

# An Exploration of How Working Virtually Impacts the Psychological Contracts of Globally Dispersed Teams, and How Talent-Management Strategies Can Be Optimised Accordingly

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of remote work have accelerated the need for businesses to reassess their talent management strategies, particularly for globally dispersed teams. This study explores the impact of virtual work on psychological contracts within FinAfrica (anonymised), a pan-African fintech company, and proposes strategies to mitigate perceived breaches. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study involved semi-structured interviews with both internal and external respondents. Findings reveal that trust, onboarding, and alignment of organizational values are critical to maintaining positive psychological contracts in virtual teams. This paper offers recommendations to enhance talent management practices in virtual contexts, along with insights for future research.

**Keywords:** talent management, psychological contract, virtual teams

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 Background*

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the COVID-19 (Ghebreyesus, 2020) pandemic have fundamentally reshaped the global workplace, prompting organizations to re-evaluate their talent management strategies (Malik & Srikanth, 2020). The pandemic has led to widespread adoption of remote and virtual work models, bringing to the forefront the

importance of psychological contracts in employee engagement and retention (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Psychological contracts, defined as "an individual's beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between the individual and their organization" (Rousseau, 1995), play a critical role in these evolving work environments.

### *1.2 Research Context:*

FinAfrica, a global fintech firm operating across multiple jurisdictions, faces unique challenges in managing a dispersed workforce. The firm has grown rapidly from less than 100 employees to more than 700 employees over the past five years. This has resulted in commensurate increase in virtual and location-agnostic roles from less than 20 to over 50 in the same time span. The organization's strategic aspiration is to operate in all 54 African countries, providing payment and fund remittance gateways through a proprietary B-2-B mobile technology platform. Asynchronous work and virtual team settings have become standard as a result of this growth, necessitating a reevaluation of traditional talent management practices.

### *1.3 Research Objectives*

This research aimed to:

1. Explore the dynamics of psychological contracts within FinAfrica's virtual and dispersed context.
2. Develop talent management strategies that reinforce positive psychological contracting and address the challenges posed by asynchronous work settings.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Overview of Psychological Contracts*

Psychological contracts, as originally conceptualized by Argyris (1960) and further developed by Levinson et al. (1962), refer to the unwritten, informal agreements between employers and employees that shape their mutual expectations. Schein (1980) highlighted that these contracts are dynamic, existing at both individual and organizational levels, and are influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they arise. Rousseau (1995) later refined this definition, emphasizing that psychological contracts are "individual's beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between the individual and their organization." This definition underscores the subjective and individualized nature of psychological contracts, which are often based on perceived promises and obligations that go beyond formal employment agreements.

Trust and fairness are critical elements of psychological contracts. Guest and Conway (1998) identified trust as a fundamental pillar, asserting that it underpins both relational and transactional obligations within the psychological contract framework. Atkinson and Cuthbert (2006) further argued that the perception of fairness significantly affects employee attitudes and organizational commitment, while Middlemiss (2011) noted that trust violations often result in negative organizational outcomes. Recent research by Rousseau et al. (2018) introduced a phase model of psychological contract processes, highlighting how

psychological contracts evolve over time, particularly in response to significant disruptive events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

