes on digital platforms.

They would share different types of, you know, activities or physical activities that they should, you know, consider because we linked to discovery. Then there's also that benefit of…what do we call it? What's that membership, again, where they get points? Vitality.

Yeah. So, it's also linked to Vitality. They get points for every interaction. Physical interaction that they embark on. Yeah, I haven't really engaged much on that, but, I mean, that's the feedback that I've been getting from staff. (Participant 4)

They would share different types of, you know, activities or physical activities that they should, you know, consider because we are linked to Discovery Vitality (Participant 6)

What is apparent in the above data is that different organisations have a variety of services in their EWPs. The service offering may differ based on the size of

the organisation, whether the organisation has an in-house EWP or if they have outsourced it to an external service provider. These features of the EWP – size of organisation, whether it is in-house or outsourced, are also reflected in the delivery and maturity of the programmes.

4.3.4. Utility of services

The utility of the employee wellness services is a key measure for the effectiveness of these programmes. The utility not only measures the frequency that participants of the services, but it also looks at the availability of the services to drive usage and participation.

I think I had - I would say three, maybe four sessions. (Participant 1)

There was a time when I had monthly sessions with the organisers or the coordinators. (Participant 3)

I have not used the services consistently. There have been dips, but I'd say it's probably more than 20 times. (Participant 4)

I think I stopped going around April. So, it was what, November, December, January. Six sessions. Yeah. (Participant 8)

Four. I went for four sessions (Participant 6)

Considering the frequency of these services, the findings suggest that participants used the services more than once and show that the usage was linked to the availability of the services.

There's a cap as to how many sessions you can have. Otherwise, then you, you pay out of pocket. It's actually three sessions that they provide, I think per year. I'm not sure I can find out for you, but I think it was only three sessions that we were given. But the therapist then, I don't know how she worked it out to get me a fourth one. I think the, the one online, the virtual one didn't count. (Participant 3)

I think it's just unfortunate that I couldn't see the process through, you know, because as far as I can remember, the service was available to me as long as I needed it. (Participant 1)

It was unlimited [access to the sessions]. Weekly sessions at that. (Participant 7)

Although he reports attending a total four counselling sessions with the employee wellness service provider at his place of work, Participant 6 indicated that due to the size of the organisation and the large number of requests for the usage of these services, there were delays in the availability of the services and thus affecting the usage of these services. This indicates that the size of the organisation and demand for the services can affect the availability and by extension the utility of these services.

I think there's a lot of people [that need the service]. Since we're a large company you'll find that in our wellness centre where I'm located there's like 300 applicants for the next two months or so. You know there's so many who need this service. So, I would understand why there would take time to actually allocate me a slot. (Participant 6)

4.3.5. Factors influencing employee participation

Following the disclosure of the influence that awareness, access, availability and utility of employee wellness services has on employee participation, participants revealed other factors related to intangible elements that either limited or enabled participation in EWPs. These are factors that are not necessarily associated with the design and delivery of the EWP but rather factors related to the nature of the job or organisational features such as culture, leadership, etc. that have an influence in the participation or extent of participation in employee wellness services.

One such factor was the lack of trust in the culture of the organisation and by extension, the EWP services that was highlighted by a few participants. Due to the nature of these services where employees who utilise counselling services for instance may be required to disclose work-related information for their diagnoses and treatment during consultations, some participants highlighted

concerns around confidentiality and privacy when using these services as they feared that sensitive information would be disclosed with their managers or senior leadership.

To expand on that, one of the biggest fears I had when using this service was, you know, the protection of privacy. And so, I think because we have a culture that is non-trusting, that we've built. There's a subculture of mistrust and of backstabbing.

And so, a lot of the time you're going to see that where people do use this service, they're not being entirely honest because you feel that maybe you're being recorded, and your information is going to be shared with senior leadership and people are going to know exactly what you said about this person or what you said your experience was.

And so, I think to answer your question, there is a correlation if the service is used according to its intended purpose, which is to really get into, you know, health, wellness, a balanced life for employees without any fear, without any bias. But I do think that these, these services are underutilised because there is a subculture of fear. (Participant 3)

I mean even now, I still find that we struggle with the staff engagement as much as people are engaging. But I still think that there's an element of trust in terms of the service, you know. You know we can, we can preach as much as we want about the fact that it's a confidential service and the likes, but you know, staff still think that we are privy to the information that they are sharing and the likes. So, we still struggle with that. Basically, the confidence in the programme. (Participant 4)

She [the counsellor] did mention that some people were anxious about her being there, thinking she will spill the beans to the bosses. And what they didn't. They didn't trust that there was confidentiality. You know, so they were happy using the telephonic sessions or speaking with different counsellors, you know, like that. It was more anonymous than a one-on-one and being seen walking into the wellness centre as well. Yeah, some people still have stigma about. (Participant 4)

Work-related demands like the increase in workloads and time constraints during the workday to attend to these services also proved to be a limiting factor in employee participation or continued use of the employee wellness services.

My workday was just so packed that even that one hour, you know, that you're supposed to have as an employee, which could be your lunch, you know. I had other commitments and work demands, so I could no longer meet with my therapist...I didn't stop because I was not happy, or I felt that I wasn't getting anything out of the sessions. It's just that time constraints were not on my side and that subsequently led to me leaving my job. (Participant 1)

I think the other concern is the fact that people just don't have time. People don't have time. They just don't have time because of the environment that we in. Like I said, we are highly pressurised. Everything is target based. So, when you're asking someone to, you know, take time and call in, they would have to do it after hours.

So that's another concern for us as an organisation that we need to somehow try and be accommodative. So, if we are referring someone for EAP services, we need to allow them time to actually call us like you know, during working hours and not really, you know, advise them to do it after hours. That's unfair because, you know, the, the concerns are linked to work related issues. (Participant 4)

That's why I said it was only manager's discretion because other people from other departments could go anytime or sometimes what were in my department, what we were encouraged to do. If you're using that service, say your lunch is normally during at 12 o'clock, you'll take an earlier lunch. Say you'll take lunch at 10 so that you can attend the session instead of taking lunch at 12. You just swap your lunch around when you have the sessions. That's how we did it in my department. And then you miss out on your lunch, basically. (Participant 7)

Other factors that either limited and promoted participation in EWPs related to the employees' prior experience with mental health services and/or perception of help-seeking behaviours and utilising services related to these behaviours.

I think a lot of people carry a bit of shame around using some wellness services, because maybe they think that they're weak or, you know, they're not a culture fit, maybe sometimes even for the organisation that they work for. But then they are there to help you. You know, Thrive is there to help you thrive. So, you have to actually, you have to take advantage of it. You have to take advantage of it. (Participant 5)

Oh, so I've been in therapy for years and years since I was a child. So, it wasn't a new concept to me. And when I found out that we've got, access to counsellor. I think I can't remember what it even was, but the first time I had a crisis, it was personal. (Participant 2)

There was one important thing they asked. Oh, yes. Have you been to therapy before? Yes. Or have you been at the wellness centre before? (Participant 6)

The above statement shared by Participant 6 may indicate that EWP service providers assess if participants have had prior exposure to mental wellness services to gauge comfort levels with these wellness services and to sensitise participants to the process of utilising these services to manage expectations. Other statements show that participants who had prior exposure to mental health services were likely to use the mental health services at their place of work.

Furthermore, there were also personal factors that led to the use of employee wellness services which were motivated by a decline in mental health of some participants or personal challenges that affected their wellbeing.

I think I was like; my mood was just generally low. I was always tired. Mentally, I wasn't okay 100%. And I figured it's something I've always wanted to do. Let me reach out to this lady. So, I reached out. Found the consent form I filled in. I don't remember what it was, but it was a form that says she can see me and I'm okay with that. (Participant 8)

For the past two years or for the first two years, when I started working for the organisation, I didn't really think I needed it. I would only use it for keeping up with my health and fitness. But the wellness part, where they help you take care of

your mental health, I never thought about it. Unfortunately, I lost a best friend, and I didn't know how to deal with it. (Participant 6)

I needed the services because my mental health was on the decline. The pace at which we, we used to work was quite fast and I mean I'm a fast learner, I'm quite adaptable, reasonably adaptable. But I think the team dynamics were a bit too demanding for me to keep up with. And I learned later that I was actually presenting with signs of burnout. So, I realised that I needed an intervention, and time was not really on, on my side. My health was on the decline. (Participant 1)

The above data show that there are external and internal drivers that affect employee participation in employee wellness programmes. Which these may not be directly related to the digital maturity of the EWPs, they provide relevant data to assess if is indeed the digitalisation (or lack thereof) of certain aspects of EWPs that affects the employee participation or if there are other contributing factors that need to be considered.

4.3.6. Summary relating to Proposition 2

Based on the findings above, the EWPs offered at various organisations that the participants work for do meet employee expectations regarding awareness, access, availability, utility and variety of wellness services offered. Albeit at varying levels, the findings above indicate that EWP service providers use relevant tools and technologies to drive awareness, access and utility of these services and thus indicate a degree of digital maturity of such programmes and meet the expectations of a changing workforce in this regard. Furthermore, factors that limit or promote employee participation in EWPs are not as a result of the design or delivery of the EWP - where the digital maturity of the programme can be evaluated - but are instead as a result of the personal challenges or work-related pressures that affect their functioning and overall wellbeing.

4.4 Participant's perception of the digital maturity of EWPs

Using the different dimensions of the Maturity Model for Technology Adoption at Educational Organisations (MMOE), participants shared their perception of the

digital maturity of the EWPs in their place of work along the following dimensions: equipment and technology, strategy and leadership, culture, organisation, employees, and digital learning.

4.4.1. Equipment and technology

Some participants shared details of how their organisations were able to make provisions for the relevant technology and tools to adjust to the new ways of work and provide the means to support their outreach and access to the various channels offered by the EWPs.

Firstly, just the flexi work hours. That's the first thing. The second thing is equipment, tools of trade. So, you know, whereas some employees are still desktop based and have a desktop. Some are provided with laptops, and you know, the necessary tools of trade. And then yeah, I think lastly is just around the access to certain facilities. So, for example, if you're a site-based employee, there's quite a lot of requirements that you have meetings in person whereas your non-site-based employees can have online meetings. We're seeing a world of virtual meetings. So, the requirements for certain employees are different. (Participant 3)

So, people who don't have computers also don't get work phones. So now we're like, what now? These are the people that need the communications [for the wellness services], right? And then we got digital screens. So, whatever we shared on Yammer, we then put on digital screens. And they were at the warehouse, you know, and at the canteen. (Participant 2)

There's an app now it is linked to our medical aid. So, you don't really pay for the service from your own pocket. You pay from your medical. It's an app that shows a lot of programmes. And the app is for your therapy, your loved ones, maybe somebody you trust in the organisation. That is also an option and if that other person also allows that. There's also fitness on the app. There's also [suggested] diets on the app that help you keep your health on track. And there's programmes that cater to managing chronic diseases. (Participant 6)

4.4.2. Strategy and leadership

Leadership plays a crucial role not only in setting out the strategy for the wellness initiatives within an organisation and its alignment to the overall business objectives, but it also plays a role in advocating for wellness at work by creating awareness of these services and promoting the use of these services within their teams and the broader organisation. With regards to setting out a wellness strategy, this is evidenced in how some organisations for responded to the effect of the pandemic on the wellbeing of their employees and how it changed the nature of their jobs and broader work environment.

For instance, Participant 2 shares how in her organisation, the Human Resources (HR) department had to change the wellness service provider to align to the new wellness initiatives within the organisation.

