

# GiLE Journal of Skills Development

---

## “Mind the Leadership Gap!” A Call to Action for the Future Research Agenda

**Liam Murphy**

University of Chester, UK

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2348-4445>

**Helen Turnbull**

University of Chester, UK

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0369-2036>

### Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has acted as a catalyst for organisational change, disrupting historic ways of working, and spearheading organisations towards the next evolution of their working environments. In the aftermath of the largest concurrent work from home experiment in the world, organisations are coming to grips with the new policies and practices they need to implement to remain competitive. But there is one crucial stakeholder who continues to be left out in academic research, leaders. New questions now arise as to how we should remodel leadership in an increasingly remote world. What skills do leaders need to develop and how, in order to maintain employee wellbeing and manage the intergenerational divide? This paper presents a short synthesis of the challenges faced by leaders today specifically around remote team management but also in the context of a multigenerational workforce, alongside a summary of the research gaps we face in post-COVID literature. This paper concludes with the production of a future research agenda for scholars to close this gap, and to help organisations in building their leadership capability in the ‘new normal’.

**Keywords:** leadership skills, millennial, remote teams, wellbeing, emotional intelligence

### 1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has acted as a catalyst for organisational change, disrupting historic ways of working, and spearheading organisations towards the next evolution of their working environments in the post-industrial era (Gherson & Gratton, 2022). Pre-pandemic working environments saw between 3-5% of US and European employees working from home for some part of the week (Afota et al., 2022; Ipsen et al., 2022). However, in the last three years, we have witnessed the creation of more opportunities than ever before for large-scale remote, hybrid, and flexible working practices (Desilver, 2020). The prolonged exposure

---

to this transformative way of working has resulted in 75% of employees now expecting their organisations to continue some element of home working in the future (Parry et al., 2021). As we reach three years since the start of the global pandemic, the chaos has started to settle and organisations have had time to consider and implement their new working policies. However, scholars have recently concluded that there is still much to learn with respect to upskilling leaders in a post-COVID world (Franzen-Waschke, 2022). This presents us with exciting new research opportunities to analyse the emerging questions which leaders will need to respond to for the modern employee. We seek to contribute to this debate by devising recommendations on specific research focuses which will further direct the discussion and produce practical recommendations for organisations. Questions we need to answer could relate to how to remodel leadership in an increasingly remote world. How to maintain employee wellbeing and resilience? What different leadership approaches do we need to consider from an intergenerational perspective?

## **2. Leading in a Post-Covid World**

### **2.1. The Remote Working Dynamic**

As we enter the ‘new normal’ of mass remote and hybrid working, it has been proposed that existing organisational leadership models and theories are becoming outdated (Gherson & Gratton, 2022; Tourish, 2019). Scholars argue that with many organisations now flattening their hierarchies, and increasing digitisation and automation, there is the need to change leadership power, skills and structure (Gherson & Gratton, 2022; Murphy, 2022). This is increasingly relevant, given that many leaders of previously physically, co-located teams, have now transitioned into ‘e-leaders’ (Chamakiotis et al., 2021), and the acceleration of remote management has created new experiences that they may not be trained for (Vargas, 2020; Murphy, 2022). It is important to consider that leaders are now operating in an environment whereby employees are leaving a 3-year period of intense and long-lasting stress, the likes of which we have not seen before. Alongside trying to perform in their jobs and adapt to remote-working, employees have also been worried about finances, health, family, and general well-being (Brown, 2021). While these new remote-working practices can positively influence productivity, creativity, and satisfaction (Abrams, 2019; Kirchner et al., 2021), remote practices are also known to create loneliness and isolation (Hertel et al., 2005; Stich, 2020), alongside impacting organisational communication, knowledge sharing, and socialisation (Choudhury, 2020). Furthermore, recent research by Simon et al., (2023) exposes that only 5% of investigated companies feel they have the capabilities needed to lead in the remote world, with only 15% of team leaders feeling very comfortable leading remote teams. It is such dynamics that have led scholars to suggest organisational growth needs to be aided by developing training to improve people management and leadership skills in this new working environment (Murphy, 2022; Parry et al., 2021). Scholars such as Pierog (2023) have taken these ideas further to suggest that modern leaders need to adopt the CRAFT (creativity, resilience, agility, focus and trust) qualities first introduced by Kalamar (2022) in the post-COVID world. Pierog (2023) explains CRAFT qualities as a plethora of competencies, intelligences and traits which demonstrate the complex ecosystem of organisations today, and the challenge of being an effective leader in those organisations in the post-COVID world.