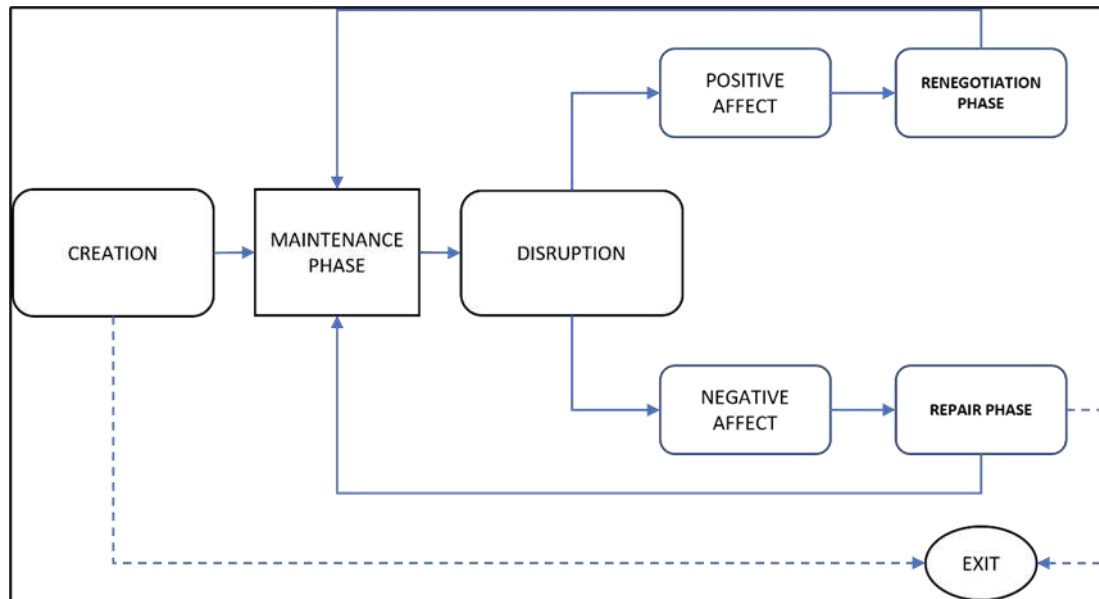


Figure: Psychological contract phase model (adapted from Rosseau et al., 2018)

## 2.2 Impact of Virtual Teams on Psychological Contracts

Virtual teams have been defined by various scholars, including Alavi and Yoo (1997) and DeSanctis and Poole (1997), as "groups of geographically, organizationally, and/or time-dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish one or more organizational tasks." This definition encapsulates the flexibility and cross-boundary nature of virtual teams, which leverage technology to collaborate beyond traditional organizational constraints. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) further expanded on this, noting that trust is particularly challenging to establish in virtual environments due to the lack of physical presence and non-verbal cues.

Virtual teams introduce unique challenges in maintaining psychological contracts, particularly around trust, communication, and the management of expectations (Ebrahim, Ahmed, & Taha, 2009). Studies have shown that the lack of face-to-face interaction can exacerbate feelings of isolation and misunderstanding, potentially leading to perceptions of psychological contract breach (Paul & McDaniel, 2004). Powell, Piccoli, and Ives (2004) emphasized the need for intentional trust-building practices in virtual teams, such as regular check-ins, transparent communication, and structured feedback mechanisms. More recent studies by Li, Ma et al (2022), particularly in the context of the post COVID-19 pandemic era also explore the impact of 'network embeddedness' on a new generation of employees and its impact on the psychological contract. Their research unearths a positive predictive effect on the psychological contract and innovation when the relationship embeddedness is positive within a team setting, even though it may be a virtual team.

Moreover, the literature identifies asynchronous work as ‘work conducted by team members across different time zones or schedules’ as a significant factor influencing psychological contracts in virtual teams. Glaveski (2021) argues that asynchronous work requires new norms and communication strategies to ensure cohesion and trust among team members. Research by Cummings (2011) and Kayworth and Leidner (2000) suggested that virtual team leaders must develop specific competencies, such as cultural intelligence and digital communication skills, to effectively manage asynchronous teams.

### *2.3 Talent Management in Virtual Contexts*

Talent management (TM) is crucial in virtual environments, where traditional HR practices may not apply. Lewis and Heckman (2006) defined TM as encompassing all HRM activities focused on attracting, developing, and retaining talent. In virtual settings, TM strategies must be adapted to address the unique challenges posed by dispersed teams. This includes onboarding processes, performance management, leadership development, and the use of technology to facilitate communication and collaboration.