So, we changed this provider. We had a different provider. Before it was a smaller company. And they were called PHS. You know, I can't remember what it stands for, but it was PHS. And I did not like them at all. Very few counsellors that you could speak to and get. And the counsellors would leave. So, if you still spoke to someone and then they wouldn't follow up...And they also didn't offer the full scope. So, with this one [Lyra]...they offer the full scope. There's feedback, you know, they're responsive. They call; they check on you. (Participant 2)

Leadership plays a crucial role in endorsing and promoting the use of wellness services. This is evidenced below:

So, I found out about the programme in the app through my team leader and she actually briefed me through it and showed me the steps, showed me the offices in the building. Actually, I didn't even know we had an office for that department. I thought it was in another, you know, building from where I'm located for the organisation. (Participant 6)

We have regular town halls and in the town hall, like the MD would mention it. Especially in Covid. And during Covid it was more prevalent where they'd be like, "Guys, please check yourselves." You know. In memos, when we talk about things that are sensitive, like if you talk about if we're announcing an employee's

passing, then we'd add the contact details there. Or if we talk about like maybe an incident of harassment or, you know, crime or something that happened like that, then you'd add the details there. So yeah, if it's memos relating to that, we'd add the contact details there. Just so to remind people to contact the wellness centre and to get the help they need. (Participant 2)

Same with senior management. They constantly, like in situations where, like for instance, the executive meetings that they have, they always encourage the divisional directors to solve a concept because like I said, we had to roll it out to the, to the various divisions. But not all of them were for the service. We still have a few that haven't signed up to EAP. So, we still trying to encourage them and we're giving them the benefits of, you know, those kinds of things or the service that is being offered. (Participant 4)

In cases where leadership has not promoted employee services, Participant 5 shared how this has created a space that is not safe to share mental health struggles or challenges.

Leadership does not promote mental health. My manager is an older white male, and he doesn't express himself much. He won't talk about it his stress in detail. It's like they just continue with doing their job, whether they're feeling sad or not. Management hasn't created a safe space to share mental health struggles or challenges. (Participant 5)

Participant 6 also shared the importance of an ongoing health-promoting culture where senior leadership or management actively encourage mental health check-ins that has helped with the visibility and utility of these services.

I mentioned that we have group discussions on Fridays and all of that. That is also part of management's interactions with us to check in. To find out how are you tackling things? Do you need time off or do you need to work from home more? All of that. Management is involved and they are more involved now since COVID because I felt like it made us take care of the personal stuff more and not only focus on work, but you also know.

4.4.3. Culture

Organisational culture is driven by leadership and participants highlighted how leadership have shaped organisational culture and how employees experience their daily jobs and the companies they work for.

[The culture of the organisation is] atrocious at best. I know it's a very extreme response. Yeah. But our organisation's culture is...funny enough, we were invited to a session a few months ago around this where they invited particular stakeholders and you know, I happen to be one of the invitees to a session to discuss the culture of the organisation. And you had fairly senior leaders in, in this, should we call it a, a group, a focus group. And the one thing we could all agree on was that our, our culture was [not great]. But we don't live it as, you know, the five values of the organisation (Participant 3)

So, for example, with the changes happening there, there's also changes happening outside of Covid. So, our MD left the company. He retired. Then our CEO also retired. So, we have new leadership and then a new leadership structure. And then some people also just didn't want to come back to the office, so they resigned. And this is, like, leadership again. So, there's a lot of leadership changes happening. And when a leader leaves and when so many leaders leave, also, the whole culture of the company changes. (Participant 2)

Because I mean when we did, there was a time when we did analysis on our turnover rate which was becoming a concern because I mean we were losing staff at a like [high rate]. It was concerning the issues that were raised during exit interviews because I mean that's one of the things we are very strict about. We always want to know why people are leaving organisation only because of the nature of the job that we're doing. And one of the issues that came across or that came about was a burnout. You know, people were burnt out. People felt that we're not, you know, like management was not really concerned about their well-being and the likes. (Participant 4)

In addition to this, the culture as influenced by leadership of an organisation has an effect in the employees' perception and by extension, participation in EWPs. In response to whether the organisations they work for have a wellness culture,

the participants below noted how their organisations promoted wellness services as a response to an unhealthy work environment or challenging job demands:

It was such a complex environment, but I think a lot of like wellness in general and mental well-being is, I felt my experience was that it was treated as a box ticking exercise. In as much as we know that people will get burnt out, we know that past the demands that we're placing on these people, we're stretching them, we're really stretching them, but we're just hoping by some miracle that they'll, they'll pull through. (Participant 1)

We promote using the service. We promote that people use the service and that they attend the wellness webinars. The culture is getting the help that you need because you need help. You need a buffer to help you survive your job basically is what I'm getting. Like just get the help you need. The services are there. The company has offered them and paid for them. Use the services available to you so that you can. (Participant 2)

The culture of the organisation is, is one that leaves much to be desired. And evidence of that is seen in our turnover rates, you know, our people turnover rates. Evidence of that is seen in terms of, you know, when we do these pulses, what are they called? These employee engagement to employee experience surveys. We get the message all the time. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 further explained that in an organisation where the broader culture is unhealthy and possibly detrimental to employee wellbeing, there are instead health-promoting subcultures where wellness is prioritised.

So, okay, the culture exists within the HR space and within, should we call it the people space? That's what it's being called these days. Within the people space. You see it's quite evident in, in these spaces. But you know, when you move into other areas such as operations and it's, it's not very well ingrained. It's not visible. You'll see it like, you know, in HR spaces.

Like I said, we've got the monthly companywide invites to these Thrive Talks and getting invited to certain events that are around health and wellness and mental and emotional wellness, and you know, balancing that. But when we look at it

from an operational perspective, outside of the people silo, it's not there. (Participant 3)

4.4.4. Organisation

Participants highlighted that there are structures that support the wellness initiatives within their organisations – structure that enable awareness, access and utility of these services. The organisational support mentioned here is related to the responses in section 4.1. regarding the organisations response to the digitisation of work processes and overall ways of work.

So yes, they have provided support, but my view is that, you know, that support has been provided to a select few. It's not across the board, but then again, you know, if we bring it into context. It's in light of the industry I am in - you can't really make a loaf of bread from home. So, it works that support has been provided for non-site-based employees such as me, but don't really see that that coming through for, for people who are required to be on site. (Participant 3).

I remember they used a team score, teams' meetings, where it was supposed to be a mental check in with an industrial psychologist and it was a group setup. So, I felt like it was not enough because yes, we're all suffering from grief and unknown Covid issues and we needed more one, one-on-one consultations instead of group sessions, you know. So, I think from that realising that if it was not as effective, maybe that's what prompted them to incorporate the employee wellness programme. (Participant 7)

Another type of organisational support that enabled the awareness, access and utility of wellness services included assigning a dedicated wellness specialist with the organisation who manages the EWP or in the case of Participant 4, assigning a business partner from the EWP service provider to support with the implementation, management and measuring of the EWP.

We've got a Wellness Specialist that belongs under HR. Yeah, she belongs to the HR department. But yeah, she facilitates that relationship between us and the wellness provider. (Participant 2)

The other thing that helps or that just gives me confidence in the programme is the, the business partnership that we have with the dedicated person that's assigned to our company. She's accessible at any time. You know, whenever there's concerns, we would raise it with her. She'll escalate it immediately, you know, and if the person is not happy with the service, they'd make sure that they link the person to someone else who's a lot more experienced or like a senior in that department. (Participant 4)

4.4.5. Digital learning

Relating to section 4.1 on the digitisation of work processes and upskilling because of a change in work environments, the digital learning dimension of the MMOE digital maturity model considers the skills required for employees to access and utilise employee wellness services in their respective places of work. Participants reported having to upskill to adjust to a changing work environment and with some organisations introducing apps to access wellness services, participants indicated a requirement to learn how to use digital tools to utilise some of these services.

So, when I joined the organisation, I work for now, they implemented a way to login or authenticate yourself as when we were doing those pre - tests where, where you check your temperature. So, you would have to check your own temperature before you come to the office. That was when I just joined. And then you would have to notify them on your laptop or on your phone that your temperature is such and such. (Participant 6)

Yeah, there is an app. Okay. I'm trying to find or access it here. But there is an app. So, you're able to interact with the coaches electronically. There's the option of calling in. So, with those that go through counselling services, they have an option of, like, face-to-face counselling sessions with a coach or therapist. (Participant 4)

Participant 6 also adds how using digital tools have aided the need for creating awareness for wellness services while Participant 3 added the benefit of an app for the wellness service at the place of work would address some of the concerns around access to information and channels for their wellness services.

And I'll also say the, the non-contact benefit of the app is that it actually speaks for you when you actually don't even know where to start. Right. Some people don't know about wellness [services] in the workplace. So, I think them taking an initiative to introduce such an app and you know, introduce such programmes, they've also made it easy for people to speak out. (Participant 6)

I think nowadays the world runs on apps. An app would be, would be great. Yeah. I do think that if we had apps that kind of give you information available at hand, access to data and information available to you on the go, that would be, would be great. Yeah, I think that's all. An app would kind of fix most of the, the accessibility concerns. (Participant 3)

4.4.6. Employees

The effectiveness of an EWP can be determined by whether employees were included in the development and design of the wellness programmes such that the service offering and delivery of these services meets employee needs, preferences and expectations.

The findings below suggest that while participants were asked for feedback following the use and experience of the wellness services, most of them were not include or consulted during the development and design of these services.

I've never been asked any for feedback, but I gave feedback. I gave feedback not on the effectiveness of it, but also, I gave feedback in terms of encouraging my head of department to promote mental health. (Participant 7)

There were employee engagement surveys. So, they were organisation wide surveys. And then we would have team surveys. And if I recall, you know, in both instances, there are questions about job satisfaction, about wellness, about work life balance, you know, which are questions that I would put under the category of wellness. But again, box ticking exercise. (Participant 1)

Yes. But they do have a suggestion box. A suggestion box on how maybe you had found one of their sessions and you would like to maybe, you know, have some input on how they can make the wellness centre better for you, you know,

and for. Yeah, so they do have a suggestion book. I've used it twice, actually. Suggestion box. (Participant 6)

For Participant 4, her role in HR and responsibility to implement the EWP within her place of work allowed for her team to contribute to the development and design of the employee wellness programme in her organisation.

So, one of the things that we started with was a debriefing session for the HR staff. So, it was HR and the training staff. Payroll. No. Yeah, and payroll. I think they were also included. So, all those departments had to basically go through debriefing sessions just so people can basically, you know, share their experiences, how they felt they needed support, what their concerns were just in terms of their well-being and the offerings from the company. So that really helped I think even for me as a person as much as we are always more focused on staff. We had to trial out the program ourselves as HR. So, it was personally just to understand the offerings that they had especially because I mean it's a confidential, you know, setup (Participant 4)

When asked about their attitudes, perception and experience of the employee wellness services, participants indicated the need for such services and for employers to further prioritise mental health in the workplace and overall employee wellbeing.

