

**ISMC 2019**  
**15<sup>th</sup> International Strategic Management Conference**

**MANAGING REMOTE EMPLOYEES: A QUALITATIVE  
RESEARCH IN THE LOGISTICS INDUSTRY**

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*Abstract*

It is becoming increasingly difficult to manage organizations operating in today's complex global business environment. In particular, to manage the remote employees, who work outside of the physical boundaries of the firms, in accordance with the management principles and through the organizational purposes is considered one of the most challenging area. Despite their constantly growing numbers, the remote employees have been neglected in recent scientific studies. Meanwhile, most of those rare studies have been conducted on the IT industry and its teleworkers. However, it is known that the truck drivers have been working on behalf of a company for years almost never been in the head office. On the other hand, studies on long-distance drivers generally focus on risk factors, job stress and health of drivers. Therefore, it is a significant shortcoming that those employees, who are the critical link of the transportation function of logistics, have not been subjected on to the scientific management and organizational behaviour researches. Thus, the current study aims to eliminate this gap in this issue. This qualitative research study tries to respond above mentioned research gap with the anti-positivist approach. Contrary to the majority of the recent studies, in spite of employees (drivers), the fleet managers of the large-scale land transport companies in the industry have been selected as the unit of analysis. The data obtained from the open-ended interviews were analysed by Nvivo 12 program. The findings of our study were evaluated and discussed from an interpretive and external perspective.

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**Keywords:** Remote employees, human resource management, logistics industry, qualitative research.



## 1. Introduction

The developments in information, communication and transportation technologies play an accelerating role to become a global organization for businesses. However, the globalization of the organization also causes it to be complex and chaotic. It is becoming increasingly difficult to manage such organizations operating in today's global business environment. Especially, it is an important problem area of executives to manage the members, as a part of the social organism we call organization, who works out of physical boundaries of organization within the organizational objectives. People, who take on the task of managing people within the framework of planning, organizing, managing, controlling, and coordinating unchanged principles which are expressed by H. Fayol, and in line with the organizational objectives, are expected to be active in the roles of decision making, collecting and distributing information, and interpersonal relations in the words of H. Mintzberg. However, in the changing global business environment, it is quite severe to fulfil the management activities that will contain jobs, people, and relationships according to the frame by G. Homans and in line with the basic principles of management. In this regard, topics such as communication, leadership, manager's influencing others by motivating or using the power of its own, providing employee commitment, and coordinating within the framework of organizational objectives are the first ones who come to mind that worth examining.

The "remote employees", who generate the focus of this study and works more than 50% of the workhours outside of the physical boundaries of organization but don't have any management responsibilities, are neglected to do scientific work on but a growing group (Golden, 2006). When the relevant literature research on the keywords is made, it is seen that almost all current studies are focused on the employees who work outside the physical boundaries of organization work in commonly IT industry or home through the opportunities that the internet provides (e.g., Staples, Hulland, & Higgins, 1999; Gabel & Mansfield, 2001; Staples, 2001). For instance, in Gabel and Mansfield's (2001) research, it is mentioned the internet created cyber workers and the legal relationship between employer and employee is examined. Johnston, Wech, Jack, and Beavers (2010) focused on the information security vulnerability that would cause of the IT employees work outside the boundaries of organization.

However, vehicle drivers working in transportation industry – especially long-distance drivers, have been known to represent their companies in a way that they have been working on behalf of the company for many years without seeing the head office of the company since the commercialization of the industry. Hence, the working problems according to this group are not a problem posed by globalization and/or advance in relevant technologies, but a field neglected by management sciences. The scientific studies on long-distance drivers are generally about the risk factors, work stress and drivers' health issues. Therefore, it is a significant shortcoming that it has the employees of logistics companies who are an important ring in this, have not been a subject of scientific research carried out within the framework of concepts of management and organizational behavior. Present study is a heuristic research that pursue the goal to meet the deficit.