Hertel et al. (2004) introduced a virtual team lifecycle model, suggesting that TM strategies should evolve through different stages: preparation, launch, performance management, development, and disbandment. Each stage requires specific interventions to support team cohesion and performance. For instance, in the "launch" phase, effective onboarding and integration practices are critical to setting expectations and building trust. Research by Ebrahim et al. (2009) highlighted three core themes—people, process, and technology—that underpin effective virtual team management. Effective TM in virtual contexts involves leveraging these themes to create an environment that supports both individual and team performance.

Recent studies have also explored the role of technology in TM. For instance, Chadee and Raman (2012) emphasized the need for "deliberate and organized efforts by firms to optimally select, develop, deploy, and retain competent and committed knowledge employees." In virtual contexts, technology plays a dual role: as an enabler of efficient communication and collaboration and as a potential barrier if not implemented effectively (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). The use of advanced digital tools, such as collaboration platforms, virtual reality, and AI-driven analytics, can enhance talent management practices by providing real-time feedback, supporting asynchronous communication, and fostering a sense of community among dispersed team members (Onnis, 2016).

### *2.4 Organizational Culture and Psychological Contracts in Virtual Teams*

An emerging area of research focuses on the role of organizational culture in maintaining psychological contracts within virtual teams. Organizational culture, defined by Schein (1996) as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration," is crucial in virtual settings where traditional social cues and interactions are limited. Several scholars argue that a strong organizational culture can mitigate the risks associated with psychological contract breaches by reinforcing shared values and norms that guide employee behaviour (Cohen, 2013; Aggarwal, 2014).

Naidoo (2019) introduced the concept of the "delivery of the deal," highlighting the importance of aligning organizational practices with employee expectations to maintain positive psychological contracts. In virtual teams, this alignment becomes even more critical due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and potential miscommunication. Findings from studies by Zakaria et al. (2004) and Paul and McDaniel (2004) indicate that organizational values and culture play a significant role in shaping employees' perceptions of fairness, trust, and psychological safety in virtual settings.

### *2.5 Gaps and Opportunities for Further Research*

While substantial research has been conducted on psychological contracts, virtual teams, and talent management, there are still gaps that warrant further exploration. For example, the long-term effects of asynchronous virtual work on psychological contracts and team dynamics remain underexplored. While Naganjani and Vanka completed a comprehensive systematic review of literature concerning working from home in 2023, no other literature could be found to indicate any longitudinal research is being conducted to understand these effects over the long term. Additionally, there is limited research on the psychological impacts of transitioning traditional teams to virtual formats and the specific leadership competencies required to manage these transitions effectively.

Another area ripe for exploration is the role of emerging technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, in enhancing communication and trust-building in virtual teams. As virtual work becomes more prevalent, understanding how these technologies can be leveraged to support psychological contracts and talent management will be crucial.

From a talent management perspective, the pre-employment assessment of managerial capabilities to manage virtual teams for sustained performance is another area where scant research has been concluded. This is especially relevant to an emerging generation of people managers who are expected to operate in this new reality of hybrid work. A question remains as to whether the traditional managerial skillset needs review in a virtual setting and whether this can be accurately assessed.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### *3.1 Research Philosophy*

A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore the nuanced experiences of employees regarding psychological contracts in a virtual work setting. Qualitative research is "the systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings" (Teherani et al., 2015). This approach allowed for an interpretivist and constructivist analysis, where the subjective experiences of respondents could be thoroughly examined.

### *3.2 Research Type and Strategy*

An inductive, phenomenological approach was chosen, focusing on eliciting narratives through semi-structured interviews with respondents. This method enabled the collection of rich, detailed data reflecting individual experiences and perceptions of virtual work and psychological contracts within FinAfrica.