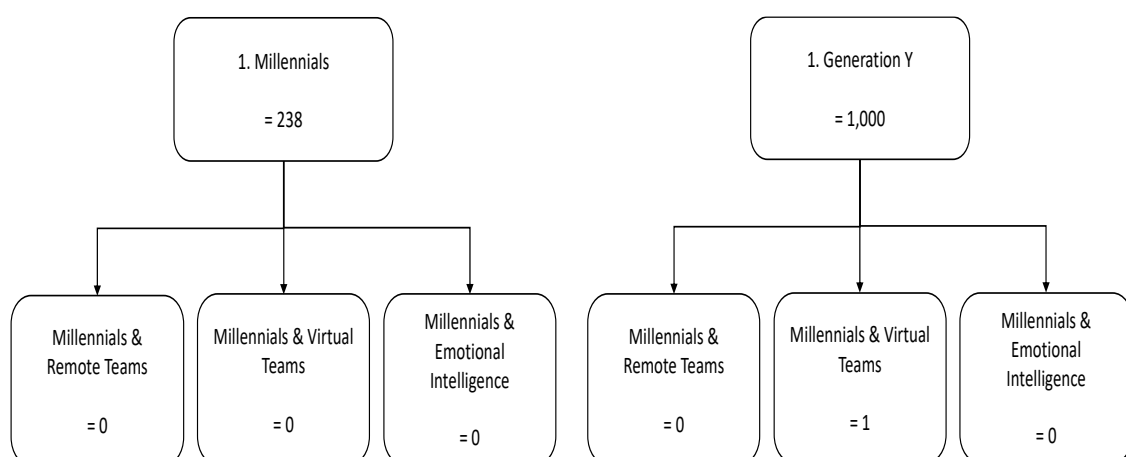
## 2.2. The Changing Generational Demographics

Another aspect to consider for post-COVID leaders is the changing generational demographics with the rise of millennials to become the largest group within the workforce and Generation Y (Gen Y) entering the world of work (Pasko et al., 2020). Just as leaders have to adapt to and learn a new skill of remote management, they jointly need to consider a generation of employees that prioritises relational aspects, vs. the transactional aspects of the generations before (De Smet et al., 2021). Research suggests that millennials, for example, differ from previous generations in that they seek shared, participative, and democratic leadership (Camp et al., 2021), with an expectation of those leaders being available in a more communal and personal setting (Pasko et al., 2020). Millennials also place high value on teamwork and collaboration (Camp et al., 2021) and prefer open, informal communication with their leaders (Pasko et al., 2020).

Scholars suggest that to manage these new generations, leaders require high emotional intelligence (Pasko et al., 2020). However, Parry et al., (2020) found remote leadership to be exposing the reality that many modern-day leaders are lacking these skillsets. While we have a basic understanding of some of the traits the new generations expect from leadership, we have a less sound understanding of the new skill sets needed by leaders, and how to build those skills when operating in a remote environment (Zhang et al., 2022).

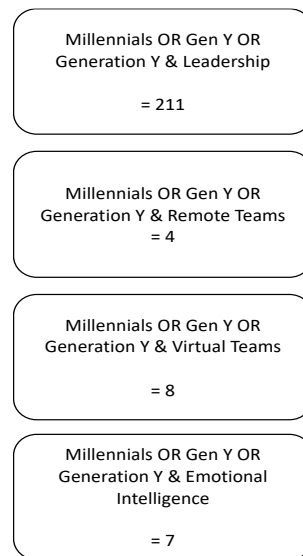
In an EthOS search from the British Library (Figure 1) and a scholarly journal search on the University of Chester library (Figure 2), the results confirmed that current literature focusing on millennials and Gen Y in remote teams is scant, and virtually non-existent when extending that to combine emotional intelligence. For both approaches a Boolean search string was established to search for “Millennials” OR “Generation Y” OR “Gen Y” and then the combinations AND for “remote teams” OR “Virtual Teams” AND “Emotional Intelligence” OR “EI” OR “Emotional Quotient”. The results have been summarised into two diagrams by the authors:

FIGURE 1. ETHOS SEARCH



Source: Authors own compilation based on British Library EthOS Search, September 2022.