The main assumption of our research was set out the leader-member exchange (LMX). The theory of leader-member exchange is an approach which is developed by Dansereau, Graen, and Haga, (1975) and, Graen and Cashman (1975) and examines the binary communication between leader and its follower within the framework of social change theory based on relationship. The theory emphasizes on the

interrelation between the leader-member by discussing the relationship between each follower of the leader separately. There are mutual expectations in relationships. Besides, the interaction level between bilateral relationships is correlated with the feeling of trust. In this interaction, the quality of the relationship means being based on mutual trust between the leader and his/her subordinate and being more productive, high quality. Members who have qualified relationship with their leader, tend to effort and personal commitment to their superior. Thus, they contribute to enhance the performance the organization. Leaders tend to respond to such subordinates by providing more social support and organizational resources, and by rewarding them (Çalışkan, 2017). Concordantly, the managers, that create our working group, must contact effectively within the framework of leader-member exchange to manage the drivers who works detachedly and remote employees of organization in line with organizational objectives.

Our study is an exploratory empirical research which tries to explain a subject with a lack of managerial sense in the social sciences in terms of anti-positivist approach through qualitative research methods. In this context, open-ended interviews were made with the fleet managers of large-scale road transport companies in the industry, and the data obtained were analysed by Nvivo 12 statistical program. Eventually, research findings are evaluated from the interpretive and external perspective. This paper is focus on the evaluation of remote employees and challenges of managing these employees through the outside boundaries of the organization. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows; Section 2 examines previous researches about managing employees working outside physical areas and related theories. Section 3 focus on methodology and. Section 4 gives information about the findings of the research. The last part of the study consists of the conclusion.

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Managing the Employees Working Out of Physical Boundaries**

The radical changes in business world under the leadership of computer, communication, and transportation technologies and systems lead to different demands of stakeholders, especially customers and suppliers, and create an important area of struggles for enterprises. Businesses recognize that traditional strategies, styles of business, and organizational structures that are still in force are not suitable for this dynamic and complex business environment, but sometimes with painful experiences they realize that they have to be simple, flexible, and innovative. Especially many managers who works in the area of people management, try to respond this change with their cooperative efforts, flexible and temporary working areas (Robbins & Coulter, 2016, p. 344). New organizational structures that emerged in this regard and defined as an unlimited organization in the literature necessitate do business with mostly with the remote employees and establishment of organizational structures such as virtual organizations and network organizations (Robbins & Coulter, 2016, p.348).

One of the processes where this necessity is felt intensely is the processes of distribution and transportation in the supply chain of companies. Since the 1980s, increase in businesses tend to outsource their compulsory activities by focusing on their basic skills, and the globalization, which gained momentum from the 1990s, extended supply chains at the international level have obligated many producing companies to cooperate with organizers for distribution activities. For this situation, the

products which are expected to create value for the company and the customer have not worked together until now and have never been within the physical boundaries of the company, but have made the company of the firm a temporary element, and hence the management responsibility has arisen. Yet this situation also applies to transportation companies in logistics industry. Drivers, especially long-distance drivers, have been working on behalf of the company by representing their firm in distant markets and run a relationship with end customers without seeing the head office of the company for many years.