I think there's a need for such services and I think burnout is more common than we, than we think it is. And you know employee wellness services come in handy in cases where they're able to assess your well-being and motivate, you know, in cases of burnout and motivate in cases of overworking and things, things like that. You know, I don't know what needs to happen for the workloads to be dealt with a little bit better, for team toxic team dynamics to be handled better because, you know, if it's not being solved or if for some reason, you know, employees are being silenced and then your mental well-being is going to suffer and yeah, it's just a downward trajectory [from there]. So, there's a need for such services in the workplace. (Participant 1)

One thing I would say on a personal level, the wellness services are essential. I feel like every workplace should have them. I think it's very, very essential to have

a wellness centre for my team because I have used it now. It has helped me a lot. I think when I joined the company, I wanted to see a difference, you know. I wanted to see some change because I've worked for a lot of companies, but I found them [the wellness centres] to be the same. They don't have that personal factor like that. So yes, what I took from the experience, and it has made me somebody who never thought taking care of your mental health was such an essential thing, but now it is the thing to take care of. (Participant 6)

4.5 Limitations of digitising EWPs

The above data demonstrates how the digitisation of the delivery of EWPs has created more channels for awareness, access and utility. It has further shown how the different dimensions of the MMOE Digital Maturity Model contribute to the level of digital maturity of EWPs whether the service is in-house or outsourced. However, the digitisation of the delivery of such services presents some limitations related to its availability due to the reliance on technological tools for its delivery:

You book on the app, or you can book at the office. So, there's two ways you can book on the app if you find that easier. But there was a time of, I think, five months or something like that where the app was giving us problems and we had to book in person. (Participation 6)

And during this time, I'm going to be on a work call using the work phone, calling the hotline. But now because I'm thinking about someone who's on leave or who's on sick leave and needs to have those sessions. I think the WhatsApp line would have, would have worked better. And it also creates a sense of confidentiality if it's just on your phone, you know. (Participant 7)

Other limitations related to the counselling services and how due to the sensitive nature of the information shared during counselling, it would be better to have face-to-face consultations in addition to telephonic or virtual options available for employees to. Both Participant 1 and Participant 6 share their sentiments below:

Yes, I was presenting with physical symptoms, but there was no therapist or like a counsellor that you could, you know, ask to, to meet with face to face and even if it's virtually. I did not know the face of my counsellor. So, I think, I suppose especially because it's a counselling service, I think that's something that they could have looked into because there is something comforting with talking to, you know, seeing the face. Because you are sharing quite sensitive information, you know, and there is a distress, so seeing a face and them also just being able to, I mean you can pick up on how a person is feeling telephonically even if you don't see them. But I think it would, it would have helped to see [the counsellor]. (Participant 1)

So, for me, in my suggestion, how I suggested for them was that they could make. I don't know, I find the virtual one not as beneficial. You know, I feel like a more human interaction is important, especially when you are dealing with maybe one of the worst things you could deal with in life. The virtual thing. Sometimes it doesn't work. I've had a lot of people actually say, "I didn't really feel like I got the attention I needed because we were virtual." You know, I feel like when I went there physically, I actually felt like I had gained more. (Participant 6)

4.6 Linking Findings with the Propositions

The findings in this section indicate that in the context of EWPs, digitisation relates to the various channels that are available to the delivery of the services offered by EWPs. While the size of the organisation and whether the EWP is in-house or outsourced does have a bearing on the level of digital maturity, this does not disregard the need to digitise certain elements of the delivery of these programmes whilst keeping the delivery of certain services in their traditional form to meet employee expectations.

4.6.1. Findings related to Proposition 1: EWPs have become a strategic imperative for organisations as a result of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on employee wellbeing and transformation in the workplace

Figure 4.1 Represents a thematic map showing the themes linked to Proposition 1:

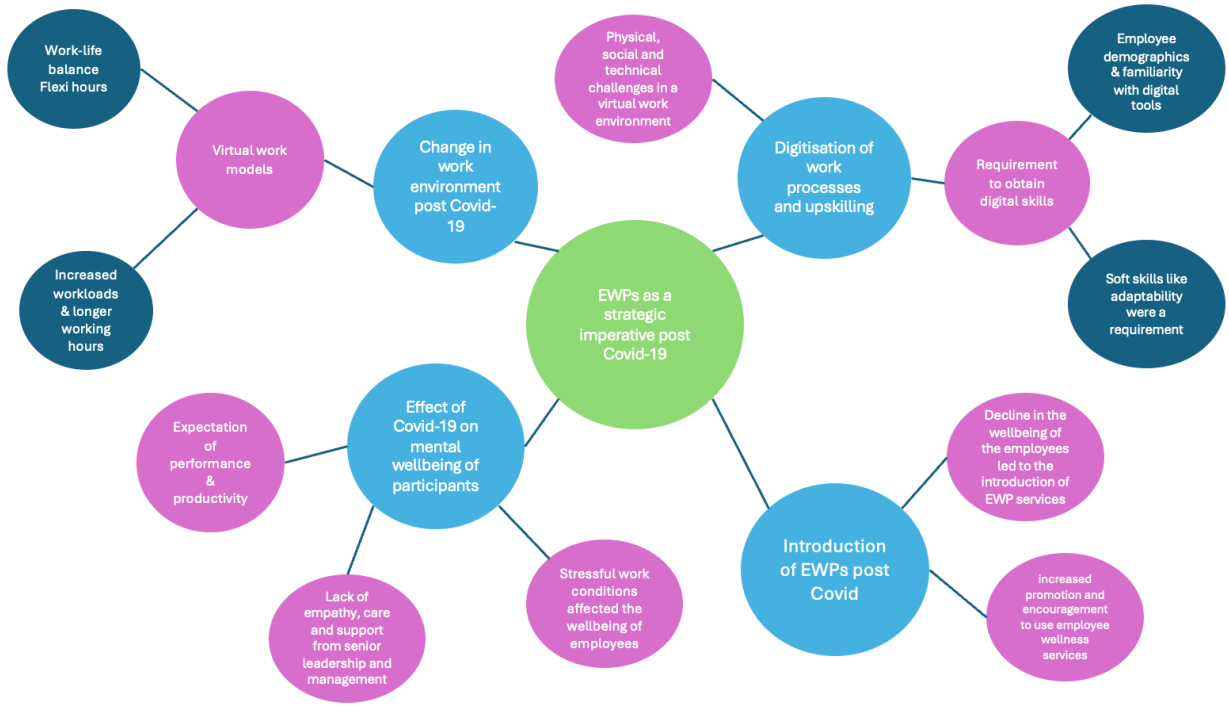


Figure 4.1 Thematic Map of themes related to Proposition 1

The thematic map above shows that there are four themes that that emerged in the findings related to proposition 1. These themes are change in work environments post Covid-19, the effect of Covid-19 on mental wellbeing of participants, digitisation of work processes and upskilling as a result of change in work environment and introduction of EWP services as a response to changes in work environment caused by Covid. From these four main themes there are sub-themes that emerged that further expand on the main theme to provide more detail on the main theme as it relates to proposition 1.

4.6.2. Findings related to Proposition 2: Meeting employee expectations at different levels i.e. awareness, access and utility using relevant tools and technologies has the potential to result in increased employee participation in EWPs.

Figure 4.2. Represents a thematic map showing the themes linked to Proposition 2:



Figure 4.2. Thematic Map of themes related to Proposition 2

The thematic map above shows that there are five themes that that emerged in the findings related to Proposition 2. These themes are awareness of EWP services, access of EWP services, services offered with the EWP, utility of services and factors influencing employee participation in EWPs. These are themes that are derived from the dimensions of employee participation where EWP services are concerned. From these five main themes, the sub-themes further expand on the how participants experienced awareness, access and utility of wellness services in their place of work and uncovered the factors enabling or hindering participation as it relates to Proposition 2.

4.6.3. Findings relating to Proposition 3: Traditional EWPs must undergo a process of digitalisation as they have not achieved a level of digital maturity that meets employee expectations and supports employee participation in the programmes.

Figure 4.3. Represents a thematic map showing the themes linked to Proposition 3:



Figure 4.3. Thematic Map of themes related to Proposition 3

The thematic map above shows that there are five themes that that emerged in the findings related to Proposition 3. These themes are awareness of equipment and tools, strategy and leadership, organisation, culture, employees and digital learning. These are themes that were guided by the dimensions of the MMOE digital maturity model and the sub-themes that emerged that further expand on the main dimensions and how participants perceive and experience the digitalisation of EWPs within their respective work environments as it related to Proposition 3.

4.7 Summary

It is evident that there is a need for EWPs as a response to the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on employee wellbeing and transformation in the workplace. Employees not only require technical support to perform their daily tasks, but they also require psychosocial support that helps them navigate a dynamic work environment and the transforming nature of the job market.

The EWPs offered at various organisations that the participants work for do meet employee expectations regarding awareness, access, availability, utility and variety of wellness services offered. Albeit at varying levels, the findings above indicate that EWP service providers use relevant tools and technologies to drive awareness, access and utility of these services and thus indicate a degree of digital maturity of such programmes and meet the expectations of a changing workforce in this regard.

Furthermore, factors that limit or promote employee participation in EWPs are not as a result of the design or delivery of the EWP - where the digital maturity of the programme can be evaluated - but are instead as a result of the personal challenges or work-related pressures that affect their functioning and overall wellbeing. in the context of EWPs, digitisation relates to the various channels that are available to the delivery of the services offered by EWPs.

While the size of the organisation and whether the EWP is in-house or outsourced does have a bearing on the level of digital maturity, this does not disregard the need to digitise certain elements of the delivery of these programmes whilst keeping the delivery of certain services in their traditional form to meet employee expectations.

The following chapter discusses the findings in relation to the literature outlined in chapter two. The discussion of the findings in chapter five also seek to address the research objectives of the study accordingly.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings in chapter four within the context of the literature in chapter two. The findings shared in this chapter seek to address the research objectives of this study which are:

i) To explore the relevance of EWPs in a changing job market and transforming workplace.
ii) To understand employee expectations regarding awareness, access, utility and participation in employee wellness services within a transforming workplace.
iii) To understand what constitutes as 'digital maturity' in the context of EWPs and how the level of the digital maturity of existing EWPs impact employee participation

The chapter will also discuss the following:

- Change in work environment post-Covid
- Participant's experience with EWP services post-Covid
- Participant's perception of digital maturity.
- Researcher positionality and reflections
- Chapter conclusion

5.2 Proposition 1: EWPs have become a strategic imperative for organisations as a result of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on employee wellbeing and transformation in the workplace

5.2.1. Change in work environment

According to Hussain, Lei, Akram, Haider, Hussain and Ali (2018), there are internal and external forces that prompt change in an organisation. This type of change can be reactive or proactive. Reactive change occurs when the internal or external factors force an organisation to change whereas proactive change occurs when the organisation decides to change to a desired state (Pierce, Gardner and Dunham, 2002 in Hussain et al., 2018).

In the case of an unprecedented event such as Covid-19 and the findings presented in chapter four, the change in the organisations was a reaction to internal and external factors that pressurised the organisations to adjust to the new environmental conditions. The Covid-19 pandemic prompted both employees and organisations to adopt new work methods suited to an evolving work environment. This shift involved embracing remote and virtual work arrangements, led to an increased reliance on digital tools like video conferencing, and the integration of technology into everyday workflows (Botha & Coetzee, 2022).

Participant 6 shares how these changes have affected the nature of his work post-Covid: *I had never worked from home before. I didn't need to because all the previous jobs I had required me to be in the office. But post-Covid...I've worked for two companies actually, one being where I was working full time at home. Where I work now, it's a hybrid model.*

The findings suggest that remote work has become one of the most prominent shifts, leading to new employee preferences and expectations regarding how and where they work. As noted in the research findings, many have reported benefits of remote work such as better work-life balance, and increased flexibility (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). An example of this is the comment by Participant 3:

I've got a lot more work-life balance. I've also got a lot more, you know, can I, can I call it room to play with in terms of, you know, how I can structure my life, how I can structure how things work. But for me again, the anomaly is that my job can be done almost completely virtually.

As a result, employees now expect employers to create supportive working environments that enhance overall wellbeing. For organisations to remain competitive and safeguard employee wellbeing, they have had to adopt new strategies that embrace automation, digitalisation, appropriate technological tools, and more flexible organisational structures (Mostafa, 2021). Botha and Coetzee (2022) further highlight that these sweeping changes in work structures and employee expectations have pushed organisations to go beyond technical adaptation. They argue that organisations now have a critical responsibility in helping employees navigate both professional and psychosocial changes brought about by this transformation.

While smart technologies have made remote work more accessible, employees continue to face significant challenges in balancing work and personal responsibilities effectively. As the post-pandemic reality unfolds, some individuals have experienced lingering stress brought on by internal and external organisational changes (Prasad et al., 2020 in Mostafa, 2021).

5.2.2. *Digitisation of work processes and upskilling as a result of change in work environment*

Moisalo (2011 in Arila, 2022) challenges the outdated belief that simply working harder leads to better outcomes, arguing that this mindset can be detrimental to employee wellbeing. As the workplace evolves, especially with the digitisation of processes, there is a growing need for new skills, digital competencies, and adaptable mindsets. Participant 1 shared the need to adapt to this fast-changing work environment by stating that:

There was a lot of adaptability, a lot of adapting that needed to be done, but I appreciated the flexibility of being at the office and being at home.