FIGURE 1. CHESTER UNIVERSITY LIBRARY SEARCH



Source: Authors own compilation based on Chester University Library Search, September 2022

### 2.3. The Knowledge Gap

When considering all these emerging elements together, it is only natural that organisational leaders may feel ill-equipped to support and manage their teams in a post-COVID age. In fact, these macro-environmental workplace changes have highlighted gaps in our knowledge of how managers should rise to the challenge of leading remote teams and the multigenerational workforce (Hennelly and Schurman, 2023), and how managers should support the mental health, wellbeing, and performance of their employees (Adenle, 2020; Giurge and Bohns, 2020; World Health Organisation, 2020; Kirchner et al., 2021). This widening managerial skill gap is imperative for organisations to resolve (McRae et al., 2023). However, there are gaps in the extant corpus of literature on how to address these topics. In general, current literature is scant on the subject of new leadership practices and theories needed to manage the new work environment. It would appear that the main focus of researchers during the pandemic and pre-COVID were focused solely on the employee aspects. There have been numerous studies conducted on employee performance and turnover (Bader et al., 2019), employee discrimination and hostility (Bader et al., 2018), and employee psychological health and wellbeing (Faeth and Kittler, 2017; Bader et al., 2019; Kirchner et al., 2021). Whilst some papers have tried to address the evolving roles of HR during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Dirani et al., 2020), there appears to be less focus on new leadership practices required post-COVID (Kirchner et al., 2021), and even less understanding of the leadership challenges that have arisen due to the pandemic and other external influences (Dirani et al., 2020). One of the more comprehensive literature reviews discovered in this research area suggested a dearth of research on what adaptations need to be made to leadership approaches in a post-pandemic world (Porkodi, 2022). In his review, Porkodi calls out a research gap, recommending future scholars focus on what new leadership styles and tactics should be implemented by organisations in a post-COVID world. Furthermore, Park and Cho (2022) propose that there is a paucity of research regarding the perceptions and the lived experience of supervisors leading remote teams.

---

### 3. Future Research Agenda

This paper suggests scholars narrow the literature gap by pursuing new empirical studies focused on emerging practice issues. Topics that scholars may prioritise in future could be:

1. *What new leadership practices are required post-COVID?*
  - a) What are the new leadership practices and qualities needed to manage remotely dispersed teams post-COVID? Studies could assess this from Kalamar's (2022) CRAFT qualities, examining the different skills, motivations, behaviours, and practices that contribute to successful e-leadership in a complex organisation.
  - b) What leadership practices should be implemented in remote teams to support mental wellbeing? How does this inform existing leadership theory?
  - c) How do we remodel traditional leadership practices and skills to be fit and relevant for the new intergenerational workplace? Studies may focus on specific generations such as millennials, and Gen Z who are now entering the workforce and any distinctive differences and requirements for these generations. Additionally, studies of Baby Boomers and Gen X would also be relevant with people looking to remain in work for longer in life.
2. *How may these new leadership practices be cultivated?*
  - d) How do we train, mentor and coach both existing and new leaders with remote team members now spanning five generations?
  - e) How do we help leaders balance organisational pressure from their senior leaders with team members' demands for work-life balance, career development and purpose?

To combat the focus on purely quantitative studies in correlation with the rise and sophistication of Information Technology data collection and analysis tools (Williamson et al., 2018), we suggest researchers pursue qualitative studies to address these gaps. Thus, in doing so, develop a deeper and richer understanding of the practice gaps. Much of the extant research even in relation to the perceived "softer skills" required by modern leaders, such as emotional intelligence, has been quantitative. Grey (2022) suggests that the approach could be problematic when researching concepts such as intelligence. Additionally, as many quantitative studies employ self-measurement surveys, there could be a limitation in relation to the validity of these responses as participants may interpret the questions differently, and they could also rate themselves differently to how they actually behave (Clark et al., 2021).

