

**CHALLENGES & SUCCESS FACTORS OF REMOTE WORKING
IN SMEs DURING COVID-19 IN THAILAND AND SINGAPORE**

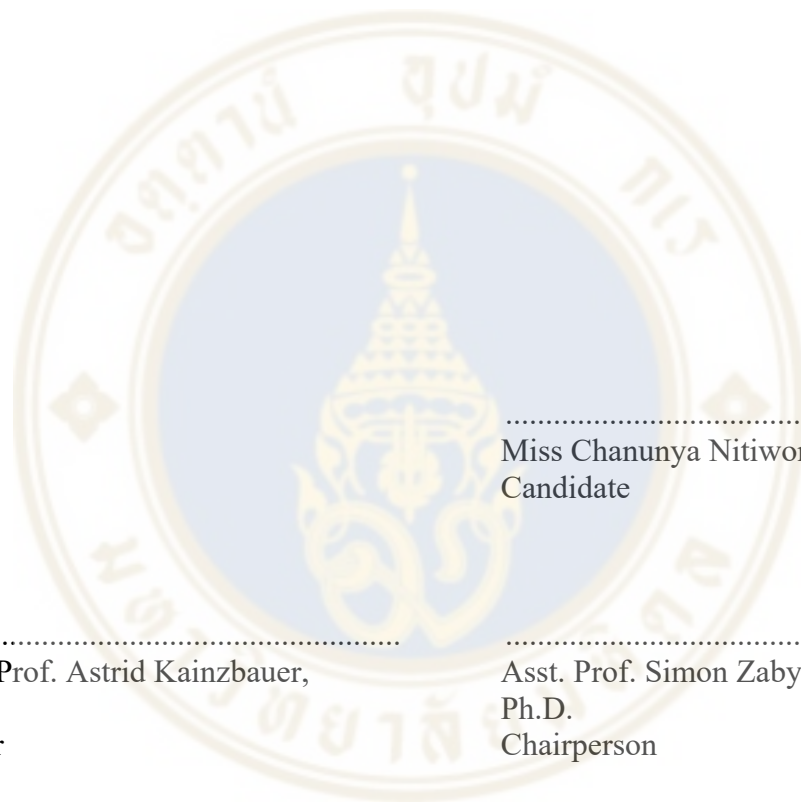


**A THEMATIC PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF MANAGEMENT
COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT
MAHIDOL UNIVERSITY
2022**

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Thematic paper
entitled
**CHALLENGES & SUCCESS FACTORS OF REMOTE WORKING
IN SMES DURING COVID-19 IN THAILAND AND SINGAPORE**

was submitted to the College of Management, Mahidol University
for the degree of Master of Management
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May 1, 2022



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would not be able to complete this thematic paper without the kind support from the following people. Firstly, I would like to express great appreciation to my advisor, Assoc. Prof. Astrid Kainzbauer, for the great support in detailing guidance to my research from the beginning until the presentation. I am grateful for her dedicated time and patience to improve my thematic paper with cherished words throughout the semester. Also, to all interviewees for the time to answer my long questions, and for giving genuine suggestions to complete this research.

Other big thanks to my boss and colleagues in Soccer Grass & Engineering Company and CONNP Company for understanding my study strive and bearing hard work for me during my challenging time. My gratitude to my lovely family and friends who always stood by me when I was almost giving up and drove me to achieve this master's degree.

Lastly, thank you for my right decision to study at CMMU. The great experience with professors and friends at CMMU will be unforgettable.

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CHALLENGES & SUCCESS FACTORS OF REMOTE WORKING IN SMES DURING COVID-19 IN THAILAND AND SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find the challenges and success factors of remote working for SMEs in Thailand and Singapore. The research is done through semi-structured interviews with 9 interviewees in 4 companies 4 businesses comprising a financial consulting company, a kids design school, a design, and construction company, and an F&B manufacturing company. The kids' design school and design & construction company are based in Singapore and the other two are in Bangkok, Thailand. Both sides of the SME's owner's and employee's feedback are given in the research. The results showed that the challenges affecting remote working are similar in 4 factors regarding business Industry and type of tasks, financial problems due to pandemic effect, not enough IT support remotely, and lack of physical engagement. In terms of success factors, the sharing process is similarly comprised of familiarity with online communication tools, using applications to increase virtual engagement, virtual tasks management, long working experience, and a systematic meeting schedule. Furthermore, the research has shown the benefits and disadvantages of remote working, and the recommendation for future working styles is reflected in the real experience of owners and employees in SMEs.

KEYWORDS: Remote Working / Thai SMEs / Pandemic / Challenges and success factors / Hybrid Working

40 pages

CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 SME Challenges	2
CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW	4
2.1 SME Company Structure & Character	4
2.2 The Challenge Factors That Affect Remote Working in SME	5
2.2.1 Limitations of Remote Working for Specific Types of Tasks and Industries	5
2.2.2 IS an Investment in SMEs Inherent to Remote Working	6
2.3 The Success Factors That Affect Remote Working in SME	6
2.3.1 Digital Technology as a Tool	6
2.3.2 Company's Community Supporting	7
2.3.3 Effective Communication	8
2.3.4 Tasks Planning	9
2.4 The Advantages of Remote Working for SMEs	10
2.4.1 Advantages for SMEs in Remote Working	10
2.5 Literature Review Summary	11
CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	13
3.1 Primary Data Collection Method	13
3.2 Interview Method	13
3.2.1 Sample Selection	14

CONTENTS (cont.)

	Page
3.2.2 Develop Questions List	15
3.2.3 Probing Technique	18
3.2.4 Conduct the Interview	18
CHAPTER IV RESEARCH FINDINGS	19
4.1 Challenge Factors	19
4.1.1 Business Industry & Type of Tasks – (Value Chain, Information System Management)	19
4.1.2 Financial Problem due to COVID-19 Crisis	21
4.1.3 Not Enough IT Support Remotely	22
4.1.4 Limitation of Physical Engagement	22
4.2 Success Factors	23
4.2.1 The Familiarity with Online Communication Tools	23
4.2.2 Using Applications to Increase Virtual Engagement	23
4.2.3 Virtual Tasks Management	24
4.2.4 Long Working Experience – (No supervision needed)	24
4.2.5 Systematic Meeting Schedule	25
4.3 Benefits and Disadvantages of Remote Working	27
4.3.1 Owner’s Benefits/ Disadvantage	27
4.3.2 Employee’s Benefits/ Disadvantages	28
4.3.3 The Company’s Benefits/ Disadvantage	29
4.4 Future Working Style After a Pandemic	30
4.5 Finding Summary	31
CHAPTER V RECOMMENDATION & CONCLUSION	33
5.1 Conclusion	33
5.2 Recommendation	34
5.3 Limitation	36

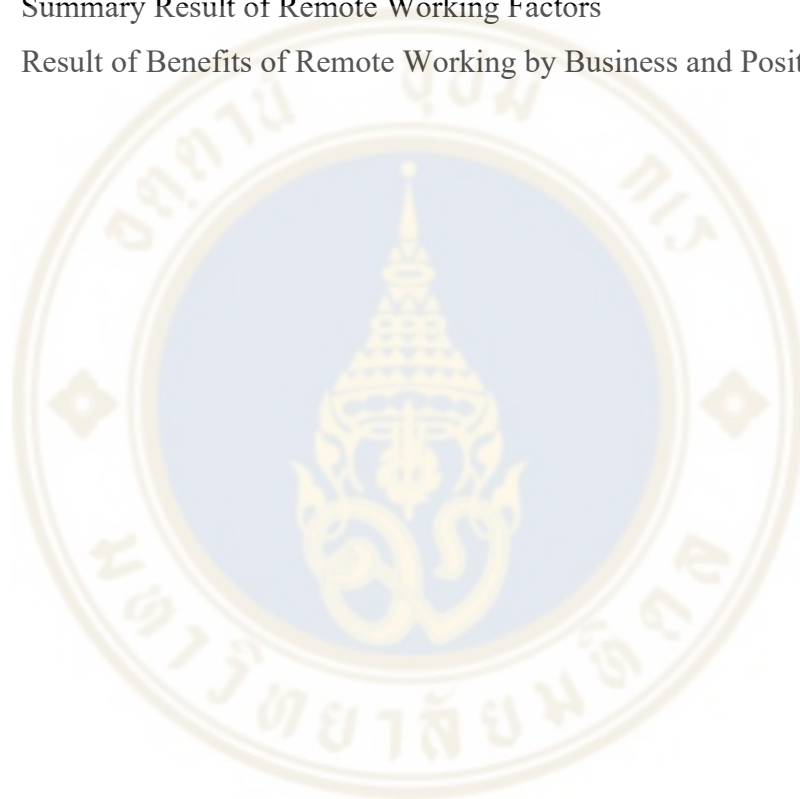
CONTENTS (cont.)