Researches has focused on recently became increasingly popular virtual study and working models outside the main office (e.g., Maruca & Egan, 1998; Verbeke, Schulz, Greidanus, & Hambley, 2008). Increase in virtual and remote employer numbers reveals the need to focus on this study model. Virtual and/or remote working have potential benefits for employees (for example more flexibility, less distracting variables etc.). Besides it has benefits for employers, too (for instance, decreasing costs for renting, increase in efficiency etc.). In sum, virtual working presents an attractive alternative to a routine work day for both parties. But, virtual and remote working has disadvantages as much as it has advantages. From the perspective of employees, occupational and social isolation, lack of access to informal information, difficulty of separating house and work responsibilities, technology and accessibility issues etc. On the other hand, from the point of employers, managing blindly, difficulties in communication, and copying the equipment at home etc. are observed in disadvantages. Shortly, the virtual work is neither a shining utopia nor a desolate wasteland, but both have the potential to have more moderate characteristics. Organizational researches have lately begun to examine virtual and remote working models but until today, many of those studies analysed virtual working and its results only from the perspective of employees, by using the self-reporting methods. For instance, Hill, Miller, Weiner, and Colihan (1998) examined the effects of virtual office on work/life balance problems. Raghuram, London, and Larsen (2001) has focused on the employees' performance within the context of successful adaption signals and their satisfaction from new working system. There are many similar publications in literature. The main question underlying all those studies is: How can organizations provide efficiency and satisfaction of virtual employees? However, a distinguish is required between virtual working and remote working by highlighting an important point here. As a result of the developments in the internet and other telecommunication technologies, the virtual working means employees who will work only with computers maintain their working life at home instead of central offices. Remote working covers the employees that work at least 50% of their working time at outside of but committed to the office. When this subject is evaluated from the basic assumption of our research, it will be appropriate to emphasize the importance of the leader/manager's role on development of virtual or remote employees' evaluation. However, there are not many publications about the management of employees that work outside of the physical are of organization. In fact, as a representative of organization the leader/manager is generally (at least indirectly) responsible of the sub-results like efficiency and satisfaction. In this context, remote employees in logistics industry are not enough to form a theoretical framework intended for applications in field. In one of the limited number of studies in the literature, Arnold et al. (1997) conducted a study about the drivers' working and sleep hours and their fatigue perception in a survey with 638 participants. On the other hand, in a thesis study that the effects of leadership on the employees' performance and job satisfaction in a virtual work environment are examined, on the contrary of frequently encountered studies

on employees working in virtual business environment, aforementioned employees' leaders are discussed (Lyon, 2003).

## **2.2. Leader-Member Exchange Theory**

Our research's main assumption is supported by leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. The theory expresses the leader's exchange relationship between different employees and their superiors by assuming he/she treats equal to all subordinates (Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998). As a result of developments in leadership researches and the literature of the Leader-Member Exchange Theory focuses on the bilateral relations between leader and followers unlike other theories that try to explain leadership based on the characteristics of leader or situation (Michael, Guo, Wiedenbeck, & Ray, 2006). Thereby, from the point of basing on bilateral relations, it stays from traditional leadership models and neglected mutual communication process in traditional leadership models and differentiation in this process constitutes the research topic of theory (Baş, Keskin, & Mert, 2010). Leader-member exchange became a very important concept for management scientists because of the ability of predict numerous desired results. Leader-member exchange theory, with this characteristic, can be an overlooked explanation for driving and alike business environments where the highness of employee change ratio is a general problem. Opportunity to develop a positive leader-member exchange between drivers and their managers is restricted by several reasons. Namely, it is a high possibility for drivers to experience a bad leader-member exchange and thus, they mostly prefer quitting their jobs among other probabilities. Surprisingly, transport operators that somehow built a good leader-member exchange cannot guarantee the low employee change ratio. Because in general, challenges in driver supply (Min & Emam, 2003) and in particular, shortcomings of those who have strong capabilities enable drivers to move from one organization to another. The researches on leader-member relationships emphasize on the interaction of both social-based and business-focused. In these studies, there are four conceptual dimensions were found out that explains leader-member exchange: sensuality (friendship and liking), loyalty (mutual support and obligation), contribution (performance beyond minimum standards), and professional respect (appreciation of knowledge and competence for work) (Morrow, Suzuki, Crum, Ruben, & Pautasch, 2005).