Adopting a more qualitative research approach on the aforementioned topics will enable the views and experiences of individuals and groups to be understood from a more socially constructed perspective. This would provide a deeper insight into the leadership skills needed in the current working environment, whilst enabling practitioner recommendations to support both existing and new leaders of remote and intergenerational teams. This is in comparison to quantitative studies where the connection between in situ reality and research is limited due to both the reliance on instruments and procedures and because social life is viewed as static and independent of the lived experience (Clark et al., 2021). Additionally, multi-level research would give further dimensions, in which team members', team leaders' and senior managers'

---

participation could provide a more nuanced perspective. Suggested approaches could involve interviews and focus groups, whilst methods such as observation, diary and documentational analysis should also be considered. Scholars, therefore, could consider case studies or action research approaches that influence and drive change inside organisations and contribute empirical practical recommendations. By adopting more qualitative approaches this will enable insight into the complexity and richness that is a reality in organisations today (Saunders et al., 2019).

#### 4. Conclusion

The future of leadership is changing, and both scholars and practitioners need to address the newly emerging phenomena to ensure our leaders are armed with the right skills, and methods of skills development, to meet the task of leading the modern workforce. While the new reality raises challenges in managing the intergenerational divide, maintaining employee wellbeing and stepping into a remote leadership role, it also creates mass opportunities for skills growth and new ways of working. This paper has presented a synthesis of some of the current leadership research gaps and built on existing studies, to recommend five areas of future research. In addition, a new push for qualitative approaches of study has been raised, aimed at developing a deeper and quality understanding of the practice gap. It is envisaged that these new research areas and approaches will drive new value for organisations through the output of organisational change recommendations, enabling executives and HR offices to train their leaders in the right way, and with the right skills.

#### References

- Abrams, Z. (2019). The future of remote work. *American Psychological Association* 50 (9).  
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/10/cover-remote-work>
- Adenle, C. (2020). Working from home during coronavirus? Six tips to make it work. *Elsevier Connect* <https://www.elsevier.com/connect/working-from-home-during-coronavirus-6-tips-to-make-it-work>
- Afota, M.-C., Provost Savard, Y., Ollier-Malaterre, A., & Léon, E. (2022). Work-from-home adjustment in the US and Europe: the role of psychological climate for face time and perceived availability expectations. *International journal of human resource management, ahead-of-print*, 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2022.2090269>
- Bader, A., Reade, C., & Froese, F. (2019). Terrorism and Expatriate Withdrawal Cognitions: The Differential Role of Perceived Work and Non-work Constraints. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 30(11), 1769–1793.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2016.1233448>
- Bader, B., Stoermer S., Bader, A., & Schuster T. (2018). Institutional Discrimination of Women and Workplace Harassment of Female Expatriates: Evidence from 25 Host Countries. *Journal of Global Mobility: The Home of Expatriate Management Research* 6 (1), 40–58. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JGM-06-2017-0022>
- Brown, S.M. (2021). Thinking about developing business leadership for the post-COVID world, *New England Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 25(2), 2574-2904.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/NEJE-04-2021-0026>