	Page
REFERENCES	37
BIOGRAPHY	40



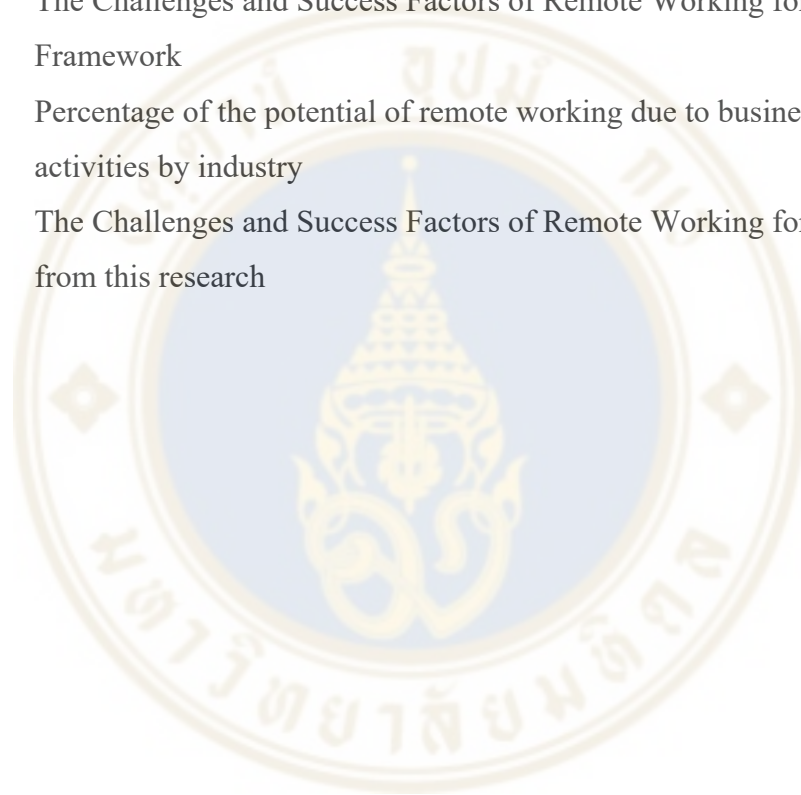
LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
3.1	Interviewee List	14
3.2	Open-end Questions List	15
4.1	Summary Result of Remote Working Factors	25
4.2	Result of Benefits of Remote Working by Business and Position	31



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1.1	Teleworking in France and the United Kingdom in 2020, by firm size	2
2.1	The Challenges and Success Factors of Remote Working for SME Framework	11
4.1	Percentage of the potential of remote working due to business activities by industry	21
4.2	The Challenges and Success Factors of Remote Working for SME from this research	32



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2019 Covid-19 pandemic started, businesses around the world were affected by different government policies to stop the virus spread out. One policy that is forced to embrace is social distancing to protect employees' and their families' lives saved from viruses. The unpredictable situation was dragged over years with on-off site working, forcing every company to consider a new normal hybrid work model to save operating costs and safe lives. According to an established consulting firm, PwC's Thailand estimated that 20% of Thai corporations have permanently shifted to working from home. The main reason is to keep employees' health safe and to cost-saving strategy. In addition, PwC's CEO Panel Survey, which surveyed 699 CEOs online from mixed 67 countries/regions in June and July 2020 presented that majority of respondents (78%) expect remote working and collaboration to have a lasting impact after COVID-19. Based on surveys, the next working model post-COVID-19 will be flexibility arrangement between physically onsite and working from home in a balanced way. Investing in digital tools to sustain their operations, customers, and employees' experience (PwC,2020).

Even though the result of the world trend is moving toward hybrid working, another survey in western countries shows that remote working rates are different by over 10% substantially due to the firm size. Teleworking rates in France and UK during the pandemic were higher among workers in large-size firms than in small ones, influenced by lower digital tools adoption among small firms and their specialization in activities less amenable to remote working (OECD, 2021). Moreover, not every industry is compatible with remote working.

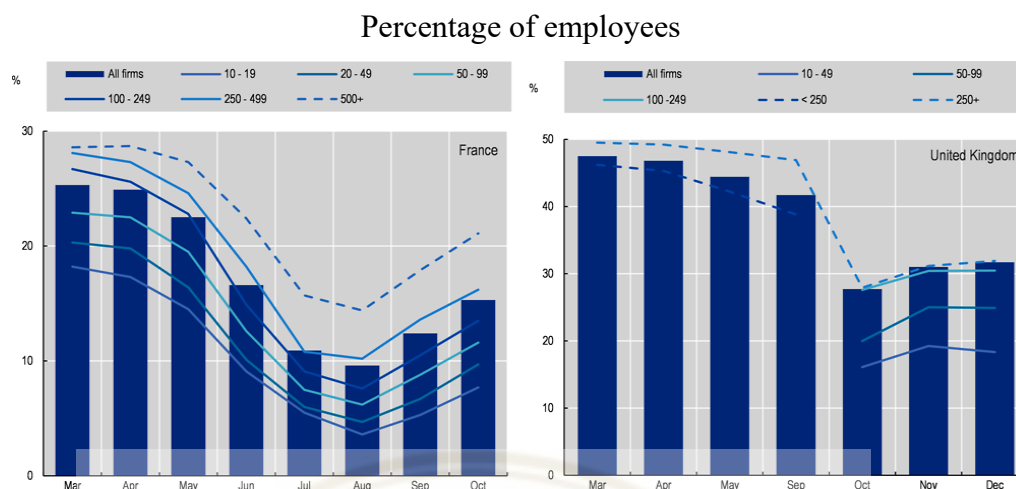


Figure 1.1 Teleworking in France and the United Kingdom in 2020, by firm size (OECD, 2021)

1.1 SME Challenges

Showing the contrast between corporate and SME remote working results, it triggers me to be curious about the reasons why remote working is not applicable in SMEs when the working model trend weighs over remote working. According to my experience in design and construction companies, several small design companies could collaborate with the team and client well without a face-to-face meeting, or very less often about once or twice a year. Some companies hire employees from different countries and successfully maintain their staff with remote working concepts with special input. For example, manage a substantial schedule for meeting and review daily to keep employees engaged, provide staff gathering space without bosses, and allow staff to take long leave and work from anywhere in the world.

Having said that, there was no substantial research framing remote working in SME companies. Therefore, I would like to find out these questions,

- *What are the challenges of the application of the remote working model to SMEs?*
- *What are the success factors for SMEs to apply for remote work?*
- *What are the benefits and disadvantages of remote working for SMEs in long run?*

The research will focus on small-medium size companies in Thailand and Singapore working in design & construction, financial, and manufacturing, and kid's school businesses. The research methodology will be in-depth interviews with business owners and employers in the company in 4 SMEs.



CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 SME Company Structure & Character

SMEs are considered the backbone of the economy in many countries as they contribute GDP, employment and value-added to the economy in high portion. Furthermore, SMEs are the business unit that creates the biggest profit margins for the country compared to the bigger scale enterprises. According to The Office of SMEs Promotion (OSMEP)'s announcement, Thailand's SMEs total value in 2019 was 5.96 trillion baht which contributed to the national GDP by 35.3% and grows approximately 0.7% p.a. from the year 2011 (OSMEP, 2020). Break down from the total SME portion, Small Enterprise in Thailand counted for 15.3% of GDP followed by 17.1% of medium Enterprise accordingly. SME employment rate is as high as 12,060,369, which is equal to 69.48% of total employment. Before digging down to remote working in SMEs in Thailand and SG. The definition and character be defined to understand the unique features of SMEs. In this research, we will focus on SMEs in Trade and Service sectors which contributed to almost two-thirds of the total MSME GDP, by 41.8% and 20.3% respectively in 2019 (OSMEP, 2020).

To define SME size by a number of employees, there is 3 range of numbers according to The Office of SMEs Promotion (OSMEP) Thailand. Small Enterprise employee number is between 5-50 people and produce 1.8 Mb- 100Mb p.a., Medium Enterprise is between 50 to 200 employees contribute 100-300 Mb. p.a. (Ministerial Regulations on the Designation of the Characteristics of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion Act B.E. 2562 (2019)). Most enterprises in the SME category are very small size, about 70% to 80% of them employ less than five people. There is a small percentage of firms that hold a big number of employees, typically ranging from about 1% to 4%, which have more than 100 employees (Tambunan,2008).

Another general recognition of SMEs is that these are all independent enterprises that are not part of a larger corporation; instead, they are usually owned and

managed by their owners, who usually also contribute most, if not all, of their capital (as cited in Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). Therefore, they usually operate from the owner's home and present incredibly high diversity regardless of the sole entrepreneur to a diverse spread of products with over 100 employees (Schaper and Lee, 2016). The character of a business owner is another important factor in SMEs. The status of SME business is far stable from established corporations as well as the resource of capital and time. It's reflected in the lower uptake of concrete systems and digital technology in the business. When the crucial change from the pandemic came, the owner requires more trust, engagement, and planning with room of flexibility to acquire a new work model for their business. Therefore, we can't expect all of them to comply new work model as fast as billion and multinational corporations.

2.2 The Challenge Factors That Affect Remote Working in SME

2.2.1 Limitations of Remote Working for Specific Types of Tasks and Industries

In an effort to cut costs and improve worker morale, corporations are increasingly turning to telecommute, the ability for an employee to perform work assignments using telecommunication tools such as email, phone, chat, and video apps outside of the typical workplace (TechTarget Contributor, 2020). Conflicting reports exist though on the effects that working outside the office has on productivity which directly affects a company's bottom line. This study explores these controversies using an experimental approach. Results of this study indicate that the telecommuting environmental effects may have positive implications on the productivity of creative tasks but negative implications on the productivity of dull tasks (Dutcher, 2012). Moreover, workers with a higher level of qualifications were more likely to telework during the pandemic which limits some specific industries, such as information and communication, professional and technical services, and education. In contrast, industries associated with physical products, such as health and social care, construction, transport, and warehousing as well as accommodation and food services had relatively low rates of teleworking during the pandemic (OECD, 2021). Therefore,

SMEs in highly digitalized industries, have a high potential to convert into full-time remote working rather than physical production.

2.2.2 IS an Investment in SMEs Inherent to Remote Working

According to the transformable industry to be remote working for SMEs is relatively linked with Information systems (IS) for future digitalization. IS an investment in SMEs is successful when it is either driven by necessity, such as in the case of manufacturing, be focused on transaction processing systems, or due to innovative owners who are looking for business growth. The IS adoption should be a low-cost investment to provide efficiency savings or the enabling of a value-added strategy. On the other, firms with more sophisticated IS but do not obtain strategic benefits tend to perform worse than those with more limited systems due to limited IS knowledge and skills as well as failure in integration to the overall operational system. Even though the owner has enthusiastic about IS, the employee could be less likely to use it when operational systems are not sync resulted in low-performance effectiveness (Levy and Powell, 2005)

2.3 The Success Factors That Affect Remote Working in SME: Develop a High-Performance Virtual Team

Regardless of the firm size, the virtual team working model is comprised of several common shared rules. The main factors shaping a successful virtual team are categorized into 4 aspects, 1) Digital & Technology as a tool (Avikshit,2021), 2) Company's Community Supporting (Gollant and Toholka, 2021), 3) Communication Collaboration (Hill and Bartol,2018), 4) Project Planning & Process (Watkins, 2013).

2.3.1 Digital-Technology as a Tool

Since the lockdown forced corporate to do remote working. The workplace was transformed from actual brick-and-mortar to be online network. The quality of collaboration partly depends on the leverage of proper communication technologies. There are 3 factors to evaluate the system human-friendly aspect, security aspects, and economic aspect. Acquiring the technology process should consider applicable

knowledge and convenience from employees as major users. It should be able to fit in current knowledge and type of device as much as possible to reduce obstacles which can lead to lower productivity. Moreover, the Lack of enough training to use technology-based peripherals at home, purchase and install the same in their homes, and use them with the highest level of efficiency (without errors) was difficult (Avikshit,2021). Secondly, security, the different industries, and size of a company require different complexity of technology which is relevant to the cost of technology both application and hardware to invest (Levy,2005). Fundamental cloud space and security of internet gateway must establish well if the company service is mainly online data.

2.3.2 Company's Community Supporting

Working away from the office takes much more mental effort than working on site. Remote working has been a “luxury for the relatively affluent” (as cited in Wang et al, 2021), such as higher-income earners (e.g., over 75% of employees who work from home have an annual earning above \$65,000) and white-collar workers (e.g., over 40% of teleworkers are executives, managers, or professionals) (Wang et al, 2021), hence, it's not easily applicable to all positions. Boston Consulting Group (BCG) surveyed 12,000 people in the US, Germany, and India in 2020 showing that 29% claims their mental health was worse from WFH. Onboarding new staff presented its challenges during lockdown especially junior staff because of missing learning by osmosis by observing more senior staff interact with clients, creditors, and other stakeholders including having in-person catch-ups with team and client building activities. Moreover, there are more challenges to managerial tasks and collaborative tasks undertaking (Gollant and Toholka, 2021). The following tips are the guidance to increase remote working to be smoother by social support from the company.

- *Get the team together physically early on:* The management people should focus on the humans and taking network in the workplace to familiarize themselves with the team members. When it comes to creating connections and fostering trust, which is both necessary foundations for effective teamwork, face-to-face communication still outperforms virtual communication. (Watkins,2013)

- *Knowledge sharing*: Classically, this on-the-job learning takes place through apprenticeship. New employees learn the correct and proper way to behave—“how things are done around here”. When moving to online working. New staff are highly facing a loss situation if the company didn’t prepare well in good online orientation, supporting mentors, and monitoring set up (Fayard et al,2021)

- *Social Engagement*: The ability to work remotely corresponds with higher engagement. Job autonomy is negatively related to procrastination and loneliness (Wang et al, 2021). Among employees who spend up to 20% of their time remotely, 35% are engaged - but engagement levels drop as employees spend more time off-site (Crabtree and Steve,2014). Remote working has been a “luxury for the relatively affluent” such as higher-income earners and white-collar workers (e.g., over 40% of teleworkers are executives, managers, or professionals) (Wang et al, 2021). However, almost every employee has been transferred to remote work since the pandemic began and it inevitably supports team members to be produced offshore. Studies have long shown that frequent in-person interactions lead to commitment, support, and cooperation among people on teams. A traditional office, a cultural space, provides workers with a social anchor, facilitates connections, enables learning, and fosters unscripted, innovative collaboration. The guidance to relieve this tension is creating a “Virtual Water cooler” with small talk at the beginning of the meeting, shared workspace on the social network, and sharing pictures of different geography from staff will help to increase remote engagement for distancing work.