The research findings further show that employees have had to upskill to meet the demands of a digitally transforming work environment. Vizjak, Paulišić, and Mišević (2024) argue that agile organisations prioritise digitisation and require employees to at least possess foundational digital skills which include proficiency in applications, MS Office, web browsers, spreadsheets, and email (ICTC, 2016 in Vizjak et al., 2024). In today's digital work environment, these skills are essential in most work environments. Participant 7 notes the challenges of having to adjust to a digitally transforming environment and the need to upskill:

Resources were available, but it was a case of getting used to the technological aspect of it. Okay, remember, we are used to working in the office on a desktop computer, right? Now suddenly you find yourself at home with your desktop computer having connectivity issues. Remember, everybody was working from home. The bandwidth was an issue. And internet was not stable.

Now you're getting penalised because of your lack of connectivity or connectivity issues. And it created a lot of anxiety while you were working at home because now if you're not available or if, if your VPN drops sometimes because you are not used to working, dealing with those technical glitches, even if it drops, you are sometimes you're not even aware that you are disconnected.

In supporting sentiments from the findings that have had to prioritise both technical and soft skills in a digitally transforming work environment, the Future of Jobs Survey (2023) emphasises the skills requirements for employees in today’s job market:

> *In today's dynamic job market, desirable employees are expected to possess a range of skills, including analytical thinking, innovation, active learning, complex problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, originality, initiative, leadership, and social influence. Technical skills such as technology use, monitoring, programming, and technology design are increasingly valued. Additionally, personal attributes like resilience, stress tolerance, flexibility, and emotional intelligence are essential to thriving in an ever-evolving workplace.*

Although the need to upskill in a changing work environment is essential, Arila (2022) further adds that there needs to be organisational support that not only helps employees who have challenges with the pace of technological change but also to empower them to perform effectively and sustainably in a digitally transforming environment.

5.2.3. Effect of Covid-19 on mental wellbeing of participants

The varied experiences of the pandemic have had an impact on the employees' psychological wellbeing. In a study about *How Wellbeing is Experienced in Remote Work and How It Can Be Promoted in An Accounting Firm*, Arila (2022) highlights three factors that affect the wellbeing of employees in a virtual work environment namely: overworking, work-related stress and recovery. Overworking refers to working excessively due to job demands without not finding a healthy balance between one's professional and personal life (Spagnoli et al. 2020 in Arila, 2022).

In a study evaluating *Workplace Stress and Employee's Psychological Well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic in Educational Institutions,* Ali, Khan, Bilal and Nasir (2025) recognise work-related stress as the emotional and physical responses that occur when the demands of a job exceed an individual's ability to cope or manage them effectively while recovery is an intentional process where an individual replenishes their mental, emotional and physical wellbeing that has been depleted by work demands (Arila, 2022). Based on the research findings, participants noted that work-related stress, increased workloads which led to overworking and a lack of recovery resulted in a decline in their psychological wellbeing leading to cases of burnout in some instances.

Just the increase in, in the workload and accessibility is because now there's all these digital channels that, you know. I guess, managers in head office can access you online. (Participant 5)

But before Covid, it used to be eight [working] hours. But I realised that working from home is usually more than that because you end up knocking off at 10om.

But also, you don't have to get up early and prepare yourself and all of that administrative. So longer hours post Covid. (Participant 8)

The pace at which we used to work was quite fast and I mean I'm a fast learner, I'm quite adaptable, reasonably adaptable. But I think the team dynamics were a bit too demanding for me to keep up with. And I learned later that I was actually presenting with signs of burnout. (Participant 1)

In earlier literature Hamouche (2020) identified psychological distress triggered by the pandemic and employees' difficulties in coping with the effects of Covid as key concerns impacting employee wellness. Makhanya (2021) further added that elevated stress levels have undermined employee wellbeing and negatively influenced both productivity and job performance. The author emphasizes that work-related stress should be viewed as an occupational hazard, suggesting that employee-focused interventions, such as EWPs play a crucial role in reducing the risk of stress-induced illnesses or injuries. Participant 4 who was part of a team responsible for implementing an EWP in her organisation quoted the above reason for the organisation's introduction of the EWP.

It was concerning the issues that were raised during exit interviews because I mean that's one of the things we are very strict about. We always want to know why people are leaving organisation only because of the nature of the job that we're doing. And one of the issues that came across or that came about was a burnout. You know, people were burnt out. People felt that we're not, you know, like management was not really concerned about their well-being and the likes. So, I think, you know, with the introduction of this programme, it basically gave them a bit of comfort that we care.

5.2.4. Introduction of EWP services as a response to changes in work environment caused by Covid

According to Cowdrey & Ponniah (2020), there is an increasing expectation from employers to provide contemporary wellness services that meet employee needs, changing job design and industry standards. Following the increase of remote work and a greater dependence on technology, employee wellbeing has

emerged as a top priority and a significant challenge for modern organisations (Zicari & Gamble, 2023 in Riaz, Stankeviciute, & Pinzaru, 2024). These employer-sponsored initiatives such as EWPs are designed not only to support employees' overall health but also to help them adapt to the new demands of a changing job landscape (Ngeno and Muathe, 2014).

More than ever, employers are recognising the vital need to support their workforce by focusing not only on physical safety but also on mental and emotional health (Kane et al., 2021 in Riaz et al., 2024). These developments point to the increasing necessity of implementing comprehensive EWPs to foster a healthy, engaged, and resilient workforce. This is evidenced in the research findings where some participants indicated that their workplaces did not have an EWP prior to Covid-19 and that it was the effect on the psychological wellbeing of employees caused by the pandemic that resulted in an introduction of the EWP services.

Yeah, so we didn't have one prior to Covid. So, it's only after Covid where we actually came to the realisation that we needed this programme... So, you know, we needed to prioritise the well-being of staff and just ensuring that, you know, there's enough psychosocial support for them as well. And like I said, because we had neglected a lot just in terms of well-being, we needed to ensure that people have, you know, like proper coping mechanisms and strategies of dealing with, you know, with the, the aftermath of Covid...One of the reasons why we started, you know, or we, we had to introduce this program is because the concerns that came about and one of them was that they felt like they were operating like machines. (Participant 4)

In cases where organisations did not have existing EWPs, intermediary wellness solutions such as group counselling sessions with a psychological were introduced to the mental and emotional distress caused by the pandemic on employees. Ngeno and Mauthe (2014) argue that such interventions can be classified as corporate health care programmes, which typically focus on employee assistance and health insurance. Whereas EWPs promote healthy behaviours and correct poor health among employees with the aim of enhancing the operation and productivity of the organisation.

This was seen in the research findings when a corporate health initiative involving Industrial Psychologists was later replaced by an EWP at a later stage.

During Covid there were industrial psychologists who were filling that gap. But then after Covid, that's when they started bringing in the services of employee wellness. One of the therapists and also ICAS. (Participant 7)

5.3 Proposition 2: Meeting employee expectations at different levels i.e. awareness, access and utility using relevant tools and technologies has the potential to result in increased employee participation in EWPs.

As the job market evolves and workplace dynamics continue to shift, employee expectations have also changed. This has prompted employers to rethink how EWPs are structured, implemented, and communicated. The idea is that aligning EWPs with the diverse needs and expectations of employees can significantly boost participation. This was evaluated along the following factors which have been identified as essential in driving employee involvement in wellness programmes: awareness, accessibility, services offered and utility.

5.3.1. Awareness

In a study evaluating the *Employees' Awareness, Attitudes and Utilisation of an Employee Wellness Programme in a Financial Services Company in South Africa*, Dawad and Hoque (2016) noted the different levels of employees' awareness of EWPs. Employee awareness considers the programme, the awareness of the services offered by the programme and the awareness regarding the confidentiality of using the services. Solnet et al. (2020) also note that the success of an EWP is characterised by being consistently visible and distinctive to employees.

With regards to the sources of information to create awareness of these services, the authors highlight internal communication tools such as the company newsletter, email or intranet as effective channels to drive awareness of the EWP and its services. The authors further note that word of mouth and referrals from

management and peers also played a role in creating the right level of awareness of the wellness services.

In the research findings, participants indicated that internal marketing efforts and channels such as those mentioned by Dawad and Hoque (2016) communicated consistent and clear information about the EWPs and thus proving its effectiveness in creating awareness about the EWP. Participant 5 and Participant 2 supports the authors' stance on how EWP service providers create awareness about their services:

So, it's publicised everywhere. We've got posters everywhere, like in the bathrooms, at, you know, random spots in, around the office. But when I joined the company, they just launched or named our employee service. They call it Phefula. They did a whole big launch of it, you know, roadshow. So, when I joined it, the launch had already happened, but it was still pretty prevalent. You know, there's posters and stuff everywhere. (Participant 2)

All right, so on site drives where they obviously created awareness about what the service is, how you can access it, how it can benefit you and all of that. And then also through like internal communications via email, internal comms. (Participant 5)

Additionally, some participants indicated that they found out about the services from their peers and colleagues while others reported that an endorsement and promoted of the services from senior leaders supported the argument stated by Bontrager and Marshall (2019) argue visibly involving leadership and senior management in the promotion of EWPs drives buy-in.

So, I found out about the program in the app through my team leader and she actually briefed me through it and showed me the steps, showed me the offices in the building. Actually, I didn't even know we had an office for that department. I thought it was in another, you know, building from where I'm located for the organisation. (Participant 6)

5.3.2. Access

In earlier literature, Mugari et al. (2014) noted that EWPs should not only have a comprehensive service offering, but it should also be accessible and available in terms of distance and channels to deliver those services. The research findings indicate that EWPs offered at the participant workplaces are delivered in various channels namely telephonically, in-person and virtually. It is through these channels that the delivery of these services has been digitised where participants have indicated the use of other digital tools such as mobile applications and chatbots to access these services. This is evidenced with Participant 3

Yeah, there is an app. Okay. I'm trying to find or access it here. But there is an app. So, you're able to interact with the coaches electronically. There's the option of calling in. So, with those that go through counseling services, they have an option of, like, face-to-face counseling sessions with a coach or therapist. And they've got, I think, up to eight counseling sessions per episode, which is good as well. (Participant 4)

So, there were, if I'm not mistaken, three channels available. There's a WhatsApp line, there's a phone line, and then there's the in-person sessions that can be held. I initially used the phone line. So, I called in and I had a conversation over the phone with the counsellor, and then I had a follow up conversation with the counsellor. And then within which she then recommended that I go see someone in person. (Participant 3)

An interesting point noted by Mugari et al. (2014) which was also apparent in the research findings is that access for employees in different locations should also include physical locations that could be both onsite and offsite. Two participants indicated a benefit extended by the wellness services within their respective organisations for employees to have in-person sessions with a counsellor of their choosing at an off-site location. Thus, indicating that access to location and proximity to access personal and confidential services such therapy or counselling are an important factor in drive utility and participation.

I had an in-person, but you get to choose. If over the phone works for you, you do that. If you wanted to come to the office, you do that. But I went to her offices.

Offices off site. So, she's not based at no offices. But she does come, I think once a week to our office. (Participant 8)

5.3.3. Services offered

With the role of EWPs expanding from basic HR support services into structured, holistic initiatives aimed to enhance the overall employee experience and meet employee expectations regarding such services. (Grant et al., 2008 in Stefko, 2023), this means that organisations understand that meaningful employee wellness must align with the broader realities of employee expectations in a changing work environment. Additionally, this shift highlights a move toward holistic employee wellbeing models that are crucial for the long-term success of organisations.

Ngeno and Muathe (2014) add that wellness programmes that promote healthy behaviours typically include the following services health risk management (e.g. screening for cardiovascular disease risk factors such as cholesterol and blood pressure), behavioural health like smoking cessation, substance abuse and psychological counseling, and primary care promotion and lifestyle management especially on weight loss, fitness and nutrition. Cheon et. Al (2020) note that several studies have shown that EWPs that offer comprehensive services such as smoking cessation, weight management, mental health support, and chronic disease management can produce to improved health outcomes.