### *3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Tools*

A purposeful sampling approach was employed, selecting 12 participants from various organizational levels and functions. The SPIDER tool (Cooke et al., 2012) was used to structure the data collection process, ensuring a systematic approach to gathering evidence. Interview data were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed using an adapted grounded theory approach (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

### *3.4 Evaluation Criteria and Ethical Considerations*

The research adhered to the quality objectives of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bell et al., 2019). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Reading, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

## **4. Discussion**

### *4.1 Psychological Contract (PC)*

The fieldwork findings confirm that the psychological contract (PC) is deeply personal, shaped by individual experiences and perceptions, as outlined by Rousseau (1995). The study found that trust plays a pivotal role in the maintenance of PCs, with many respondents citing trust as a critical factor in determining their sense of psychological safety and engagement within the organization. This finding aligns with previous literature, which emphasizes trust as fundamental to the perceived fairness and fulfilment of PCs (Guest & Conway, 1998; Middlemiss, 2011).

A noteworthy insight from the fieldwork is the importance of clearly defining reciprocal expectations at the onset of employment. Several respondents expressed that ambiguity around mutual expectations can lead to perceived breaches of the PC, particularly in a virtual work environment where informal cues are minimized. This supports the view of Naidoo (2019) regarding the "delivery of the deal," which suggests that the explicit communication of expectations is vital for maintaining positive psychological contracts.

Interestingly, the fieldwork also revealed that organizational values play a significant role in shaping the PC. Approximately one-third of the respondents noted that the demonstration of positive organizational values contributed to their perception of a positive PC. This insight is somewhat underexplored in the existing literature, suggesting a potential gap. While Cohen (2013) and Aggarwal (2014) mention the role of perceived fairness and organizational behaviour in influencing employee engagement, the specific impact of organizational values on the PC in virtual settings remains a relatively novel finding. This points to an opportunity for further research to understand how values-based leadership and organizational culture can strengthen PCs, especially in dispersed teams.

### *4.2 Virtual Teams*

The findings from the fieldwork reinforce the complexities involved in managing virtual teams. The research confirms that, while virtual teams provide flexibility and access to a broader talent pool, they also present unique challenges that can negatively impact



psychological contracts. Respondents frequently highlighted the difficulties in building trust and fostering effective communication in virtual settings, where the absence of face-to-face interaction limits opportunities for informal relationship-building and spontaneous feedback.

The literature similarly identifies trust as a critical challenge in virtual teams, particularly when non-verbal cues are missing (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Paul & McDaniel, 2004). Respondents noted that asynchronous communication, due to differences in time zones, exacerbates these challenges by creating delays and reducing the immediacy of feedback, which is consistent with findings from Cummings (2011) and Glaveski (2021).

However, the fieldwork also uncovered some nuances not fully addressed in the existing literature. While many studies focus on the structural aspects of managing virtual teams (Ebrahim et al., 2009), few explore the emotional and psychological impacts of asynchronous work on team members. Several respondents reported feelings of frustration and disconnection due to the lack of synchronous interaction, which they felt diminished their ability to build strong interpersonal relationships with colleagues. This insight highlights an area where further research could be valuable in understanding the psychological impacts of asynchronous work, particularly in terms of social isolation and its effects on team cohesion and individual well-being.

Another key finding is the role of leadership competencies in virtual teams. The study found that respondents viewed leadership skills such as empathy, cultural intelligence, and adaptability as essential for managing virtual teams effectively. While the literature recognizes the importance of leadership in virtual settings (Kayworth & Leidner, 2000), the fieldwork provides additional evidence that these competencies are critical for fostering trust, maintaining engagement, and navigating the complexities of asynchronous communication. Respondents emphasized that leaders who can create an inclusive environment, where all team members feel valued and heard, are more successful in maintaining positive psychological contracts. This finding suggests a need for targeted leadership development programs that focus on building these specific competencies.

#### *4.3 Talent Management*

The findings indicate that talent management strategies must be tailored to the unique demands of virtual work environments. Respondents consistently highlighted the importance of a thorough onboarding process to help new employees acclimatize to the organizational culture and expectations. This aligns with Hertel et al.'s (2004) virtual team lifecycle model, which underscores the importance of onboarding in the "launch" phase to set clear expectations and foster a sense of belonging.