2.3.3 Effective Communication

- *Matching technology to each task*: As mentioned about technology in the a), to make communication and collaboration the most effective are by selecting the right tools for the right tasks. For instance, when circulating routine information and plans, sharing ideas, and collecting simple data. Web conferencing and video conferencing are richer and more effective in complex tasks such-as problem solving or negotiation. A proper technology will reduce miscommunication and frustration among the team (Hill and Bartol,2018).

- *Make intention clear when texting*: Nowadays, most people communicate via text-based. On sending side, people tend to be less guarded and wright

negatively easier than face-to-face or phone calls because no voice tone or emotional expression on their face could be seen. Either way, receiving text side tends to interpret the message negatively easily because “people read with a different lens” (Hill and Bartol,2018). Therefore, communication via writing must make clear intentions both text messages and email. Some easy tips in casual communication especially among Asian people are using emoticons to express their positive or sense of humor. Emoticon could help to relieve tension in the text or further elaborate on the talking tone when writing something sensitive.

- Agree on shared language: During the collaboration, it can be cross-department joining together, especially to solve the problem. The different assumptions in languages can lead to a danger of divergent interpretation. For example, when teams work on tasks involving more ambiguity and need to collaborate with more than one technical department. Common language should be clarified, such as, when we say “yes,” we mean...and when we say “no” we mean...and post this in the shared workspace. Take the time to explicitly negotiate an agreement on shared interpretations of important words and phrases (Watkins, 2013).

- Keep everyone in the loop: When team members don't interact face to face, the risk of losing touch and getting out of step is greater (Hill and Bartol,2018). Several reasons can cause left-out-of-sight and out-of-mind without acknowledgment. One reason is a communication failure. Teammates might not get the email by the wrong email address, or because of a network problem. The way to overcome this challenge is constantly rechecking with the teammate when one is silent in a time-sensitive period, maybe it hasn't been received, or perhaps something urgent came up (Hill and Bartol,2018). Lastly, Leaders' one-to-one performance management and coaching interactions with their team members regularly are a fundamental part of making any teamwork. Keep members connected to the vision and highlight the story of what you are doing together (Watkins, 2013).

2.3.4 Tasks Planning

- Clarify tasks & Processes, not just goals and roles: With virtual teams, coordination is inherently more of a challenge because people are not co-located. So, it's necessary to focus on the detail of the task, process, and time to complete them.

Simplify and chop the task to be concrete to check on. Make sure everyone understands the task clearly with what and when then periodically do “after-action reviews” to evaluate how things are going and identify process adjustments and training needs (Watkins, 2013).

- Commit to communication charter: Communication in virtual teams is often less engaged and always is less rich than face-to-face interaction, which provides more contextual cues and information about emotional states. The way to avoid the pitfall is to establish the behavior of virtual meeting participation by setting a communication schedule. Build the team habit by following the rhythm constantly. Get teammate on communication charter commitment by a guideline on announcing time frame, being attentive talker and listener, talking clearly in notify agenda, and control individual’s context by trying to reduce background noise as much as possible (Watkins, 2013).

- Foster shared leadership: Tracking commitment is a “push” to keep team members on track, but shared leadership provides a crucial “pull”. Find ways to involve others in a leading team, such as, assigning project to follow up by themselves and getting team members to coach each other on their area of expertise, especially to the newcomer on board. By sharing leadership, you will not only increase engagement but will also take some of the burden off your shoulders (Watkins, 2013).

2.4 The Advantages of Remote Working for SMEs

2.4.1 Advantages for SMEs in Remote Working

Even before the pandemic of 2019, there was research in New Zealand and Australia showed that remote working has clear results as boost revenue. In 2013, the survey from Colmar Brunton conducted a nationally representative survey of 1047 SMEs in New Zealand and Australia and found that 43% of the business whose employees worked remotely from office experience raised revenue whereas only 28% of those whose staff only work from office experience the raising up. In Australia, the survey has shown that 57% of teleworkers and the revenue was raised by 24% in the past year. The key benefits are employee satisfaction and IT performance to increase

productivity. There were many benefits of teleworking, but the top 3 satisfaction is from employees are more productivity 27%, travel costs have been reduced by 26% and employees are happier by 24%. The most crucial point to perform best in remote working is the technology which is the basic software such as Skype, Dropbox, Gmail, and Microsoft Office 365, which are good enough to transform for remote working (New Zealand Management, 2013)

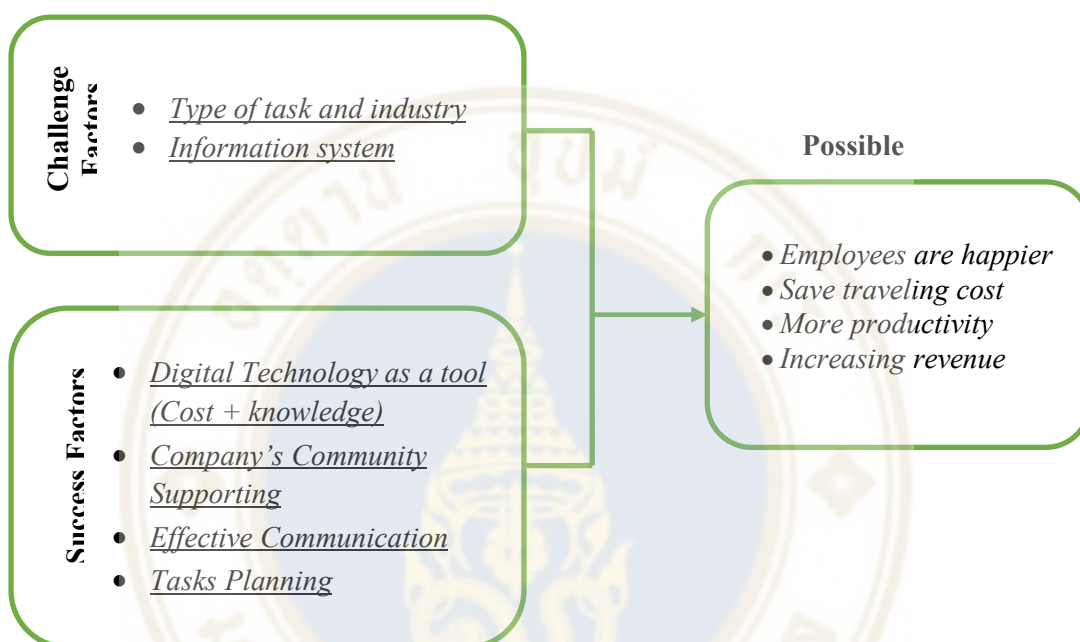


Figure 2.1 The Challenges and Success Factors of Remote Working for SME Framework

2.5 Literature Review Summary

For SMEs, the basic defining criteria are employee size and business revenue size. The range of employee size is from 5 people to 30 people maximum, and the range of revenue is between 1.8 Mb to 300 MB p.a. General SMEs are owned and managed by their owners, who usually contribute most to capital and operation. Therefore, each SME presented different characteristics to the business owners. Moreover, they are incredibly high diverse in limited capital, and investment in technology requires carefully determine. As a result, most successful SMEs in applying technology are correlated to the concern of the owner. These limitations are the

challenges to using remote work to SMEs because one of the key success factors is digital technology, which is depending on the business owner's realization and knowledge about digital technology. Another challenge is that well-performed business in remote working is limited in the creative and high digitalize industry, such as information and communication, professional and technical services, and education.

Nonetheless, to succeed in telecommuting, SMEs can start low-key with basic software in the market such as email, chat, video apps, and cloud storage, offered at a budget price or free, incorporated with the effort in communication collaboration and human support community among the owner and staffs. Successful cases of teleworking can result in a rise up productivity, employee satisfaction, and revenue.

During remote working, clear and effective communication is fundamental preparation to proceed with remote working distancing can create a communication error. A clear Work process planning from the supervisor should be prepared for employees to follow up on the tasks. As digital communication is lack human touch, therefore the company should include socialization support online for their employees.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Primary Data Collection Method

The current literature is mostly from Western countries and big corporations but does not focus directly on SMEs in developing countries like Thailand. The factor of cultural differences and supporting infrastructure in a developing country are not considered in the review. Therefore, primary data collection by direct questions and listening focus on business owners and employees in SMEs with qualitative research methodology is decided to be used in this study. Moreover, crossing 2 countries SME experiences are included in the research for cultural aspects.