The research findings suggest that although not every organisation has a wellness service that fits the criteria of a traditional EWP, there are variations of services that meet the list of offerings highlighted by Ngeno and Muathe (2014). Some common services included general counselling services, trauma counselling, financial and legal advisory, health assessments and fitness incentive programmes. Other employee wellness services provided extended a benefit of the services being available to their immediate families to support the integration of wellness beyond the workplace. An example of a comprehensive EWP service offering over and above general counselling services is noted by one of the participants below:

5.3.4. Utility of services

In earlier literature, Solnet, et al. (2020) highlighted that the availability of an EWP in an organisation does not automatically result in employee participation, thus it is important to understand the factors that influence employee participation as it relates to utility.

The research findings indicate that participants used the wellness services more than once, however had to cease their usage for various reasons. According to Person et al. (2010 in Ngundu, 2015), demographic, work-related challenges and employee attitudes and perception towards the EWP and programme design are some of the factors that affect initial and continued use of these services. The issue of a non-trusting organisational culture and by extension the trustworthiness of the employee wellness services led to concerns around confidentiality and privacy for some participants.

To expand on that, one of the biggest fears I had when using this service was, you know, the protection of privacy. And so, I think because we have a culture that is non-trusting, that we've built. There's a subculture of mistrust and of backstabbing. And so a lot of the time you're going to see that where people do use this service, they're not being entirely honest because you feel that maybe you're being recorded and your information is going to be shared with senior leadership and people are going to know exactly what you said about this person or what you said your experience was. (Participant 3)

Dawad and Hoque (2016) noted a similar finding in their study stating that "confidentiality concerns, and trustworthiness of staff, were common reasons for staff not wanting to use the EWP" and thus making the emphasis of the confidentiality of the programme during the awareness campaign essential. Participants also cited that work-related demands such as increase in workloads and time constraints as factors affecting the continued use of these services.

This is also supported by a Ndungu (2015) where he cited a study by Kruger et al. (2007) that explored employee attitudes toward potential obstacles to the

effective implementation of workplace wellness programmes. The researchers conducted a voluntary mail survey aimed at identifying both the barriers and motivators influencing employee participation in such initiatives. According to the findings, the most cited barrier was a lack of time during the workday, reported by 42.5% of respondents. Additionally, 39.4% indicated that limited time after working hours also hindered their ability to take part in wellness programmes (Dawad and Hoque, 2016). Participants in this research study noted the same barrier:

My workday was just so packed that even that one hour, you know, that you're supposed to have as an employee, which could be your lunch, you know. I had other commitments and work demands, so I could no longer meet with my therapist...I didn't stop because I was not happy, or I felt that I wasn't getting anything out of the sessions. It's just that time constraints were really not on my side and that subsequently led to me leaving my job. (Participant 1)

I think the other concern is the fact that people just don't have time. People don't have time. They just don't have time because of the environment that we in. Like I said, we are highly pressurised. Everything is target based. So, when you're asking someone to, you know, take time and actually call in, they would have to do it after hours.

So that's another concern for us as an organisation that we need to somehow try and be accommodative. So, if we are referring someone for EAP services, we need to allow them time to actually call us like you know, during working hours and not really, you know, advise them to do it after hours. That's unfair because, you know, the, the concerns are linked *to work related issues.* (Participant 4)

The effectiveness of employee wellness programmes is also influenced by employee perceptions and attitudes. When employees view a programme as valuable and beneficial, and hold a positive attitude toward it, they are more likely to engage with it. Increased participation enhances the programme’s overall effectiveness in meeting its objectives, creating a mutually advantageous outcome for both the organisation and its workforce (Dawad and Hoque, 2016) This is evidenced by participants in the research findings who had a positive

attitude towards using employee wellness services due to prior experience with mental health services and overall, had a positive outlook of help-seeking behaviours when experiencing psychological, physical or personal challenges.

Oh, so I've been in therapy for years and years since I was a child. So, it wasn't a new concept to me. And when I found out that we've got, access to counsellors…I think I can't remember what it even was, but the first time I had a crisis, I used it for personal reasons. (Participant 2)

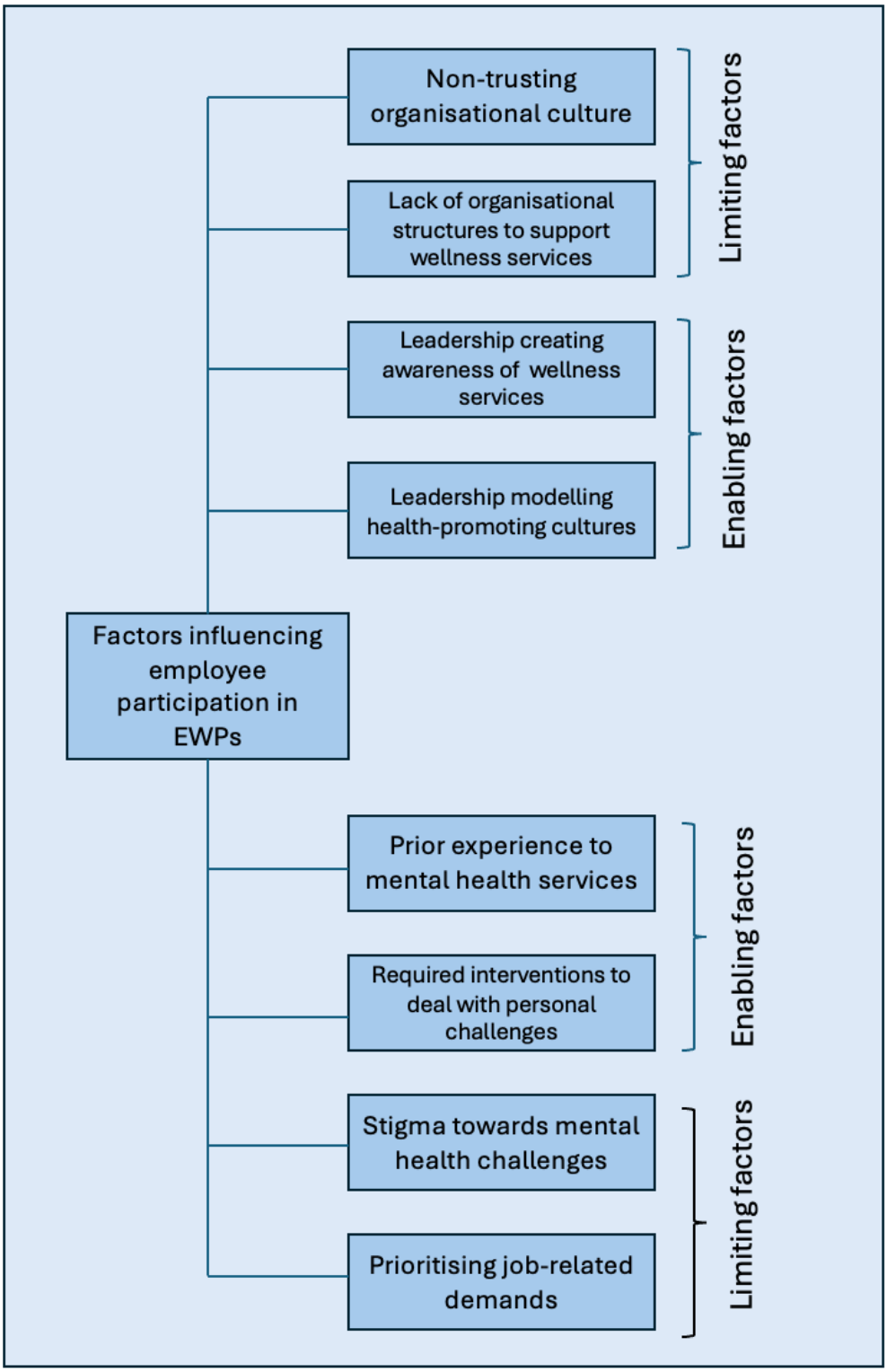
Ndungu (2015) also indicated that including features such as the use of incentives in the design and delivery of EWPs is useful in driving employee participation in wellness programme. The incentives noted by the author prioritised by the offering services related to convenience and time whereas those shared by participants in this research study focused on prioritising health-promoting behaviours and continuous wellness-centred lifestyle by using digitised loyalty programmes such as Discovery Vitality to drive utility of the EWP services.

So, with the physical [health assessment], I think that is more aligned to staff with chronic illnesses. They would offer, like, your assessments. I know there's educational talks on how to deal with, like, things like your HIV management, your diabetes management, encouraging them to be active. They would share different types of, you know, activities or physical activities that they should consider because we are linked to Discovery. Then there's also that benefit of…what do we call it? What's that membership, again, where they get points? Vitality.

They would share different types of, you know, activities or physical activities that they should, you know, consider because we are linked to Discovery Vitality (Participant 6)

The diagram below illustrates that limiting and enabling factors that influence employee participation in employee wellness services.

Figure 5. 1: A model of factors influencing employee participation in EWPs based on findings



The above diagram demonstrates the limiting and enabling factors that influence employee participation. These factors can be categorised as

organisational and employee factors that influence employee participation. Organisational factors influencing employee participation are a non-trusting organisational culture, lack of organisational structures to support wellness services, leaders creating awareness of employee wellness services (or lack thereof) and leadership modelling health-promoting cultures (or lack thereof).

Employee factors that influence participation include prior experience to mental health services, required interventions to deal with personal challenges, stigma towards mental health challenges and prioritising job-related demands.

5.4 Proposition 3: Traditional EWPs must undergo a process of digitalisation as they have not achieved a level of digital maturity that meets employee expectations and supports employee participation in EWPs.

This proposition draws on literature from the Maturity Model for Technology Adoption at Educational Organisations (MMOE) where participants shared their perception of the digital maturity of the EWPs in their place of work along the following dimensions of the model: equipment and technology, strategy and leadership, culture, organisation, employees, and digital learning

5.4.1. Equipment and technology

Arila (2022) noted that The Centre of Occupational Health stipulates that employees working in digitised environments should be able to work under health and safety conditions equivalent to those of on-site staff. To ensure this, employers are responsible for providing the necessary tools and equipment. Ifenthaler & Egloffstein (2020) note that the first dimension of the MMOE considers the provision of IT-related equipment and technology required for organisational processes and systems such digital devices, software, connectivity, etc.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act (Arila, 2022) further asserts this stating that it is the employer's duty to safeguard employee wellbeing, a requirement that extends equally to remote working arrangements. This includes providing the

necessary equipment and tools of trade that enables employees to fulfil their day-to-day tasks in a virtual environment. In the research findings, participants indicated that their employers made provisions for the relevant technology and tools for employees to adjust to the new ways of work and to support employee outreach and access to the various channels offered by the EWPs. The equipment included tools of trade such as laptops, cell phones, access to data, etc.

This can be seen in the provision of such equipment and tools of trade by her employer with Participant 3:

Firstly, just the flexi work hours. The second thing is equipment, tools of trade. So, you know, whereas some employees are still desktop based and have a desktop. Some are provided with laptops, and you know, the necessary tools of trade. And then yeah, I think lastly is just around the access to certain facilities. So, for example, if you're a site-based employee, there's quite a lot of requirements that you have meetings in person whereas your non-site-based employees can have online meetings. We're seeing a world of virtual meetings. So, the requirements for certain employees are different. (Participant 3)

Ergonomic furniture and safety guidelines, along with standard office supplies and items typically available in a physical office environment and not expected to be purchased by employees were also supplied (Arila, 2022). For one participant, her organisation made provisions office supplies and items typically available in a physical office environment for the employee's home office.

When I joined them post-Covid, but also, I think during Covid, what they did was that they gave people money to buy stationary to enable them to work from home. Office supplies in terms of tools and resources, basically. And then from a technology perspective, you get a 3G. You get a cell phone and laptop. (Participant 8)

5.4.2. Strategy and leadership

Al-Fayez and Goodman (2024) highlight that obstacles to using Work-Life Balance Policies (WLBPs) often stem from traditional supervisors who resist these policies and downplay their value where on the other hand supportive supervisors can shape how employees perceive WLBPs and potentially lessen these negative effects. Similarly, Little (2021) describes the role of leaders in setting the wellness strategy and in influencing employee participation in wellness programme by highlighting the different levels of behaviours that leaders exhibit to encourage or hinder employee involvement. These behaviours can be classified as obstructing accommodating or promoting behaviours.

