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The "Empty Desk" Syndrome: Determinants of Loneliness and Emotional Transition Among Urban Retirees

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ABSTRACT: Retirement represents a major life transition that extends beyond the end of employment and requires individuals to adjust to significant psychological and social changes. Despite extensive research on financial preparedness, limited attention has been given to the emotional experiences of urban retirees. This study proposes Empty Desk Syndrome as a new conceptual framework for explaining the emotional transition and loneliness experienced after retirement. The study adopts a conceptual research design based on a structured narrative literature review. The framework was developed through comparative analysis and conceptual synthesis of peer reviewed literature. The review focused on retirement psychology, identity theory, loneliness among older adults and *Empty Nest Syndrome*. The findings identify three interconnected dimensions underlying *Empty Desk Syndrome*, namely disrupted daily routines, shrinking social networks and professional identity crisis. The study also identifies the digital divide and established work culture as reinforcing factors that intensify post-retirement adjustment challenges. The proposed framework demonstrates that these dimensions interact dynamically rather than operating independently. By integrating these dimensions into a unified psychosocial model, the framework extends existing retirement literature beyond financial preparedness and single-dimensional explanations of retirement adjustment. It provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical research and offers practical implications for developing comprehensive pre-retirement programmes that integrate financial preparedness with psychological, social and emotional well-being.

KEYWORDS: Digital divide, Empty Desk Syndrome, Professional identity, Retirement adjustment, Social networks

1. INTRODUCTION

Retirement is widely regarded as the conclusion of one's working life. However, retirement is a major life transition. It requires individuals to adapt to profound psychological, social and behavioural changes beyond leaving paid employment (Thane, 2006). Ending a career involves more than withdrawing from the labour force. It also requires individuals to redefine patterns of daily living that have evolved over many years. As professional responsibilities disappear, retirees must adapt to a lifestyle that is no longer organised around occupational roles (Brugiavini, 2001; Yeung & Lee, 2022). Throughout adulthood, employment provides far more than financial security. It shapes social identity, reinforces self-esteem and establishes everyday routines that gradually become embedded in an individual's sense of self (Froidevaux et al., 2019). Consequently, retirement represents not merely the end of employment but the beginning of a complex process of personal and social readjustment.

The significance of this transition becomes more apparent when examined from a social perspective. Oldenburg (1989) argued that modern social life is organised around three principal settings namely the home, the workplace and informal public spaces such as cafés and parks. Although these informal spaces encourage social interaction, the workplace remains the primary environment in which most adults develop meaningful social relationships. Daily interactions with colleagues foster shared experiences, mutual support and a sense of belonging. This pattern is particularly evident in urban societies, where opportunities for regular social interaction outside the workplace have become increasingly limited. Retirement therefore entails more than leaving a place of employment. It also involves losing an important social environment that has structured everyday life for many years. For some individuals, this loss makes the transition to retirement considerably more difficult (Miron et al., 2022).

Against this background, this study introduces the concept of *Empty Desk Syndrome* to describe the psychosocial experience that may emerge following retirement. The office desk symbolises an individual's professional role and daily working life. Upon retirement, leaving the desk behind signifies the loss of routine work responsibilities. Retirees also lose the social interactions, structured routines and professional identity developed throughout their careers. The proposed concept shares important similarities with *Empty Nest Syndrome*. The syndrome describes the psychological responses experienced by some parents after their children leave home to marry, begin employment or live independently (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). In both situations, individuals experience the loss of a long-established social role that has become central to their identity. Bougea et al. (2020) argued that the loss of such roles may result in substantial psychosocial consequences. Nevertheless, the intensity of these experiences differs according to individual life circumstances, personal background and adaptive capacity.

Despite the importance of retirement as a major life transition, existing research continues to emphasise financial preparedness. Much of the literature focuses on retirement savings, pension schemes and financial planning (Zaimah et al., 2023). A similar emphasis is evident in

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studies examining financial literacy and retirement preparedness (Abdullah et al., 2023; Kumaraguru et al., 2022). Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the emotional and psychological experiences associated with retirement. Kenny et al. (2025) reported that retirement may increase both loneliness and social isolation, although these effects may not persist over time. This imbalance suggests that research on psychological adjustment has not advanced at the same pace as studies addressing financial preparation for retirement.