3.2 Interview Method

The methodology aspects for finding data in this research will come from qualitative interviews often aiming at gaining information about or exploring a specific field of the questions. This research will use semi-structured interviews which are a mix of structured and unstructured interviews. While a few questions are predetermined, the others aren't planned. The other three most common types of interviews. In research, semi-structured interviews are often qualitative in nature. They are generally used as exploratory tools in fields such as marketing, social science, survey methodology, and other research fields. A semi-structured interview is a data collection method that relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework. However, the questions are not set in order or phrasing (George, 2022).

The reason to choose semi-structured interviews is that the topics about remote working in SMEs are aimed to be exploratory based. The interviewees' answers can help to develop a more robust knowledge base for future research (George, 2022). The interview will be conducted in the following aspects:

3.2.1 Sample Selection

In this research, the group of interviewees is selected from 3 different industries purposely to widen the result from the two features of business between digital and physical work. The 3 industries are comprised of Design and construction companies, Financial Consultant companies, and F&B Manufacturing companies. Among 3 industries, the financial consultant is the most digitalized industry, secondly, Design and Construction company is in between digital and physical work needed, and lastly, F&B Manufacturing Company is the most physical work needed.

The scope of the interview is expected to explore cultural factor involvement; hence, selected samples are a mix of 3 groups, one is solely from Singapore, another one is a Singaporean company with full-time Thai remote working employees, and the last group is in Thailand. Singapore is considered a developed country in SE, and they have transformative culture between Western and Eastern seamlessly. Therefore, the research can collect differences and similarities in working cultures between the two countries. A cross-culture group sample will be led to check whether cultural difference effects be challenge and success of teleworking or not. The selected interviewees in each company are from 2 positions, one owner/ partner in each company, and the rest are employees.

Table 3.1 Interviewee List

Industry	Code	Position	Working Country	Experience in current company (Yr)	Age	Gender
Financial	1A	Owner	TH	12	42	Male
	1B	Assistant	TH	10	33	Female
Kids Design School	2A	Owner	SG	3.5	36	Male
	2B	Teacher	SG	3	27	Male
Design & Construction	3A	Owner	ITA	5	38	Male
	3B	Designer	TH	3	35	Female
F&B Manufacturing	4A	Owner	TH	4	38	Female
	4B	Admin	TH	1	38	Female
	4C	R&D	TH	1.5	31	Male

3.2.2 Develop Questions List

Table 3.2 Open-end Questions List

Position	Questions	Finding Factors
Owner	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Please explain what your company is doing 2) Since when have you started this company? 3) How many staffs in your company? 4) Can your work be done entirely online or do your employees have to go to the workplace to get the job done? (Which aspects of your job can be done online, which aspects must be done in the workplace)? 	Company Industry & Tasks Factor
Owner	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How long have you been working remotely? 2) Do you work with different nationality staffs? 3) How is it different from working with the same culture employees? 4) How does it create advantage or challenge to working process with different culture staff in remote working? 5) During the last lockdown forced you to WFH, do you find it challenge or more productive than usual? Why do you think that way, please explain the situation relevant to your opinion? 6) What do you think it is the most challenges of teleworking in your role? How you find the solution? 7) What do you think were the biggest challenges for your employees? (Different challenges for different jobs?) 	Challenge Factors

Table 3.2 Open-end Questions List (cont.)

Position	Questions	Finding Factors
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What helped them to overcome these challenges? (What did you do as the owner, what did employees initiate themselves?) 2) Did you invest in additional digital communication tools during WFH? If yes, how does the technology help/not help in remote working? 	Solutions/ Success Factors
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3) Do you find more tangible benefit to the company during remote working? What is the factor affecting those result (Proven/Opinion)? 	Benefit of Remote Working
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) After pandemic situation is release, will you prefer onsite or online working? Why? 	Future Working
Employees	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Please explain what your current job responsibility. 2) How long have you been working in this job? 3) How long have you been working remotely? 4) Can your work be done entirely online or do your employees have to go to the workplace to get the job done? (Which aspects of your job can be done online, which aspects must be done in the workplace)? 	Experience & Task Factor

Table 3.2 Open-end Questions List (cont.)

Position	Questions	Finding Factors
Employees	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Do you work with different nationality boss? 2) How is it different from working with the same culture employer? 3) How does it create advantage or challenge to working process with different culture boss during remote working? 4) During the last lockdown forced you to WFH, do you find it challenge or more productive than usual? Why do you think that way, please explain the situation relevant to your opinion? 	Challenge Factors
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What do you think it is the most challenges of teleworking in your role? How you find the solution? 2) Did the company provide any extra support for remote working (Technology, Human Support)? Do you find them useful for your role? 	Solutions/ Success Factors
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) If the remote working continues in the long-term, what support from the company do you think it should to be improved? 2) After pandemic situation is release, will you prefer onsite or online working? Why? 	Future Working

3.2.3 Probing Technique

The probing approach is used to check the data's veracity. Probing is a strategy for delving deeper into a subject by using the interviewee's responses to ask follow-up questions (McDaniel & Gates, 2015), such as real-life examples, results, or reasons for the supplied answers. Two-way communication was used in the interviews to be able to use this strategy.

3.2.4 Conduct the Interview

The interview will be conducted online through the Video Conference application (Zoom) in order to hear the information and be able to read the body language, gestures, and feeling expressions of the interviewees. Interviewing sessions will be assigned prior to interviewing time by interviewees to make the most comfortable and convenient for interviewees. Each session should take approximately 20-40 minutes including background introduction, small talk (to make interviewees at ease), and open-ended and probing questions.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this research, I've selected 4 SMEs in different industries to find out the challenges and advantages of remote working with the use of semi-structured interviews. The 4 SMEs are a financial consultant company from Thailand, Kids Design School from Singapore, Design & Construction from Singapore, and an ice-cream manufacturing factory from Thailand. Even though the 4 companies are from different backgrounds, the interviewees showed similar results, especially in the technology aspect and the preference for future work after the pandemic. In contrast, there are many different opinions in ways of working depending on the mindset of different environments, cultures, and the business industries.

4.1 Challenge Factors

4.1.1 Business Industry & Type of Tasks – (Value Chain, Information System Management)

Selected industries are comprised of Personal Financial Consultant, Kids' Design Thinking school, Design & Construction, and F&B Manufacturing. The type of business industry is correlated to a specific type of tasks related to the value chain and digitalizing information system in each business.

Among the 4 industries, *F&B Manufacturing in Thailand is the industry that experienced the most challenge* to adopt remote working according to physical work in the factory requirement due to production line and stock. Both owner and employees prefer to work on-site up to 80% of total work responsibility due to the benefit of the business activities such as coordination work related to a production line, sales delivery, stock checking, and products R&D. Another task regarding administrative and accountant department are challenges for remote working as the inventory information

is not digitalized and synchronized with the manufacturing and store. Otherwise, it will enhance more chances to work online. However, the company is not considering this data to be digitalized as the owner is not convinced that remote working will be workable in this business.

However, the factory has never applied remote working during pandemics due to the owner's policy. The 2 employees from the interview can see the possibility of remote working especially R&D position, which is a creative task rather than the routine task. Therefore, it is possible to partially remote work in some tasks of the F&B business.

The second industry that experienced challenges is the *Kids' Design Thinking school* in Singapore. It is a startup company that started in 2018. The 2 main tasks relative to the value chain is curriculum design development and the class session with the kids and parents. The main challenge is regarding clients' requirements, the parents prefer on-site learning rather than online learning activity due to the lesser burden on the parent's preparation. According to the value chain task, the curriculum and activity design and development can be finished online, but activity testing and equipment preparation should be done on-site. Therefore, the on-site work requirement is around 60-70%. However, during the pandemic in 2020 forced to do everything online, the on-site tasks could be reduced to 30%. Whereas the online class rate raced up to 70% as seasonal demand.