When leaders obstruct participation, they openly oppose wellbeing programmes and are generally unsupportive, creating a direct barrier to employee engagement. Accommodating behaviour, on the other hand, is characterised by a neutral stance where leaders neither support nor resist these initiatives but may be hesitant to engage in conversations about mental health or actively encourage participation.

In contrast, promoting behaviour involves leaders actively encouraging employee engagement by showing genuine concern for staff wellbeing and leading by example (Hoert, Herd and Hambrick 2018), the research shows that employee participation tends to be highest in workplaces where leaders cultivate trust and foster a psychologically safe culture at different levels. In the research findings, it is evident that leadership plays a role in advocating for and hindering the use of EWPs as noted below:

We have regular town halls and in the town hall, like the MD would mention it. Especially in Covid. And during Covid it was more prevalent where they'd be like, "Guys, please check yourselves." ... In memos [signed off by leadership], when we talk about things that are sensitive, like if we're announcing an employee's passing, then we'd add the contact details [of the EWP] there. Or if we talk about like maybe an incident of harassment or, you know, crime or something that happened like that, then you'd add the details there. (Participant 2)

With regards to setting out a wellness strategy, this is evidenced in how leadership responded to the effect of the pandemic on the wellbeing of their

employees and how it changed the nature of their jobs and broader work environment. In some organisations, participants shared how leadership played a role to procure employee wellness service providers to align to the new wellness initiatives within the organisation.

So, we changed this provider. We had a different provider. Before it was a smaller company. They were [called] PHS. You know, I can't remember what it stands for, but it was PHS. And I did not like them at all. Very few counselors that you could speak to and get. And also, the counsellors would leave. So, if you still spoke to someone and then they wouldn't follow up. (Participant 2)

In cases where leadership has not promoted employee services, participants shared how this has created a space where it is not safe to share mental health struggles or challenges, affirming the standpoint made by Little (2021) that employee participation in EWPs increases when leaders cultivate trust and foster a psychologically safe culture.

Leadership does not promote mental health. My manager is an older white male, and he doesn't express himself much. He won't talk about it his stress in detail. It's like they just continue with doing their job, whether they're feeling sad or not... Management hasn't created a safe space to share mental health struggles or challenges. (Participant 5)

5.4.3. Culture

Organisational leaders serve as the public representation of an organization and play an influential role in forming the culture of the organisation, including the extent to which that culture emphasises health promoting behaviours (Hoert et al., 2018). In a study that explored the role that senior leadership and managers have in shaping organisational culture, including the norms, values, and attitudes shared within a workplace, Passey, Brown, Hammerback, Harris, & Hannon (2018) reflect on the findings revealed that managers at all levels namely: senior, middle, and line, play a crucial role in fostering a culture that supports wellness initiatives.

In another Canadian study that the authors quoted, it was found that visible managerial support and active engagement with employees were key to building a health-focused organisational culture. Similarly, research involving construction managers in California showed that senior leaders felt responsible for establishing a culture of safety by prioritising employee health and safety, while middle and line managers contributed by modelling appropriate behaviours and maintaining strong engagement with staff (Passey et.al., 2018).

The research findings show that culture is driven by leadership and participants highlighted how leadership have shaped the culture of the organisation and how employees experience their daily jobs and the companies they work for. In addition to this, the culture as influenced by leadership of an organisation has an effect in the employees' perception and by extension, participation in EWPs. Participant 6 shares how middle and senior management in his department are intentionally creating a health-promoting work environment.

I mentioned that we have group discussions on Fridays and all of that. That is also part of management's interactions with us to check in. To find out how are you tackling things? Do you need time off or do you need to work from home more? All of that. Management is involved and they are more involved now since Covid because I felt like it made us take care of the personal stuff more and not only focus on work, you know. (Participant 6).

In cases where there was a non-trusting culture in their organisations, participants indicated that there were concerns regarding their confidentiality and privacy when using the wellness services. This is further supported by Dawad and Hoque (2016) who argued that confidentiality concerns and trustworthiness of the wellness services is based on the employees' perception relating to the culture to the organisation, and this often leads to non-utilisation or low utilisation of these services.

I mean even now I still find that we struggle with the staff engagement as much as people are engaging. But I still think that there's an element of trust in terms of the service, you know. You know we can, we can preach as much as we want about the fact that it's a confidential service and the likes, but you know, staff still

think that we are privy to the information that they are sharing and the likes. So we still struggle with that. Basically, the confidence in the programme. (Participant 4)

5.4.4. Organisation

According to Passey et al. (2018) one the key elements of a comprehensive wellness programme is the integration of the wellness programme into the organisations structure. Goetzel et al. (2014) emphasise that EWPs lacking proper infrastructure and organisational backing tend to be poorly implemented, leading to high costs and limited effectiveness. Thus, for an EWP to be effective, there needs to be structures in the organisation to support the wellness initiatives set out by the company.

Passey et al. (2018) notes that research in organisational management and occupational psychology highlights the significant role that management structures play in the successful implementation of worksite programmes. Middle managers are crucial in facilitating employee participation by allocating time, while line managers who interact most closely with staff act as influential role models by promoting involvement.

The research findings indicated that some participants worked in organisations where there was structural and organisational support through the provision of dedicated internal wellness specialist or business partner from the EWP service provider to support the organisation's wellness strategy. This visible support and resource allocation from the organisation directly impacted the implementation, management and measuring the wellness programme.

We've got a Wellness Specialist that belongs under HR. Yeah, she belongs to the HR department. But yeah, she facilitates that relationship between us and the wellness provider. (Participant 2)

5.4.5. Digital learning

Errichiello and Pianese (2021) suggest that in increasingly virtual work settings, effective technological support involves not only supplying the necessary digital

tools but also equipping employees with the skills and training needed to use them effectively in their roles. Management also plays a key role in supporting wellbeing through targeted training that enhances employees' ability to perform their roles. When workers are equipped with the skills they need, they often experience greater motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity (Rodriquez & Walters, 2017).

This introduces the need for digital learning which refers to the openness to use digital platforms to access and consume information. Schell (2012) explains that the widespread use of mobile devices, applications, and gamification has made it possible for employers to create tailored wellness experiences by delivering relevant content through digital platforms. For remote workers, who rely extensively on digital tools and software, proper training is essential. Employers should ensure access to the right technology such as computers, relevant software, internet, printers, phones, and other ICT resources. Providing these basics and the necessary training to use these tools is fundamental to supporting employee wellbeing in the virtual environment (Rodriquez & Walters, 2017).

Furthermore, Makhanya (2021) asserted that EWPs and overall employee wellbeing depends on how well employees can perform within their current work environments. This includes technical aspects such as the use of digital tools, job expectations, and the scope of their responsibilities. Therefore, it is essential for organisations to ensure that employees are equipped with the necessary digital skills and knowledge to effectively use the required technologies.

The research findings indicate that participants had to upskill to adjust to a changing work environment and with some organisations introducing digital technologies such as apps to access wellness services, participants indicated a requirement to learn how to use digital tools to utilise some of these services.

So, we were faced with a lot of demand in terms of having to upskill or basically bump up our staff, especially the support staff. (Participant 4)

We use a lot of apps now coming to our lives at work. There have been like eight apps I think since I've joined that have actually been implemented to take care of the well-being of employees. (Participant 6)

Participants also indicated how using digital tools have aided the awareness drives for the wellness services and how such technologies have addressed some of the concerns around access to information and channels to access these services.

And I'll also say the non-contact benefit of the app is that it speaks for you when you actually don't even know where to start. Right. Some people don't know wellness in a workplace. So, I think them taking an initiative to introduce such an app and you know, introduce such programmes, they've also made it easy for people to speak out. (Participant 6)

5.4.6. Employees

According to Hussain et al. (2018) employee involvement i.e. employees' contributions to decisions that impact both organisational performance and their personal wellbeing is essential when introducing new initiatives within an organisation. This concept rests on four key elements: power, access to information, skills and knowledge, and rewards. Cummings and Molloy (1977 in Hussain et al., 2018) further argue that involving employees in change enhances motivation and helps align innovations with the organisational context.

In earlier literature, Cowdrey & Ponniah (2021) noted that there is a growing demand for employers to offer modern and relevant wellness services through EWPs that align with evolving employee needs, shifting job structures, and updated industry standards. Cheon et al. (2020) emphasised the importance of designing EWPs around employees' specific needs, health goals, and readiness for behavioural change. Considering employee preferences, characteristics, and wellness objectives when creating these programmes enhances their relevance and effectiveness. For change to take hold beyond the status quo, leaders must actively support employee involvement.

In the research findings suggest that while participants were asked for feedback following the use and experience of the wellness services, most of them were not include or consulted during the development and design of these services. It is only one participant who was involved in a Human Resources capacity and was part of a function responsible to implement a new wellness service provider who contributed to the development and design of the EWP in their organisation.

Some participants who shared feedback after their experiences of the services via surveys indicated that there was implementation of this feedback. This feedback included the ease of use of the services, quality of the services and other digital aspects that EWPs should consider. The implementation of this feedback indicated a consideration of employee involvement in improving the design and delivery of these services. Other participants cited no change following their feedback.

5.5 Researcher positionality and reflections

The researcher reflected on her role as a research student throughout the research process. Following the conclusion of chapter one – three, I felt confident that I had a plausible research study that would contribute meaningfully to the broader body of work around employee wellness. The process of getting research participants to interview for my study utilised social media where I shared a post on the Instagram page called @wellnessintheworkplace_ seeking participants who met the sample criteria to participate in this study. Eight of the nine participants volunteered to be interviewed from this Instagram post. One participant was a personal referral.

As mentioned in an earlier section, one participant withdrew from the interview process citing time constraints due to work-related demands. The interviews were all conducted on a video conferencing platform called Google Meet and the interviews were recorded on a mobile device as the version of Google Meet on my desktop did not enable recording. As the participant interviews began, I made sure to build rapport with the interview participants to create a comfortable atmosphere and to allow them to share openly and freely.

From the first interview, I shared my appreciation and gratitude for the participants' willingness to volunteer and participate in this research study. As the interviews progressed, I was able to identify areas that required further exploration, key themes that emerged which were not included in the initial research questions but required follow-up questions and information that I thought would be significant to the research study but was in fact not as relevant. Throughout the interviews, I took reflective notes to accurately capture the participants' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. This process deepened my understanding and awareness of their individual experiences. It also strengthened the rapport built during the interviews. Preparing ahead of each session by reviewing these notes, identifying potential follow-up questions, and examining underlying cognitive assumptions played a crucial role in fostering meaningful dialogue and ensuring the interviews progressed with greater depth.

Most of the participants were quite open and reflective in their sharing, however Participant 5 was quite succinct in her answers and not as open to disclose further information regarding the organisation that she works for. An interesting point to note is that out of the eight participants who were interviewed for this study, only one of them was male. In their research about the *Employees' awareness, Attitudes and Utilisation of an Employee Wellness Programme in a financial services company in South Africa*, Dawad and Hoque (2016) noted that gender was one of the factors that was associated with the use of the wellness programme and found that "women were almost twice more likely to use the wellness programme services than men."

What was apparent in the research findings is that EWPs are digitally transforming to meet employee preferences, characteristics, and wellness objectives. These programmes are delivered through both traditional and digital channels for awareness, access and utility. The factors affecting participation have very little to do with the digitisation of the delivery of these services but rather with aspects of leadership and organisational culture that affect how employees perceive these services. Organisational culture aspects such as work-related demands and a lack of trust in the leadership and by extension the EWPs

were significant factors that contributed to the non-utilisation, low utilisation or discontinued use of the employee wellness services.

5.6 Summary

Organisations now play a crucial role in supporting employees through the professional and psychosocial challenges brought on by the change in their work environments post the pandemic. The research findings indicate that remote work has emerged as a major development, reshaping how employees perceive and engage with their work environments.