Understanding retirees' experiences has become increasingly important within the context of urban living. Drawing upon evidence from 24 countries, Zhu et al. (2025) found that higher levels of urbanisation were associated with longer periods of loneliness among older adults despite increasing life expectancy. Likewise, Henning-Smith et al. (2019) reported that older adults living in urban areas were more likely to experience loneliness than some of their rural counterparts, even though rural communities generally maintained fewer formal social relationships. These findings suggest that urban environments do not necessarily provide stronger social support for older adults. Existing literature further indicates that no previous study has specifically examined the experience of *Empty Desk Syndrome* among urban retirees.

The importance of this issue becomes even more evident in light of ongoing global demographic change. The World Health Organization (2025) projected that the global population aged 60 years and above will increase from 1.1 billion in 2023 to 1.4 billion by 2030. Similarly, the United Nations (2023) reported that population ageing is occurring across almost every region of the world rather than being confined to developed countries. At the same time, urbanisation continues to accelerate worldwide, resulting in a growing proportion of retirees living in urban environments. These demographic trends highlight the need to pay greater attention to the psychological well-being of urban retirees.

Although previous studies have explained retirement through perspectives such as identity transition, financial preparedness and social adjustment, these dimensions have generally been examined independently. For example, the identity transition model proposed by Froidevaux et al. (2019) focuses primarily on the reconstruction of professional identity during retirement, whereas other studies have separately examined changes in daily routines or social relationships. Existing research therefore provides valuable insights into individual aspects of retirement but offers limited explanation of how these dimensions interact to shape retirees' emotional experiences. This conceptual separation leaves an important gap in understanding retirement as an integrated psychosocial adjustment process.

In response to this gap, the present study proposes *Empty Desk Syndrome* as a new conceptual framework that integrates disrupted daily routines, shrinking social networks and professional identity crisis within a single explanatory model. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate outcomes of retirement, the proposed framework conceptualises them as interconnected processes that continuously influence one another throughout post-retirement adjustment. By integrating professional identity theory, the principle of role loss underlying *Empty Nest Syndrome* and contemporary retirement research, the framework extends existing theoretical perspectives and offers a more comprehensive explanation of the emotional transition experienced by urban retirees. It also provides a conceptual foundation for developing pre-retirement programmes that integrate financial preparedness with psychological, social and emotional well-being.

2.1 The Concept of Empty Desk Syndrome and Its Theoretical Foundation

In this study, the term *syndrome* does not denote a clinically recognised disease or mental disorder. Instead, it serves as a metaphor for the emotional experiences that may arise after retirement. *Empty Desk Syndrome* is conceptualised through three interconnected dimensions namely changes in professional identity, disruption of daily routines and the decline of social relationships following retirement. Together, these dimensions provide the foundation for the conceptual framework used to examine retirees' emotional experiences.

The metaphor of the *empty desk* is inspired by the Clean Desk Policy commonly practised in corporate organisations. Under this policy, employees are expected to clear their desks at the end of each working day. On the final day of employment, however, the same action assumes a different meaning. An empty desk symbolises the end of a professional career and the beginning of a new stage of life. More importantly, an office desk represents more than a physical workspace. It is where individuals perform professional responsibilities, develop social relationships and strengthen their professional identity throughout their careers. Leaving this space permanently therefore involves more than departing from the workplace. It also requires individuals to redefine themselves as retirees entering a new phase of life (Jolles et al., 2023).

This study adopts the identity transition model proposed by Froidevaux et al. (2019) as its theoretical foundation. The model explains how professional identity changes during the transition from employment to retirement. Its focus extends beyond changes in employment status. Instead, it explains how retirees reconstruct their understanding of themselves after leaving the workforce. Throughout working life, occupational roles, responsibilities and organisational recognition shape an individual's identity. Following retirement, this identity may no longer correspond with everyday life. As a result, retirees begin to establish new roles and a renewed sense of purpose. Froidevaux et al. (2019) described this process through three interconnected elements namely identity discrepancy, identity transition negotiation and the quality of social exchange relationships. The authors further argued that employees approaching retirement often continue to define themselves through their occupational roles despite their impending retirement.