## **2.3. Phenomenology and Grounded Theory**

Phenomenology as a qualitative research method, is a way of research that benefits from subjective experiences of individuals to retrieve information about the phenomenon research subject. Phenomenology tries to recognize experienced world by individuals to explore the common meanings underlying the subject of research and explain to essence of experiences (Kocabiyık, 2016). Grounded theory tries to understand what the individuals' behaviors and beliefs are according to the researching phenomenon. Theories that explain the reasons of behaviors are developed by researching the main categories which are grounded and grounded theories. Attention is paid to concepts and mutual relations between concepts because it is very crucial to create or form conceptions in this method (Kocabiyık, 2016). Since grounded theory was shown up in 1967, it didn't undergo an important change. Specificity of procedures are elaborated as the method is developed in practice. Grounded theory procedures are designed for integrated concepts that provides a full disclosure of social phenomena. Grounded theory can

provide predictability up to a certain level, in accordance only to special circumstances (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

It is considered necessary to examine phenomenology and grounded theory together which have seen as important research methods in qualitative studies (Kocabiyik, 2016). The grounded theory that supports the qualitative research methodology of present study is both a research method and a data analysis way. The main idea while discovering a grounded theory is to find a central category that explains the bottom line and has a high degree of abstraction but based on data. It is specified that the researches codes have gathered in three main categories. First code level is to find conceptual categories in abstraction level. Other code level is to find relationships between these categories. The last code level is to conceptualize and explain these relations in a higher degree of abstraction (Ilgar & Ilgar, 2013).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

Our research is supported by epistemology which is one of the important part of philosophy of science that queries how to access true information, and content analysis pattern which is one of the qualitative research methods that bases anti-positivist paradigm perspective as an extension of this philosophy. Interviews that had with managers in the content of research are compiled as a data set and used as secondary data in our research. The data obtained from the analyses by Nvivo 12 program are discussed in interpretive and external perspectives.

#### **3.2. Research Framework**

Turkey has one of the biggest road transport fleet in Europe-wide. According to TUIK Household Labor Force Survey 2017 data, the 1,235 million of the total 28,189 million employment play a part in transport and storage business lines (UDHB, 2018, p.10). Since the end of the year 2017, number of vehicles within authorized companies are 1.240.543 (UDHB, 2018, p.24), 838,718 of them are engaged in domestic and overseas transportation of vehicle, vehicle etc. (UDHB, 2018, p.22).

Our research contains the fleet managers of large-scale firms which are in logistics industry of this economic value and in the field of transportation activities. The managers who contributed by accepting our invitation are the fleet managers of eleven logistics companies that placed near the top in industry in terms of turnover and fleet size.

### **4. Findings**

According to frequency distributions seen in Table 1, the concepts of Chauffer/Driver and Organization/Company, that determines our research field, set the priority. Except these concepts, the first finding in the third rank and has 154 frequency distribution, which can be an answer for our problematical is the concept of "Time". Concept of "Commitment" ranks fifth with 59 frequency distribution. "Education" concept is the sixth with 55 frequency distribution. Concept of "Happiness" is ranked as seventh.

**Table 01.** Frequency Distributions

Basic Concepts	Frequency
1. Driver	2. 437
3. Organization/Company	4. 169
5. Time	6. 154
7. Employee	8. 74
9. Commitment	10. 59
11. Education	12. 55
13. Happiness	14. 47
15. Logistics	16. 29
17. Satisfaction	18. 27
19. Communication	20. 19

The frequent use of concepts in the field of management sciences in the context of logistics industry, especially in terms of chauffeur / driver, institution / company and time concepts confirms that the interviewees made consistent statements within our research framework and therefore the analyses conducted on these views are reliable.

Moreover, those findings which are closely related with and highlighting the main themes of the logistics industry were not subjected to the “word tree analysis”, namely: driver, organization/company, employee, and logistics.

According to the “time” concept’s word tree analysis; time zone (timeframe), value, not lose time, safe, fast, measurable, money, time stress like concepts are the findings in this context.