The third industry that experienced challenges is *Personal Financial Consultant*. There are 2 major parts of the business as financial consultant team and supporting team. The main challenge is based on physical document requirement from the head quarter's policies which is loaded on supporting team tasks. Even though the head quarter company have developed online system to support clients in-put information for financial consultant team, paperwork is still mandatory in the value chain which consuming up to 50% of total tasks. According to administrator given information, during lockdown time, the company has separated into 2 teams to work onsite alternatively to do paperwork. The onsite team must dedicate working time to support paperwork for WFH team, therefore it reduced productivity during lockdown. Moreover, the coordination process between each department about paperwork is

with the company cost management, which affect the company's transformation to remote working because the current working mode is relied on on-site works. Rapid drop of revenue affects the company cashflow, so the IT investment related to remote working is dismissed as it is secondary importance to the company. To invest in technology is including IT specialist to fix the program problems. In design and construction case, the employee thought the company should provide remote technician people to solve the programs' problems when remote working. It's challenge for the employees to finding solutions by themselves. However, the owner is not yet provided this support because the scale of employees and fixing case is very small, so it's not worthy to invest the remote technician.

4.1.3 Not Enough IT Support Remotely

Regarding IT support in software and hardware, 3 of 4 employees mentioned about the lack of IT support. The financial consultant administrator and curriculum designer in Kids design school suggest that it will be better if the company could provide new laptop to work at home because their computers are not updated, or it is the old version of big size PC which is inconvenience to carry back home. The designer in design and construction company also suggested to get online IT access to her PC while she got problems about the program. Currently she had to solve the problem by herself which consume long time.

4.1.4 Limitation of Physical Engagement

One critical point for remote working is to build engagement from face-to-face meeting. The Italian owner from design and construction company has mentioned about his new staff recruitment failure due to the lack of physical engagement. The downside of remote communication is delay from real-time during the conversation cases from Time zone. He thought it's the critical point to keep the staffs' trust with the physical meeting earlier.

4.2 Success Factors

The interviews showed an unexpected success result regarding online working in 2 aspects. Most of SME companies successfully adopted remote working during pandemic and were able to manage the productivity of their tasks. The success in remote working is from following factors.

4.2.1 The Familiarity with Online Communication Tools

In terms of communication, another finding point is regarding the familiarity to online communication. All 4 companies manage to use online applications in the market helping in communication fluently. For example, Zoom/ Google Meet application for video online meeting, Line application for messages and voice call, Miro for online ideation cooperation. Regarding hardware tools, all 4 companies using personal computer (PC), laptop, iPad, and smartphone for online communication. They find that these tools are sufficient for remote working for SME. Furthermore, most of the owners are finding further level application helping in socialization aspect for their employees. For example, the design & construction company in SG is looking for virtual office space where the staffs can socialize similar to online game, hence the employees can stay in touch remotely apart of task meeting session. The financial consultant companies using “*Mentimeter*” application helping the participants in the meeting to increase involvement such as, getting feedback, pole. In conclusion, SME company’s owners keep up with the new technology and be able to exploit the technology for their remote working.

4.2.2 Using Applications to Increase Virtual Engagement

From the interview, the 3 out of 4 companies which applied remote working encourage the employees to open the camera during the meeting. All 4 companies’ successes in the meeting through Zoom application where they can see the face from video, sharing content and having real time recordable feedback for clearer communication. Moreover, the issues in the meeting should be set in another application to help following up tasks consistently such as, Notion application. Moreover, the financial consultant company always create a game to test the participation from staffs to check quality of communication in each meeting.

The Thai owners from financial company was trying to increase the staffs' engagement with group discussion and turn on the cameras. However, the technology couldn't replace the physical meeting and all the companies' owners and employees still prefer to have physical engagement occasionally about 1-2 days a week. The Kids School's employee suggested that, in case of long-term applying remote working, the company should provide a break session during the day to have a small talk for the staffs' socialization and relaxation.

4.2.3 Virtual Tasks Management

The challenge of remote working is how to keep the staffs in loops and be able to explicit finished tasks. Trust in employees' responsibility is important but not sufficient to proceed the remote works. Therefore, the company should help their staffs by setting up tasks schedule and stand by to support when they need supervision. According to the interview, all the 4 companies are good at tasks planning and online meeting to update each process. In Design & Construction case, they set up systematic task checklist by the application named Notion, to set the task plan, and notify staffs before coming due date. Moreover, the task checking should be clear and consistent with discipline while maintaining the freedom and keep motivation to the staffs to finish the tasks.

In terms of Monitoring, the SG owner admit that he was monitoring closely during remote working to ensure that all the tasks can be done on time even though he felt that it's slightly micromanagement. For Thai owners, they set up meeting schedule and follow up case weekly. However, the Thai owners especially F&B Manufacturing Company still prefer their staff to work onsite in the purpose of monitoring easily even some position can do remote working well.

4.2.4 Long Working Experience – (No supervision needed)

In the interviews, the average total working experience of the interviewees are over 10 years, the least experience is 3 years and the most experience is 20 years. From the interviews, it shows that all interviewees could work well individually with remote working due to long time experience. All interviewees knowing their tasks and scope of work clearly, therefore they are capable to automate the work by themselves

anywhere away from the offices. In financial consultant company which has the most experience in working over 10 years reflected the same positive working outcome through remote working. The 11 years' experience designer from *Design and Construction* company is happy to WFH because she can manage the task to be done faster and have more personal relaxing time at home.

4.2.5 Systematic Meeting Schedule

According to the interview, 3 of 4 companies which succeeded in remote working arranged a regular meeting schedule to maintain the loop of coordination. The financial company, kids design school and design, and construction owners share that they arrange the meeting schedule systematically in each day. The Design and construction owner who arrange remote working majorly arranges every morning before starting the work and another evening meeting to wrap up the work outcome. As a result, the employees know the frequently to finish their task and able to plan. Likewise, the owner realizes the progress of work situation from constantly monitor in the meeting. The systematic meeting schedule helps to keep the employees in the working loop, so everyone knows the working progress on the same ground. Therefore, employees could plan their work effectively and the owners know each project status by monitor entire tasks progress through the constant meeting.

Table 4.1 Summary Result of Remote Working Factors

<u>Challenge Factors</u>	<u>Details</u>	<u>Outcome</u>	<u>Sources</u>
Business Industry and type of tasks	The business with mostly physical activity and coordination tasks are more challenge	The owners prefer less remote working. eg. Manufacturing business, Education Business. The employees prefer less remote working because of less productivity eg. stock checking, paper document work, testing activity in the curriculum.	1B, 2A, 2B, 3B, 4A

Table 4.1 Summary Result of Remote Working Factors (cont.)

<u>Challenge Factors</u>	<u>Details</u>	<u>Outcome</u>	<u>Sources</u>
Financial Problem	Financial Problem due to COVID-19	The critical financial problem from the pandemic made them lose interest in investing in remote working tools to digitalize the core data for remote working.	1D
Lack of IT Support	Under investment in IT support	Not enough IT support in hardware/software causes less productivity.	2B, 3B, 4B
Lack of physical engagement	Insufficient staff's engagement	- The new employee can't fit in company's culture resulted as quit. - The young employee can't balance himself between work and private life, so he needs the company to help him by breakdown the working hour with small talk session.	2B,3A
Online Communication tools	The familiarity with online communication tools.	The owner could communicate clearly with the employees with sufficient tools because everyone is forced to adapting themselves in remote during COVID-19. The companies could success remote working with the same efficiency as onsite working from online communication tools e.g. Zoom, Google Meet, Line etc.	1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B, 4A, 4B, 4C
Virtual Engagement	Using applications to increase virtual engagement.	The owners and employees could maintain their engagement while working remotely and still maintain trust with the team members.	1A, 2B, 3A, 3B
Virtual Tasks Management	Create task & meeting schedule with systematic follow up from the applications.	The employees know clearly what to be done and could manage their working schedule effectively. The owners could track the completed tasks and knowing how to plan the jobs in bigger picture.	1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B

Table 4.1 Summary Result of Remote Working Factors (cont.)