To stay competitive while protecting employee wellbeing, organisations have been compelled to implement forward-looking strategies that incorporate automation, digital transformation, the use of relevant technologies, and more adaptable organisational models (Mostafa, 2021). As workplaces undergo rapid transformation through digitalisation, there is a rising demand for new skill sets, digital literacy, and a flexible mindset. While upskilling is vital in this evolving landscape, Arila (2022) emphasizes that organisations must also provide meaningful support.

With the rise of remote work and increased reliance on technology, employee wellbeing has become both a key concern and a major challenge for contemporary organisations (Zicari & Gamble, 2023, as cited in Riaz, et al., 2024). This has led to the introduction of employer initiatives such as EWPs to support the psychosocial wellbeing of employees.

However, merely introducing and offering EWPs doesn't guarantee employee participation (Solnet et al., 2020). Thus, organisations have had to employ various strategies to ensure that they create awareness, and various channels of accessing these services to drive utility.

The study confirms that visible promotion by senior leaders and consistent internal marketing efforts enhance the programme’s credibility and employee buy-in, as noted by Bontrager and Marshall (2019). Mugari et al. (2014) emphasize that EWPs must have a comprehensive service offering and be easily

accessible across various delivery channels to ensure that it caters to different employee expectations and preferences. Accessibility influences participation and service utilisation.

Utilisation is also influenced by factors such as trust, confidentiality concerns, time constraints, and organisational culture. Employees often stop using services due to workload, lack of time during the workday, or concerns about privacy. Employee attitudes and perceptions mental health and help-seeking behaviours influence engagement. Incentives also play a role while some focus on convenience, others are geared toward promoting long-term wellness habits.

In terms of organisational readiness for these programmes, the integration of EWPs into organisational structures is essential for their success. Additionally, digital learning and upskilling are critical in virtual work environments and employers must provide both tools and training (Rodriquez & Walters, 2017). Participants shared that adapting to digital platforms used for both work and wellness access required upskilling. These digital tools aimed to improve access and the awareness of EWPs, although their effectiveness depended on employee readiness and training.

Active employee involvement in the design and delivery of the EWP enhances effectiveness (Hussain et al., 2018). However, the research found limited employee participation in the design of wellness services. While feedback was sometimes collected post-usage, only one participant was involved in programme development. Implementation of feedback varied; some noted service improvements, while others saw no changes, highlighting inconsistent employee engagement practices.

Ultimately, leadership behaviour significantly impacts employee engagement in wellness initiatives (Little, 2021). Leaders who actively promote wellness create safe, trusting environments that boost participation. The research showed mixed experiences: in some organisations, leadership proactively adjusted wellness strategies in response to Covid-19, while in others, lack of leadership involvement hindered psychological safety and openness about mental health challenges.

Culture, shaped by leadership, directly influences employee experiences and attitudes towards EWPs (Passey et al., 2018). Supportive cultures foster participation, especially when wellness is promoted by all managerial levels. Participants noted that cultures lacking trust discouraged EWP use due to concerns about confidentiality.

The following chapter presents the integrated findings of the study and offers a summary aligned with the research objectives. Chapter six further outlines practical recommendations for relevant stakeholders, acknowledges the study's limitations, and proposes areas for future research.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS, Limitations & RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the integrated findings of the study and offers a summary aligned with the research objectives. It highlights the key contributions made to the research problem, particularly within the context of existing literature on the changing nature of work environment, employee wellness, digital maturity in the context of EWP. In addition, the chapter outlines practical recommendations for relevant stakeholders, acknowledges the study's limitations, and proposes areas for future research.

6.2 Overview of the study and research objectives

This then introduces the possibility for the use of digital technologies in employee wellness initiatives to drive awareness, improve access and increase utility and engagement for employees. This paper aims to evaluate the digital maturity and employee wellness programmes (EWPs) and the influence thereof on employee participation based on the awareness, access and utility of such initiatives.

The objectives of this research were outlined as follows:

iv) To explore the relevance of EWPs in a changing job market and transforming workplace.
v) To understand employee expectations regarding awareness, access, utility and participation in employee wellness services within a transforming workplace.
vi) To understand what constitutes as 'digital maturity' in the context of EWPs and how the level of the digital maturity of existing EWPs impact employee participation

6.3 Conclusions for each proposition

The sections below discuss conclusions for each proposition.

6.3.1. Conclusions pertaining to Proposition 1: EWPs have become a strategic imperative for organisations as a result of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on employee wellbeing and transformation in the workplace

The research findings reveal that transformation of work environments following the Covid-19 pandemic led to the adoption of virtual work models, accelerating the use of digital tools and the digitisation of processes and systems. While remote work offered benefits such as greater flexibility and improved work-life balance, it also introduced challenges like increased workloads and extended working hours, which negatively impacted employee wellbeing.

The pressure to maintain high levels of performance and productivity during a period of global crisis revealed a disconnect between employees and leadership. This pressure, perceived as a lack of empathy and support from senior management, had adverse effects on employees' emotional and mental health, increasing the demand for wellness interventions.

Furthermore, the research findings suggest that employees encountered various physical, social, and technical obstacles as they adapted to virtual work settings. The growing reliance on digital communication required significant upskilling, which varied depending on employees' demographics and prior experience with digital tools. Additionally, adapting to a rapidly evolving work environment necessitated a greater focus on soft skills.

In response to the decline in employee wellbeing, many organisations have had to introduce or expand their EWPs. In workplaces where such programmes already existed, the pandemic led to intensified promotion and encouragement of their use. In organisations lacking active promotional efforts, EWPs were typically introduced during onboarding, and uptake was often driven by word-of-mouth and peer referrals. Ultimately, the visibility and effectiveness of EWPs largely

depended on the endorsement of leadership and the internal marketing strategies employed.

6.3.2. Conclusions pertaining to Proposition 2: Meeting employee expectations at different levels i.e. awareness, access and utility using relevant tools and technologies has the potential to result in increased employee participation in EWPs

The data revealed that accessibility to EWP services encompasses both the ease of booking and the channels through which services are delivered. Booking methods included telephone, email, app-based platforms, and in some cases, WhatsApp lines. Delivery formats varied, with a preference for telephonic or face-to-face counselling. Accessibility was also influenced by geographic proximity to service providers, particularly for in-person support.

The findings show that not all wellness initiatives aligned strictly with the traditional definition of EWPs. Services often included general and trauma counselling, financial and legal advice, health screenings, and fitness programmes. Some organisations extended these benefits to employees' immediate families, supporting a holistic approach to wellness that transcends the workplace. As such, more comprehensive wellness services and the way these services were delivered met the expectations and preferences of employees and influenced employee participation in EWPs.

The utility of EWPs refers to how often they are used and how accessible they are. Frequent usage was linked to the ease of availability, whereas service delays hindered participation. Organisational factors such as workload, time constraints, leadership support, and overall workplace culture either facilitated or restricted employee engagement.

This study reveals that a lack of trust within the culture of the organisation, particularly regarding confidentiality, was a barrier to participation for some employees. Heavy workloads and limited time during the workday further constrained engagement. Additionally, employees' previous experiences with

mental health support and their attitudes toward help-seeking behaviour influenced whether they accessed EWP services.

6.3.3. Conclusions pertaining to Proposition 3: Traditional EWPs must undergo a process of digitalisation as they have not achieved a level of digital maturity that meets employee expectations and supports employee participation in the programmes.

Leadership played a critical role in shaping wellness strategies and aligning them with broader organisational objectives. By promoting wellness initiatives and modelling positive behaviour, leaders fostered safe spaces for employees to share mental health concerns. The presence of wellness support structures such as wellness business partners embedded within the organisation further enabled awareness, access, and utilisation of services.

Organisational culture, heavily influenced by leadership, shaped employee perceptions of EWPs and their willingness to engage. Even within broadly unhealthy work environments, positive subcultures promoting health and wellness could emerge. The use of mobile platforms for EWP access also required digital literacy, underlining the importance of training. Finally, feedback mechanisms were established to assess employee experiences with wellness services. The effectiveness of EWPs was often linked to whether employees were involved in the design and development of wellness initiatives, underscoring the value of a participatory approach in creating impactful programmes.

The research findings reveal that based on employee perceptions, EWPs are undergoing digital transformation to align with employees' preferences, needs, and wellness goals. These programmes are offered through a combination of traditional and digital platforms to enhance awareness, accessibility, and usage. However, participation levels are influenced less by the mode of delivery and more by leadership and organisational culture. Factors such as high work demands and a lack of trust in leadership and by extension, in the EWPs themselves emerged as key barriers to the initial uptake, consistent use, or continued engagement with these wellness services.

6.4 Limitations

It is worth noting the limitations of this study:

- This study mainly investigated the effectiveness of EWPs from the perspective of the employee as it was evaluating employee participation in wellness programmes. The limitation that this presented is that the study could not corroborate its findings with employers or contracted EWP service providers to evaluate factors influencing employee participation for a more objective view.
- The level of digital maturity in EWPs was based on the employee experience and not considered based on the organisation's current state of digital maturity and its digital transformation objectives. This presented limitations as employees were not able to give a comprehensive view of the organisational support or organisational structures that enabled the digitalisation of certain elements of EWPs at various levels within the organisation.
- Although participants were informed about the confidentiality of the study, some participants who were still employed by the organisation where they accessed the EWP services were hesitant to share their open and honest feedback about the leadership and culture that they work for and were impartial in their sharing.

- The data relied heavily on participants' self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by memory, emotion, or personal bias. The participant responses may affect the trustworthiness and reliability of the study as it is based on the subjective experiences and perceptions of the participants.

- Furthermore, a limitation of thematic analysis as a method of data analysis is that it is subjective to the researcher's interpretation. The process of analysing qualitative data (coding, theming, interpreting) is inherently interpretive and can therefore present inconsistencies.

- The replicability of the study is limited due to the lack of data on how digital maturity would be operationalised. Since this study focuses on the employee perception of digital maturity and the influence thereof on employee participation, qualitative responses from the organisations and/or the EWP service providers that would provide insight on the operationalisation of digital maturity are beyond the scope of this research study.

6.5 Recommendations

6.5.1. Recommendations for organisations

If organisations are to employ EWPs to support the psychosocial needs of employees in a digitally transforming work environment, they should take into consideration other elements of organisational culture that may promote or hinder employee participation in EWPs. A strong case for building a culture of trust within organisations is to be made. Culture, shaped by leadership, directly influences employee experiences and attitudes towards EWPs. Supportive cultures foster participation, especially when wellness is promoted by all managerial levels.
This culture of trust needs to be the overarching element of any wellness initiative or strategy that is implemented by the organisation.

The findings suggest that an organisational culture that is non-trusting raises concerns about the confidentiality of the EWPs and this can result in non-utilisation, low utilisation and discontinued utilisation of the employee wellness services. Another organisational element to consider is the readiness of the organisation to implement an organisation-wide initiative such as an EWP. The findings suggested that some organisations dedicated resources such as wellness specialists or business partners from the EWP service provider to support the implementation and ongoing management of the EWPs.

The other aspect of organisational readiness refers to the digital readiness of the organisation. Although this was implied in the findings, the use of digital channels available and those provided by EWP service providers required a degree of

digital maturity or at least readiness within the organisation to be relevant and effective for employees.

6.5.2. Recommendations for leaders

Leadership behaviour has an impact on employee engagement in wellness initiatives. Leaders who actively show health-promoting behaviours create safe, trusting environments that boost employee participation in EWPs. Although the findings revealed mixed experiences i.e. in some organisations, leadership proactively adjusted wellness strategies in response to Covid-19, while in others, lack of leadership involvement hindered psychological safety and openness about mental health challenges.

Culture, shaped by leadership, directly influences employee experiences and attitudes towards EWPs. A point worth emphasizing is how Little (2021) identifies obstructing, accommodating or promoting behaviours that leaders display towards wellness initiatives. Obstructing leaders oppose wellness initiatives, creating barriers to engagement. Accommodating leaders take a neutral stance, often due to limited mental health knowledge or confidence. Promoting leaders actively support and model wellbeing behaviours, fostering trust and psychological safety. Participation is highest in environments where leaders demonstrate genuine concern and create a supportive culture.