What creates value in logistics processes is to deliver the right product, to right customer, in right quantity, with right cost, in right conditions, and in right time. Thus, one of the competition goals of logistics elements, which provides the product movement, is time. Time must be considered in the meanings of speed and meeting the both internal and external customers’ needs and expectations just on time. When the time concept in the interviews which are done with managers is re-examined, it is detected that the time is used for to evaluate the employees who work outside the physical boundaries, too. Therefore, the concept of time in the logistics industry has emerged as an important key performance indicator from strategic to operational level. This finding matches up with field literature. But it has also emerged that the use of time as a priority measurement tool creates stress on employees.

According to analysis results of other frequently used concept “commitment”; seniority, organization identity, organizational commitment, creating a valuable environment, loving the job, and happiness.

Our findings support the relative variables which are used frequently in theoretical models that contains the concept of commitment, and placed in organizational behavior field literature, in the concept of logistics industry and management of the employees work outside the physical area. Besides, seniority that matches with continuance commitment, organization identity, and organization identity that matched with group belongingness are the concepts partaking in other commitment studies in field literature. However, it is understood that the work is in technical level, different from other lines of work, and

challenging from the use of commitment to work and loving work concepts as a premise of commitment concept. It is a specific finding in the industry that these difficulties faced by the employees in the field and the fact that the education levels are low, and that the wage policies are used as incentives to ensure the loyalty of an administrator is a specific finding in the industry, and as it is known, money is not among the concepts in the first place in the organizational commitment studies.

What comes next upon its frequency of use, in accordance the analysis result of “**education**” concept; educational level, vocational trainings, starting work, continuing education, educations according to operation running, family education, in-house and external, driver trainings, self-improvement, efficiency, no new drivers, nurture, and stress management concepts came into prominence.

Many of the concepts as a result of our findings take place under the title of human research management and qualify the types of educations. However, many various concepts about education are known and used in place confute the permanent ideas about the education level of industry by revealing the fact that the industry is related in education closely.

According to the analysis result of frequently used concept the “**happiness**”, shown up concepts are family, organization identity, motivation, national economy, coordination, loving the job, speed, materiality, efficiency, tenacity, inner world, success, job satisfaction, and pleasure.

Our findings support the related variables, which are frequently used in the theoretical models covering the concept of happiness in the field of organizational behaviour, in the context of the management of employees in the logistics industry and outside the physical area. However, national economy, coordination, organization identity, and speed like concepts are separated in this context. As follows, it makes employees happy to contribute with their activities to the national economy, which we can express as a big picture of the created value by employees’ actions. Besides, drivers are accepted as representative of companies by customers in every point where the service is given. This situation increases the level of happiness of drivers who works outside the physical area and alone by feeding their feelings of belonging in a group or a company. On the other hand, even though it is seen as a job that requires acting individually, every member in supply chain system must work coordinated like in the example of orchestra members performing an entire work perfectly.

Employees feel themselves as a part of a successful team when the mission is completed coordinately within the framework of “right” criteria that mentioned before, and it makes the employees happy who work outside the physical area. Lastly, matching of happiness with the concept of speed can be interpreted as both feeling customer satisfaction and take time off after a rapidly completed operation for themselves and their families.

As final, according to the word tree of “**satisfaction**” concept; sense of satisfaction, turnover, serviced customers, mutual trust, happiness, joy, identifying the field, education, to be cared, solving problems, work stress, know what to do in field, building a gaining balance, and long-distance driver like concepts are among the findings.

Our discoveries support related variables that are used frequently in theoretical models which includes the “job satisfaction” and places in the literature of organizational behaviour, within the scope of logistics industry and management of the employees working outside the physical area. If the manager knows the field and performs visits can be commented as “management by walking around” (Hernes,

2005), the satisfaction level of employees who is accompanied, and touched. In other respects, employees' level of satisfaction increases if the organization performs over the minimum requirements, shares premium or income with their employees who creates value for company. Lastly, long-distance drivers are the leading the most toilsome employees in logistics industry's activity field. Even though driving and rest periods are tried to be regulated by law, these durations away from home are both physically and spiritually destructive. Withal, they have financial responsibilities for the goods they carry. So, it understood that the managers care about the commitment of those personnel they mention often in the interviews.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This research's main aim is to interpret the perspectives of managers about the management of employees that work outside the physical boundaries of organization by an anti-positivist approach from external perspective. As the drivers who work outside the physical of the organization in logistics firms were creating the qualitative research, which is performed with this perspective, the work group is created by the vehicle fleet managers where the drivers work in.