<u>Challenge Factors</u>	<u>Details</u>	<u>Outcome</u>	<u>Sources</u>
Long Working Experience	The more experience employees need less supervision during remote working	The less supervision needed made remote working smoother. The employees could independently plan their work while working remote from the owner.	1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3A,3B, 4A, 4C
Systematic Meeting Schedule	Keep everyone in the loop of work progress	The owner could monitor work progress with their employees. The employees know their task progress situation and could plan earlier.	1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B

4.3 Benefits and Disadvantages of Remote Working

After the interviews, it shows that remote working weighs more benefits than disadvantage towards all parties in the company and the business itself. The benefits could be both tangible and intangible aspects. And the benefit could be good for a long-term management depending on the company's policy.

4.3.1 Owner's Benefits/ Disadvantage

- *Develop New Leadership Style* – Remote working is relying on the staff's responsibility much more than on site working; therefore, the owner should develop leadership style further than day to day monitoring for the long-term benefit. According to Design & Construction firm who succeed in remote working interview from the owner, there are 3 points that the owner should be aware of when applying remote working, communication, motivation, and autonomy. The owner should allow staff's freedom and commitment to motivate the sense of ownership in the tasks. With the new leadership style, it will help the owner to recruit young talented people because it's matches to the "new rich", convince your boss to let you work from home (or anywhere you want) while spending time working effectively in the place you enjoy rather than the office (Timothy,2015).

- Expand opportunities to hire diverse staffs – There are many positions that will be more beneficial from getting staffs from diverse location. In design & construction case, he could get the designers from Thailand and Italy while he is based in SG. The diverse culture provides distinguish design to his service. In F&B Manufacturing case, the R&D could create new ice-cream taste by traveling away from the office to source out new ingredients in different part of Thailand, while stay connecting to discuss with marketing department by working remotely.

- Less trust when lack of physical engagement – The long-distance working is different from working in the same place where team member can immediately response and coordinate the work easier. In the case of new employment, it creates disconnection to the team and supervisor easily and leading to big obstacle of work. As a result, the employee is not able to fit in working system.

4.3.2 Employee's Benefits/ Disadvantages

- More productivity at home – The working environment significantly affects to productivity. In Design & Construction case, Thai designer mentioned that working in the office can endure longer working hours from the colleagues' working vibes, while working at home affect to less working hour. WFH allows more breakout time to relax during the day. However, the productivity at home is better because she could be more focus to produce the work. Moreover, more relaxation atmosphere at home help her to be less intense when the meeting last slightly overtime. Furthermore, she doesn't feel like looking forward to the weekend comparing to onsite work because working days and weekend atmosphere are not much different.

- Save traveling time & cost – In Bangkok, bad traffic can be time and cost consuming over to create anxiety to people. Therefore, remote working is helping to reduce the unnecessary consumption to employees.

- Feel safe during pandemic – Due to COVID-19 forced the companies adapting to WFH, therefore it makes employees feel safe from infection. Administrator staff from Financial Consultant Company is worry free from the virus and no risk to convey the virus to people in her house by keeping distance from other colleagues who must meet up with many clients.

- Freedom & Sense of Ownership with their tasks – Remote working is inevitably rely much more to employees causes the owner to leave bigger room for their staff to manage the work in detail by themselves. As long as the staff is experience and need less supervision from the supervisor, remote working could elevate their motivation with the freedom of management and sense of ownership in each task. Especially the creative task where they could get input idea from various sources from preferable location. One of the design & construction staffs take the 2 years of pandemic time to travel aboard and oversea while working remotely for the company.

- Adding more working process – The long-distance working requires more touch point than physically working in the same place where team member can immediately response and coordinate the work easier. In the case of coordination task, it creates more processes to link the information from the team member causing more time in working process. In some case, it needs to separate the work individually to be more efficient.

4.3.3 The Company's Benefits/ Disadvantage

- Save Company's Operational Cost – The tangible advantage from working online is mainly from utilities and property rental cost. In the case of Financial Consultant, the owner mentioned that they occasionally arrange the meeting for their consultant team could save about 10,000 THB/month of venue rental cost and snack break spending. The cost reduction is up to 50% of monthly meeting cost.

- Faster Workflow from paperless work and online system – In the Financial Industry, developed online system could fasten paper workflow by reduce the procedure manual information input from client. During pandemic, the clients avoid physical meet up with the staff, therefore they do the file fill up by themselves which is a faster and lesser error of the information.

- Online Production & Channel Development – Working /Teaching online require different detail to be prepared, during pandemic force the Kid's Design Thinking School to Develop new products for an online meeting. They take this chance to close the online curriculum gap which wasn't delivered when arranging the teaching onsite. The activities are designed clearer in each step, concise, and not diluted with the content

in the curriculum. They also design the materials package for delivery to the client's home for hands-on activity at home.

- *Exploring New Opportunity beyond Physical Boundary* – For international SME companies in SG, the lockdown time help them to explore new products/services and expanded their clients out of the country through online technologies. The Kid Design School's owner observed more demand from parents for online class in Taiwan and China and it was an opportunity to coordinate teaching with local teachers. He was surprised when he found the kids in China could use Wechat Application to solve the language barrier problems in the class by themselves. As a result, the team can see new opportunities to do marketing and develop a new curriculum for overseas clients. Likewise, Design & Construction company in SG could work online by collaborating with local architects to monitor physical construction to reduce the constrain of remote working. Therefore, they can expand their clients to other countries.

4.4 Future Working Style After a Pandemic

8 interviewees out of 9 prefer to do hybrid work after the pandemic. Remote working has shown far more benefits than onsite working, but human socializing still needs to be maintained. Most of the interviewees both owners and employees require about 10-30% of onsite work depending on the activity in the business. The only person needed to do onsite work is the administrator in a financial consultant company, the main reason is more productive in coordination with other departments in the office and more convenient to do the paper document as it is required from the company.

Table 4.2 Result of Benefits of Remote Working by Business and Position

<u>Business Industry</u>	<u>Owners' Benefits/ Challenges</u>	<u>Sources</u>
<i>Creativity Business</i> - Kid's school - Design & Construction	<i>Develop New Leadership Style</i>	(3A)
<i>Creativity Business</i> - Kid's school - Design & Construction	<i>Expand opportunities to hire diverse staffs</i>	(2A, 3A)
<u>Business Industry</u>	<u>Employers' Benefits/ Challenges</u>	<u>Sources</u>
<i>Creativity Business</i> - Design & Construction	<i>More productivity at home</i>	(3B)
- Financial Industry - Kid's school - Design & Construction	<i>Save traveling time & cost</i>	(1B, 2B, 3B)
- Financial Industry - Kid's school - Design & Construction	<i>Feel safe during pandemic</i>	(1B, 2B, 3B)
<i>Creativity Tasks</i> - Kid's school - Design & Construction - Chef in F&B Manufacturing	<i>Freedom & Sense of Ownership with their tasks</i>	(2B, 3B, 4C)
<u>Business Industry</u>	<u>Companies' Benefits</u>	<u>Sources</u>
<u>Less physical activities industry</u> - Financial Industry - Kid's school - Design & Construction	<i>Save Company's Operational Cost</i>	(1A, 2A, 3A)
<u>Less physical activities industry</u> - Financial Industry - Kid's school - Design & Construction	<i>Faster Workflow from paperless work and online system</i>	(1A, 2A, 3A)
<i>All industries</i>	<i>Online Channel & Production & Development</i>	(1A, 2A, 3A, 4A)
<i>All industries</i>	<i>Exploring New Opportunity beyond Physical Boundary</i>	(1A, 2A, 3A, 4A)

4.5 Finding Summary

In general, the challenges and success factors from research are coherent with the previous finding from the literature review related to the business industry

pertaining to the type of tasks, technology investment and knowledge, Social and community support from the company, communication, and lastly tasks planning. The additional findings are regarding the working mindset depending on different cultures. The independent and hardworking mindset such as Italian and Singaporean resulted differently from Thai culture in terms of trust & monitoring and self-management with long-hour work. However, the cultural factor is still limited to conclude because of the lack of comparing cases.