Identity discrepancy arises when individuals continue to define themselves through their former occupational roles after retirement. Consequently, identities developed during working life no longer correspond with post-retirement experiences. Retirees therefore need to reconstruct their sense of self to reflect their new social roles. This adjustment becomes easier when supportive social relationships are maintained throughout the transition. The process does not begin only after retirement. Instead, it starts during the pre-retirement stage and continues into the early years of retirement (Froidevaux et al., 2019).

Miron et al. (2022) also examined changes in social identity among retired academics. Their findings indicate that retirement involves more than leaving employment or relinquishing professional status. It also transforms how individuals understand and define themselves. Unlike Froidevaux et al. (2019), who emphasised identity discrepancy as the starting point of adjustment, Miron et al. (2022) focused on the development of a new post-retirement identity. Together, these studies demonstrate that social identity plays a central role in helping individuals adapt to life after retirement.

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2.2 Empty Desk Syndrome and Empty Nest Syndrome

This study compares *Empty Desk Syndrome* with *Empty Nest Syndrome* to strengthen its conceptual foundation. Mitchell and Lovegreen (2009) described *Empty Nest Syndrome* as the emotional response experienced by some parents after their children leave home. These emotional reactions do not arise solely from their children's departure. Instead, they reflect the loss of the parental role that once structured daily routines and gave meaning to everyday life. Bougea et al. (2020) examined the psychosocial stress associated with the empty nest stage. Their findings showed that stress levels depended largely on the extent to which the parental role shaped personal identity. Parents who regarded parenting as their primary source of identity experienced greater psychological distress than those with alternative identity roles. These findings suggest that emotional adjustment depends more on the significance of a lost role than on the role itself.

The comparison also reveals similarities through physical symbols representing the loss of long held social roles. For parents, an empty bedroom symbolises the end of active parenting responsibilities. For retirees, an empty office desk symbolises the end of professional life. Ekerdt and Koss (2016) argued that physical spaces extend beyond their practical functions. They also reinforce personal identity through daily routines and enduring responsibilities. Leaving these spaces therefore reduces opportunities to maintain identities developed over many years. This interpretation is consistent with Jolles et al. (2023), who argued that retirement requires individuals to redefine themselves when employment no longer validates their identity.

This comparison provides the conceptual basis for *Empty Desk Syndrome*. Both concepts emerge from the loss of long-standing social roles that have shaped everyday life. One concerns parenthood, whereas the other relates to professional employment. Despite these different contexts, both concepts share similar psychological mechanisms. Adjustment depends largely on the extent to which these roles define personal identity. Their primary difference lies in the life context in which the transition occurs. *Empty Nest Syndrome* develops within the family institution, whereas *Empty Desk Syndrome* arises within the workplace. Each concept is also represented by a different physical symbol. An empty bedroom reflects the end of active parenting, whereas an empty office desk represents the conclusion of professional life. Family psychology has long recognised *Empty Nest Syndrome* as an established concept. By contrast, *Empty Desk Syndrome* has received little attention in academic literature. This study therefore adopts *Empty Nest Syndrome* as its conceptual reference because both concepts share comparable psychological processes despite arising in different life contexts.

2.3 Research Gap between Financial and Emotional Preparedness for Retirement in Urban Contexts

Retirement research has traditionally focused on financial preparedness, particularly retirement savings and pension schemes. Zaimah et al. (2023) examined the relationship between financial literacy and retirement planning among younger adults. Their findings reflect the strong emphasis placed on financial preparedness rather than retirees' emotional experiences. The literature reviewed in this study reveals a similar pattern. However, financial readiness does not necessarily indicate emotional readiness for post-retirement life. Kenny et al. (2025) investigated the relationship between retirement, loneliness and social isolation using longitudinal data from older adults in England. Their findings showed that retirement initially reduced social isolation. However, this effect weakened over a longer observation period. These findings suggest that emotional experiences continue to evolve throughout retirement. Financial preparation, by contrast, usually aims to achieve predetermined goals before retirement.