Although the management of the employees outside the physical boundaries of the company, which is a phenomenon especially in the informatics and communication technologies, has recently gained popularity in the management literature, long-distance drivers have been working for almost a hundred years since the commercialization of the transportation industry of the logistics industry. However, the fact that the employees in this field of business are not covered in the scope of management sciences and especially in the field of organizational behaviour adds originality to this study. The concepts which are repeated often by managers are expected to consist the prioritized concepts in managing the industry and the employees in the relevant line of business. When we look in to the concepts in this context, commitment, education, happiness, satisfaction, and communication concepts differ from others. Rather than the performance measurements of remote employees, it is known that they can be managed easily by the managers who are educated in management sciences and/or experienced by providing their loyalties. Giving the employees internal trainings and letting them get external trainings for their personal growth is in the concepts that creates organizational commitment and is another area of our findings overlap the literature. However, the fact that the concept of happiness emerges more frequently than satisfaction and communication concepts show that only the happy employees will be dependent on the organization and work within the institutional framework drawn up by the managers. The satisfaction which is get from job will make it easier to manage an employee by the management it is connected. Communication, however, is one of the issues that most of the employees need outside the physical area, regardless of the way they are provided. In fact, in a recent research, drivers consider the technological systems which get into their vehicle cabins as a performance enhancer but not an attack to their privacy, on the contrary of expectations (Sevim, Köseoğlu, & Acar, 2015).

The aim of this study is to explain the "remote employees" who work more than 50% of their work hours outside the physical area of organization, and which concepts of these tasks of managers who have the responsibility of direction(management) based on, towards the leader-member exchange theory within the anti-positivist approach framework by the qualitative research methods. The findings obtained from

the expressions of managers who run the transport fleet of long-distance employees, revealed the concepts that are based on current practices of the industry and the employees in terms of management. Within this framework, it is recommended for managers, who currently work or will work in future, to use the concept of “time” sensitively which can affect like knife edge as well as it is one of the main goals of industry to get high performance from employees; not to forget that it is important for them to feel “happy” and “satisfied” of their jobs to provide the employee “commitment” which is the basis of sustaining this gruelling task; that trained workers will perform better and that this will contribute to the corporate performance by creating satisfied and happy employees, and that the technology as a result is an advantage, but it is one of the traditional methods to make contact with employees by making it a routine. From a strategic point of view, successful management of remote employees will benefit the organization in the long term. Remote employees are the focus of the most important activities of the organization and they are critically important. In today's competitive environment where talent wars continue, enterprises have difficulty in reaching qualified human resources. In this respect, keeping the remote employees and ensuring their sustainability is extremely important in terms of both cost and performance. As the remote employees' level of happiness, commitment and satisfaction increases, it will be a positive return to the organization. Social exchange theory also supports this strategic relationship very well.

Due to its qualitative research qualification, our study is applied on managers of logistics firms that have vast amount of vehicle fleet and superior organizational performance. Besides they are monopolizing a major part of the market, these firms are in the minority in the context of number of organizations. Hence, many small and medium size logistics companies, which are mostly family businesses, are excluded. Therefore, next studies can be repeated by categorical sampling within the context of financial magnitude, number of employees, and the size of park lots of vehicles in equity.

Following by, quantitative studies that create a specific scale to the industry can be done within the framework of data obtained from qualitative researches and theories that are accepted in management and organizational commitment literature. In this context, the use of executive control systems and tools, the management activities in this direction and the effects of communication on the remote employees can be researched.

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