A valuable exercise to overcome obstructing and accommodating leaders would be to get buy-in from such leaders from the onset of developing the wellness strategies or initiatives. This would ensure that their perspectives are considered and where there is resistance that the factors causing the resistance are identified so that they are addressed prior to the implementation of these initiatives. Lastly, leadership coaching is also a consideration to overcome obstructing and accommodating leaders as it would help uncover the resistance towards health-promoting behaviours and reframe their outlook on the importance of such initiatives not only at a personal but also at an organisational level.

6.5.3. Recommendations for EWP service providers

When designing and delivering employee wellness initiatives, EWP service providers need to consider the organisation, its leaders and its employees. At an organisational level, considerations around organisational culture, structure and support need to be prioritised as these have a direct impact on the implementation, management and effectiveness of the programme. EWP service providers need to understand different elements that will enable or limit the success of the programme and identify effective strategies to overcome these enabling or limiting factors. If left unaddressed, this will affect the efficacy of the programme and potentially raise questions about the return-on-investment on such an initiative in the long run. If the EWP service provider will be using digital channels to deliver the awareness, access and utility of the programme, then they need to consider the digital readiness of the organisation and if there are organisational structures in place that support the delivery of the programme in such a manner.

At a leadership level, EWP service providers need to socialise the wellness programme with the leaders in the organisation at different levels. They need to identify leaders who exhibit promoting behaviours, those that exhibit accommodating behaviours and those that exhibit obstructing behaviours. Once identified, the service providers need to devise strategies to convert accommodating leaders into promoting leaders and obstructing leaders into accommodating leaders at the very least. Promoting leaders can be seen as ‘champions’ of the programme and be instrumental in not only modelling health-promoting behaviours for employees but can do so for other leaders as well.

Lastly, at an employee level, EWP service providers need to consider employee needs, preferences and expectations of EWPs and include these in the design of the programme. EWP service providers can gather employee insights through interviews, surveys or focus groups to ensure employee involvement and buy-in from the onset. Additionally, employees are likely to express their considerations around the digitisation of certain elements of the programme during the design stage and this kind of employee involvement will influence buy-in and ultimately employee participation in wellness services.

6.6 Suggestions for further research

The study has considered various literature on the digital maturity and employee wellness programmes (EWPs) and the influence thereof on employee participation based on the awareness, access and utility of such initiatives. Based on the findings, it is evident that wellness services should be a strategic imperative for organisations and employers need to prioritise the successful implementation of such services. The findings indicate that EWPs are achieving a degree of digital maturity by providing digital channels to create awareness and access of such services for employees within an organisation. In the research study, participants indicated satisfaction with the current digital channels provided by their respective EWP service providers while indicating a preference for in-person or human interaction for services such as counselling services. As such, future research could also investigate how employees would be able to navigate hybrid wellness delivery models as EWPs integrate the digital convenience with human-centred touchpoints.

As such, it would be useful for researchers in employee wellness to evaluate the effective of the use of specific emerging technologies such as AI (e.g. using chatbots for employee wellness initiatives such as counselling services) to assess their relevance within a context where there is a digital divide between white collar and blue-collar employees. Given the feedback about the role of leadership and organisational culture on the adoption of EWPs, it would be worth examining the correlation of other variables such as management styles, leadership support and sub-cultures in organisations affect employee perceptions/attitudes and thereby their participation in employee wellness services. Additionally, studies around the ethical considerations of the use of emerging technologies for employee wellness services that require the disclosure of sensitive personal, health and behavioural data.

6.7 Summary

This study explored how the changing nature of work, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and digital transformation, has reshaped employee expectations

about workplace wellness and led to the need for digitisation of key elements of Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs). Recognising the workplace as a key setting for promoting health and wellbeing, the study highlights how evolving work environments demand more comprehensive technical, psychological, and social support, particularly among younger employees. Using a qualitative approach through a narrative inquiry, the research gathered insights from full-time employees in mid-to-large organisations who have had exposure to EWPs post-Covid.

Findings reveal that while most organisations have adopted digital tools to promote awareness and access of EWPs, the effectiveness and digital maturity of these programmes vary. Participation in EWPs is less influenced by their design and more by employee perceptions and attitudes, work-related demands, and concerns around confidentiality and trust of the EWPs. Organisational culture and leadership play a critical role in shaping employee engagement where visible promotion and modelling from leaders enhance credibility and uptake, whilst a non-trusting organisational culture can hinder use.

Although employees appreciate digital access, many also value traditional delivery methods, pointing to the need for hybrid approaches. The study concludes that successful EWPs require a combination of relevant technologies, strong leadership support, inclusive design processes, and a culture that prioritises psychological safety and employee wellbeing.

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APPENDIX A - Consistency Matrix

Title: Digital maturity and employee wellness programmes and the influence thereof on employee participation							
Main objective: To explore the extent that the digital maturity of EWPs affects employee participation by considering employee perceptions and experiences of the awareness, access, and utility of these services.							
Sub-objective	**Literature Review**	**Propositions**	**Research Questions**	**Constructs**	**Sources of data**	**Type of data**	**Analysis**
To explore the relevance of EWPs in a changing job market and transforming workplace.	Rubery et al. (2022); Bhaidkhar (2022); Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023); Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy (2020); Makhanya (2021)	EWPs have become strategic imperative for organisations to help provide the wellness support for employees required to navigate a changing landscape.	To what extent are employee wellness services still relevant in a post-Covid work environment?	Employee wellness Workplace wellness Digital transformation	Interviews	Qualitative	Thematic analysis
To understand employee expectations regarding awareness, access, and utility in employee wellness services within a transforming workplace.	Solnet et al. (2020); Bontrager and Marshall (2019); Mugari et al. (2014); Cowdrey and Ponniah (2020); Errichiello and Pianese (2021); Schell (2012).	Meeting employee expectations at different levels i.e. awareness, access and utility using relevant tools and technologies will result in increased employee participation in EWPs.	How do employees' expectations affect their perception of the awareness, access and utility of EWP services in their workplace?	Intrinsic and extrinsic work values Workplace wellness Digital transformation	Interviews	Qualitative	Thematic analysis
To understand what constitutes as 'digital maturity' in the context of EWPs and how the level of the digital maturity of existing EWPs impact employee participation.	Armstrong and Lee (2022); Solnet et al. (2020); Hall et al. (2017); Smit et al. (2023); Pataki-Bitto and Kapusy (2021); Cowdrey and Ponniah (2020).	Traditional EWPs must undergo a process of digitalisation as they have not achieved a level of digital maturity that meets employee expectations and supports employee participation in the programmes.	To what extent does the level of digital maturity of EWPs (or lack thereof) affect employee participation?	Digital transformation Digital maturity Employee participation	Interview	Qualitative	Thematic analysis

APPENDIX B – Research Instrument

1. Setting the scene

- *Provide overview of the research:* The researcher will share a brief introduction of themselves and explain to the participant what the purpose and objective of the research is.
- *Explain the purpose of the interview:* The researcher will briefly explain that the interview is a research instrument and is used as a tool to collect the required data for this study.
- *Describe outcome of the research:* The researcher will briefly describe how the data from this interview will be used as part of the research findings and report for this study.

2. Consent form

- *Explaining the consent form:* The researcher will explain the purpose of the consent form and require the participant to sign the form.
- The researcher will request to record the interview and require the participant's consent to proceed.

3. Interview questions

Section A: Demographics

- Tell me about yourself (Name, surname, and age)
- How many years have you been formally employed?
- What is the size of the organisation that you work for?

Section B: Change in work environment.

- How has the nature of your work changed post-Covid?
- What is the work model in your place of work? Hybrid/Remote/On-site
- How have the changes in your work affected you professionally and personally?
- Has your organisation provided adequate support for you to deal with the changes in your work professionally and personally? If so, how?

Section C: Experience with EWP

- Have you ever used an employee wellness service before? If so, when?
- How did you find out about the Employee Wellness Programme at your current or previous organisation? (Awareness)
- How did you access these services? Were there other channels to access the services? (Access)
- What services did the EWP offer? And were these relevant to your needs? (Utility)
- What is your perception of EWPs after using the services? Did it meet your needs, preferences, and expectations?

Section D: Perception of digital maturity

- Are there digital channels available to access these wellness services? If so, please name the channels. (Technology)
- Does your leadership, senior management or line manager share information about the wellness services available at your place of work? If so, when, where and how do they share this information? (Leadership)
- Does your organisation provide support to participate in wellness programmes? If so, how? (Organisation)
- Is there a culture of wellness and health-promotion in your organisation? If so, please share examples? (Culture)
- Have you ever been asked for your input, feedback, or suggestions for the employee wellness service in your place of work? (Employees)
- What other digital means would you like to see in the employee wellness service in your workplace? (Digital learning)

Section E: Final remarks

- Any additional comments or inputs regarding the interview, topic or your experience with employee wellness services?

APPENDIX C – Example of Consent Form for Interview Participant

Dear Interview Participant

My name is Mbali Mzinyane, and I am a currently a student at Wits Business School, studying a Master of Management in the field of Digital Business. My research topic explores the extent that the digital maturity of Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs) affects employee participation by considering employee perceptions and experiences of the awareness, access, and utility of these services.

I would like to invite you to take part in an interview. The purpose of the interview is to obtain your feedback to understand how your individual expectations as an employee regarding awareness, access, and utility in employee wellness services within a transforming workplace affects your participation in such initiatives. The interview will also seek to understand your perception of the digital maturity of the employee wellness services in your workplace and if this has affected your participation.

As part of the research process, I hereby request to record the interview to refer to the responses during the data analysis stage of the research process. The recordings will only be used for the purposes of data collection and analysis and will not be shared with any other parties. I would like your permission to record the interviews on the video conferencing platform that we will be using or with a digital device if the platform does not permit.

Please note that you will not receive payment or benefits from participating in this research, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for non-participation. Should you so wish, you can withdraw your participation from the interviews at any time. Should you experience distress or discomfort at any stage, you are welcome to remove yourself from the process.

I am available to answer any questions you may have regarding the research, and you are welcome to contact me via the details provided below. This research will be documented in the form of a written report which will be submitted to the Wits Graduate

School of Business. Should you wish to receive a summary of the report, I will make one available to you.

Concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study can be directed to the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical).

Yours sincerely,

Student: Mbali Mzinyane

Email: mbali.mzinyane@gmail.com

Supervisor: Dr. Jenika Gobind

Email: jenika.gobind@wits.ac.za

Declaration and signature of Research Participant

The information contained in this document was explained to me by Mbali Mzinyane. I was given the opportunity to ask questions of clarification, and they were answered to my satisfaction. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded. I hereby consent to participate in this research voluntarily, and I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of participant:

Signature:

Date:

APPENDIX D – Example of Participation Information Sheet

Dear Sir / Madam

My name is Mbali Mzinyane. I am a Master of Management student in the field of Digital Business at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr. Jenika Gobind, and I am conducting a research study about the digital maturity of Employee Wellness Programmes (EWPs) and the influence thereof on employee participation. My research study aims to investigate if the digitalisation of EWPs will affect employee awareness, access, and utility in employee wellness initiatives.

I am inviting you to take part in an interview for the purposes of the study. Should you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about one hour. An interview will be scheduled at a time of your convenience and a meeting invite on the preferred virtual platform, in-person location or telephonically will be shared via email. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and saved on an online database such as a cloud storage platform and will later be transcribed for analysis and interpretation. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

During the research activity, I will need to ask for some personal information about you, including your name, age, and the organisation you work for. The interview will be confidential and anonymous. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. Your individual responses will not be identifiable and disclosed to other participants during the data collection process or in the final report.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part. You can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you would normally have if you decided not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything. You will not be paid for being in this research study.

This research study is low risk therefore the risks are no more than what happens in everyday life or possibly some questions asked may make you feel sad or upset. If

this happens, I will stop the interview and continue another time. If you need some support or counselling services following the interview, you will be recommended to a counsellor to

This research study will be written up as a research report. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Mbali Mzinyane

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