The fieldwork further suggests that performance management is a crucial component of talent management in virtual settings. Respondents appreciated the use of transparent and objective performance metrics, such as OKRs (Objectives and Key Results), which provided clarity on individual and team expectations. This finding is consistent with literature suggesting that performance management systems should be designed to support remote and virtual teams by ensuring that goals and expectations are clearly communicated (Hertel et al., 2004; Cascio &

Shurygailo, 2003).

Another significant insight from the fieldwork is the emphasis on knowledge management and continuous learning. Respondents mentioned the need for effective knowledge management systems that facilitate easy access to information and resources. This finding supports the views of Ebrahim et al. (2009), who argue that knowledge sharing, and management are critical to virtual team success. However, the fieldwork also suggests that organizations should leverage technology, such as Learning Management Systems (LMS), to create personalized development journeys that cater to the unique needs of virtual team members. This approach not only enhances skill development but also contributes to a more positive psychological contract by demonstrating the organization's commitment to employee growth.

#### *4.4 Organizational Culture and Psychological Contracts in Virtual Teams*

The fieldwork highlighted the critical role of organizational culture in maintaining psychological contracts in virtual environments. Several respondents pointed out that a strong organizational culture, underpinned by shared values and norms, provides a foundation for trust and psychological safety, even in the absence of physical proximity. This finding is consistent with Schein's (1996) assertion that organizational culture plays a crucial role in shaping employee behaviour and engagement.

However, the fieldwork goes further by suggesting that organizational culture is particularly important in virtual settings, where traditional social interactions are limited. Respondents noted that visible demonstrations of organizational values, such as transparency, fairness, and inclusivity, positively influenced their perceptions of the psychological contract. This insight suggests that organizations should proactively communicate and reinforce their cultural values through virtual channels, such as team meetings, internal communications, and digital platforms. It also points to the potential for future research to explore how organizational culture can be effectively fostered and maintained in virtual teams.

#### *4.5 Summary*

The discussion above demonstrates that while many of the fieldwork findings align with existing literature, there are also novel insights that contribute to the understanding of psychological contracts, virtual teams, and talent management. The study reveals that trust, clarity of expectations, leadership competencies, and organizational culture are key factors in maintaining positive psychological contracts in virtual settings. It also highlights several areas for further research, such as the psychological impacts of asynchronous work and the role of organizational values in shaping psychological contracts in dispersed teams.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### *5.1 Key Findings and Implications*

The study highlights several key findings that have important implications for both research and practice:



1. Psychological contracts are deeply personal and heavily influenced by trust and the clear communication of expectations.
2. Virtual team management is complex, with unique challenges related to trust, asynchronous work, and the need for specific leadership competencies.
3. Effective talent management in virtual contexts requires robust onboarding, performance management, and continuous learning strategies.
4. Organizational culture plays a critical role in maintaining positive psychological contracts in virtual settings.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Review and Align Processes and Policies:** FinAfrica should assess its current processes and policies to ensure they are fit for virtual teams, with a focus on trust-building, clear communication, and supporting asynchronous work.
2. **Enhance Onboarding and Knowledge Management:** Implement a more structured onboarding process and leverage technology to facilitate continuous learning and knowledge sharing.
3. **Develop Leadership Competencies:** Invest in leadership development programs that build competencies specific to managing virtual teams, such as empathy, cultural intelligence, and adaptability.
4. **Foster Organizational Culture:** Strengthen the communication and demonstration of organizational values to enhance psychological contracts and employee engagement.

### 5.3 Limitations and Future Research

The study's limitations include its qualitative nature, which may limit generalizability, and the relatively short timeframe for data collection. Future research could explore the long-term effects of asynchronous work on psychological contracts, the impact of emerging and assistive technologies on virtual teams, assessment of managerial capability in virtual settings and the role of organizational culture in virtual settings.

### 5.4 Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of psychological contracts, virtual team management, and talent strategies in a rapidly changing work environment. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on optimizing talent management in globally dispersed teams and highlight opportunities for future research to address the challenges and opportunities posed by virtual work.

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