- 
- Camp, K., Young, M., & Bushardt, S. (2021). A millennial manager skills model for the new remote work environment. *Management Research Review* 45(5), 635-648.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-01-2021-0076>
- Chamakiotis, P., Panteli, N. & Davison, R.M. (2021). Reimagining e-leadership for reconfigured virtual teams due to COVID-19. *International Journal of Management*, 60, 102381.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2021.102381>
- Clark, T., Foster, L., Sloan, L. & Bryman, A. (2021). *Bryman's Social Research Methods*. (6<sup>th</sup> ed). Oxford University Press.
- DeSilver, D. (2020). *Before the coronavirus, telework was an optional benefit, mostly for the affluent few*. 2022, <https://pewrsr.ch/2Qwk1zt>
- Dirani, K.M., Abadi, M., Alizadeh, A., Barhate, B., Garza, R.C., Gunasekara, N., Ibrahim, G. and Mazjun, Z. (2020). Leadership competencies and the essential role of human resource development in times of crisis: a response to Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development Journal*, 23(4), 380-394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2020.1780078>
- Faeth, P. C., & Kittler M.G. (2017) How Do You Fear? Examining Expatriates' Perception of Danger and Its Consequences. *Journal of Global Mobility* 5(4), 391–417.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/jgm-11-2016-0063>
- Gherson, D. (2022, February 17). *Managers can't do it all*. Harvard Business Review.  
<https://hbr.org/2022/03/managers-cant-do-it-all>
- Giurge, L.M., & Bohns, V.K. (2020, April 3). *Three tips to avoid WFH burnout*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/04/3-tips-to-avoid-wfh-burnout>
- Hennelly, D. S., & Schurman B. (2023, January 5). *Bridging Generational Divides in Your Workplace*. Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2023/01/bridging-generational-divides-in-your-workplace>
- Ipsen, C., Kirchner, K., Andersone, N., & Karanika-Murray, M. (2022). Becoming a Distance Manager: Managerial Experiences, Perceived Organizational Support, and Job Satisfaction During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Frontiers in psychology*, 13.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.916234>
- Kalamar, B. (2022). *CRAFT Leadership*. Pallas Athene Books.
- Kirchner, K., Ipsen, C., & Hansen, J.P. (2021). COVID-19 leadership challenges in knowledge work, *Knowledge Management Research and Practice*, 19(4), 493-500.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14778238.2021.1877579>
- McRae, E., Aykens, P., Lowmaster, K., & Shepp, J. (2023, January 18) *9 Trends that will shape work in 2023 and beyond*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2023/01/9-trends-that-will-shape-work-in-2023-and-beyond>
- Murphy, L. (2023). Work automation and the rise of virtual teams: how to lead employees in the post-pandemic world. *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal, ahead-of-print*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DLO-04-2023-0092>
- Parry, J., Young, Z., Bevan, S., Veliziotis, M., Baruch, Y., Beigi, M., Bajorek, Z., Salter, E., & Tochia, C. (2021). Working from Home under COVID-19 lockdown: Transitions and tensions, *Work after Lockdown*.  
[https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/446405/1/Work\\_After\\_Lockdown\\_Insight\\_report\\_Jan\\_2021\\_1.pdf](https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/446405/1/Work_After_Lockdown_Insight_report_Jan_2021_1.pdf)
- Porkodi, S. (2022). Leadership Approaches for Post-Covid Recovery: A Systemic Literature Review, *European Journal of Business and Management Research*, 7(3), 1-11.  
<https://doi.org/10.24018/ejbmr.2022.7.3.1420>
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research Methods for Business Students*. 8<sup>th</sup> Edition. Pearson Education Ltd.
-

- 
- Simon, P., Maor, D., Guggenberger, P., Park, M., Luo, M., Klingler, D., D'Auria, G., Weddle, B., De Smet, A., Fletcher, B., Thaker, S. & Di Lodovico, A. (2023). *The State of Organisations*, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-state-of-organizations-2023>
- Tourish, D. (2019). Making a difference: Doing leadership research that matters. *Journal of Management and Organization* 25(3), 364-369. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2019.6>
- Vargas, O.L. (2020, June 9). *COVID-19 unleashed the potential for telework – How are workers coping?* <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/blog/covid-19-unleashed-the-potential-for-telework-how-are-workers-coping>
- Williamson, K., Johanson, G., Byrne, A., Given, L. M., Kennan, M. A., & Oliver, G. (2018). The future of information research. In K. Williamson & G. Johanson (Eds.), *Research Methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Chandos Publishing.
- World Health Organisation (2020). *HealthyAtHome – Mental Health*. <https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/healthyathome/healthyathome---mental-health>
- Zhang, Y., Zhao, R., & Yu, X. (2022). Enhancing Virtual Team Performance via high-quality interpersonal relationships: effects of authentic leadership, *International Journal of Manpower* 43(4), 982-1000. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJM-08-2020-0378>

## Declaration Statements

### Conflict of Interest

The author reports no conflict of interest.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Ethics Statement

No dataset is associated with this article.

## Open Access Agreement

This article is published under a CC BY 4.0 license. This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator. The license allows for commercial use. For more information, please visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Helen Turnbull who can be contacted by email via [1822392@chester.ac.uk](mailto:1822392@chester.ac.uk)