An additional outcome of the research is regarding the different locations of the company affect different results. Different landscapes such as Singapore and Thailand could result in different views on the same aspects such as traveling to work commuter. In Singapore, traveling cost is cheaper and more relaxed causing a positive view in contrast with Bangkok where the traffic is worse. Furthermore, the research could find that the more international context could exploit more benefits from remote working than single culture as Thailand in the production and selling aspects.

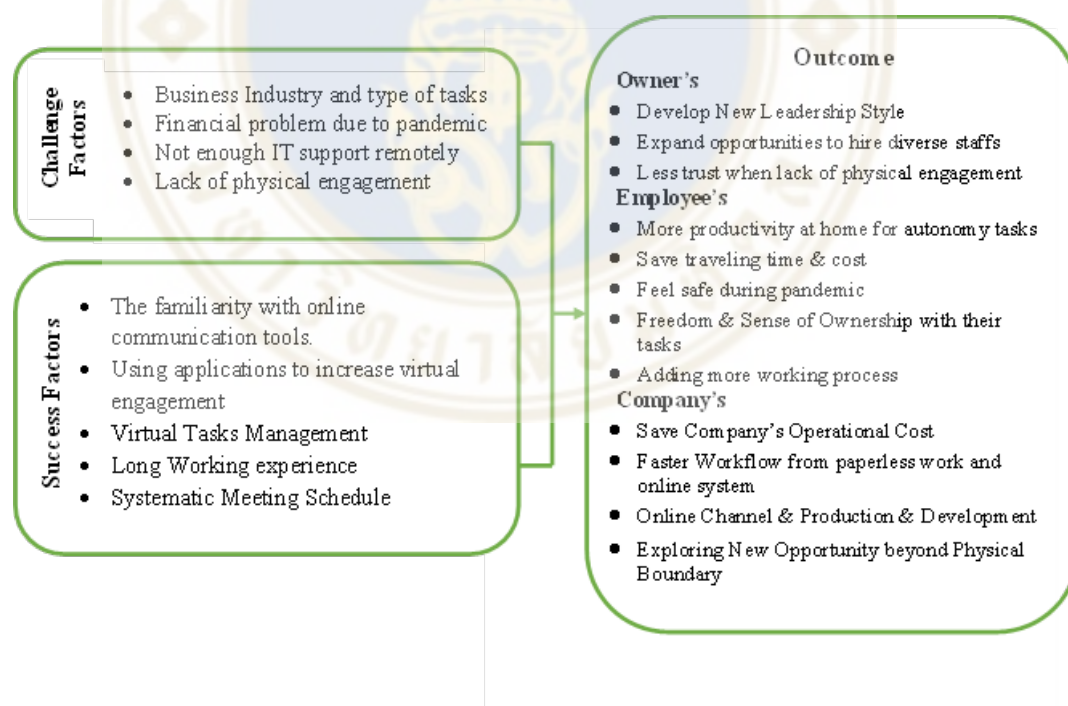


Figure 4.2 The Challenges and Success Factors of Remote Working for SME from this research

CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATION & CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

After collecting data from interviews, the research finding has shown mutual factors from the Literature Review affecting the challenge and success of remote working in SMEs. The 3 core factors regarding the company's business industry, are digital technology tools, communication, and the working process. Nonetheless, primary data collecting provides clearer as weight in each factor are different plus additional factors in terms of nationality and cultural background is influence the level of success in remote working.

A company's business is the core factor that influences business activities, the more linkage in each process of work, the more difficulty. Obviously, the business that needs to be physically done onsite like F&B manufacturing is the most challenging to be transferred as remote working. Other businesses can be managed to work remotely because the core working information is digitalized. However, in the manufacturing industry is possible to partially remote work if the important information is digitalized and uploaded online, which is depending on the owner's policy.

Technology is the second important factor for remote working. The research has shown that all 4 SME companies have enough knowledge to adopt basic applications in the market to be used in online work. The companies don't need to invest much more in hardware as the current basic tool such as PC, laptops, and mobile phones are sufficient to run the business. However, an additional IT technician is required for remote problem solving with the software. The only challenge is the investment in the cost of manpower to keep synchronizing digital information to the stock and product inventory daily update. It is challenging for SMEs because of the limitation of the capital during pandemics, therefore only primary activity to generate revenue is considered to invest in during the critical time.

The third factor is communication and planning of the work process. According to the primary research information, all SME companies are successful in developing their communication to match online work by scheduling and exploiting the online application in the market to keep engagement and follow up the tasks with their staff. Some companies looking forward to gaining virtual offices to enhance staff engagement online.

Lastly, additional finding factors are the new leadership style. The pandemic influences the new normal way of working in the office regardless of size. The advantage of small businesses is to be agile in leadership style. The owner should be more open and give freedom to their staff with discipline and clear tasks. An additional factor is a local culture, different nationality innates different levels of bearing uncertainty and hardworking level, which could be reflected in the tasks follow up detail and long hour working problem when WFH.

5.2 Recommendation

- SMEs have an advantage in agility because of the size to adapt themselves for remote working.
- Hybrid working will be the future norm of working. SME owners are inevitably developing their mindset and leadership style to adapt to the new trend.
- SME owners' mindset is the first factor to influence the transformation to remote working in the company.
- Information system preparation is necessary for remote working in SMEs in the future. Available technology in the market can support fewer paper documents and enhance productivity with economic price.
- Both owners and employees in SMEs should learn the new digital tools to enhance efficiency in remote working.
- SME owners should consider autonomous tasks can be done remotely and more coordination tasks should be done on-site.
- Physical working is still important to maintain in the future working because both owner and employee are bonded trust from the physical engagement.

- The new office design could be developed for the meeting, brainstorming, and socializing instead of a silo for working.
- Designing the office in a relaxing tone like home can help to reduce tension from work for the employees.
- To make processes suitable for remote working, the company can break down the tasks to be clear and due date to finish the work by themselves at home.
- The owner should design physical gathering activities to bridge the team member together while they must work apart.
- The owner of different businesses should find a balanced ratio between working on-site and working from home for the most efficient working in the long term.
- Different types of people prefer a different way of working. The owner should observe and match the best way for the individual employee.
- The key to efficient remote working is mentality bidding through trust and giving a sense of ownership in their accountable task.
- Giving feedback between owners and employees constantly will help to improve the remote working in SMEs.
- The owner should be flexible with the schedule occasionally to relax the tension in a systematic meeting schedule.
- Allow employees to make mistakes during remote working, so they have the courage to be accountable for their decision when working remotely.
- Integrate work and family together when remote working integrated into the house to increase both aspects' quality.
- SMEs' owner shouldn't stick with the working hours but rather focus on tasks and result when transferred to remote working.
- The goal of remote working in SMEs is cost-saving in workplace space and unlocking limitations to working in one place. Providing flexibility to live their life and work, while maintaining their own benefit with the company's profit.
- Singapore SMEs can exploit a remote working advantage over Thai SMEs due to English language users having fewer barriers to utilizing overseas

employment and customer expansion. Therefore, Thai SMEs can expand their opportunities through remote work by improving their English competency.

5.3 Limitation

- The validity of the results is limited due to the small sample size.
- The research originally expected to compare the multi-culture working factors. However, the evidence from the interviews is not clear enough to conclude.
- The 2 interviews with employees were arranged through phone calls. Hence, it's difficult to observe nonverbal expressions throughout the interview.



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