This research gap becomes more evident in urban settings. Zhu et al. (2025) analysed data from 24 countries. They found that higher levels of urbanisation were associated with prolonged loneliness among older adults. Henning-Smith et al. (2019) compared social support in urban and rural communities across the United States. Their findings indicated that older adults in urban areas were more likely to experience loneliness. This pattern persisted despite rural communities reporting fewer formal social relationships. These findings suggest that post-retirement experiences cannot be explained solely through financial or emotional perspectives. Retirement involves simultaneous changes in personal identity, daily routines and social relationships. These dimensions also influence one another throughout the adjustment process. The literature further indicates that no previous study has specifically examined how these three dimensions interact to shape the experience of *Empty Desk Syndrome* among urban retirees.

2.4 Summary

The literature indicates that retirement extends beyond the end of working life. It also transforms personal identity, daily routines and relationships with the surrounding social environment. Froidevaux et al. (2019) and Miron et al. (2022) argued that identity plays a central role in post-retirement adjustment. *Empty Nest Syndrome* provides a useful conceptual basis for understanding the psychological consequences of losing a long-established social role. Although the two concepts arise in different contexts, they share similar psychological mechanisms. The literature also shows that retirement research continues to emphasise financial preparedness more than emotional adjustment. Kenny et al. (2025) demonstrated that emotional experiences continue to change throughout retirement. Emotional preparedness is therefore more difficult to anticipate than financial preparedness. The literature further suggests that living environments influence retirees' experiences. Collectively, these findings indicate that changes in identity, daily routines and social relationships occur simultaneously. These dimensions also interact throughout the adjustment process. They should therefore be understood as interconnected rather than independent experiences. Based on this synthesis, the study adopts the model proposed by Froidevaux et al. (2019) to explain identity change during the transition to retirement. The principle of role loss underlying *Empty Nest Syndrome* provides additional conceptual support for *Empty Desk Syndrome*. Together, these perspectives explain the relationships between identity change, disrupted daily routines and declining social relationships in the emotional experiences of urban retirees.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual research design based on a structured narrative literature review. This approach is appropriate for developing a new conceptual framework through the synthesis of existing knowledge. The study neither tests hypotheses nor collects primary data. Instead, it critically examines, compares and integrates concepts, theories and empirical findings relevant to the research objectives. Unlike a systematic

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literature review, which primarily summarises empirical evidence, a narrative literature review emphasises conceptual interpretation, theoretical integration and framework development. This approach is therefore suitable for constructing the proposed *Empty Desk Syndrome* framework.

3.2 Literature Sources and Scope

The literature was obtained from peer reviewed journal articles indexed in major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. Publications addressing retirement psychology, identity transition, loneliness among older adults, social relationships and *Empty Nest Syndrome* formed the primary sources of analysis. Additional books and authoritative institutional reports were included when they provided important theoretical or contextual perspectives. Priority was given to publications that directly contributed to the conceptual development of the proposed framework rather than to the total number of studies reviewed. The review mainly focused on literature published between 2016 and 2025 to reflect contemporary developments in retirement research. Earlier publications were included only when they represented foundational theories or seminal concepts, such as identity theory, *Empty Nest Syndrome*, social network theory and retirement adjustment.

3.3 Literature Selection Criteria

Several criteria guided the selection of the literature. Only publications directly related to retirement adjustment, professional identity, daily routines, social relationships and loneliness were included. Peer reviewed journal articles received the highest priority because they provided stronger scholarly evidence. Books and institutional reports were considered when they contributed important theoretical foundations or demographic information. Publications available in both English and Malay were reviewed to broaden the conceptual perspective. Studies focusing exclusively on financial planning, pension management or economic issues were excluded unless they also discussed psychological, emotional or social adjustment after retirement. This selection process ensured that the reviewed literature remained consistent with the objectives of the study.

3.4 Comparative Analysis of the Literature

The selected publications were analysed through a comparative reading process. Each study was examined to identify its theoretical perspective, principal concepts, research focus and major findings. Similarities and differences between studies were subsequently compared to determine areas of conceptual convergence and divergence. Particular attention was given to how previous studies explained retirement adjustment. Some studies primarily emphasised professional identity transition, whereas others focused on loneliness, social relationships or changes in daily routines. Comparing these different perspectives revealed that existing research generally examined these dimensions independently rather than as interconnected components of a broader psychosocial process. This comparison provided the conceptual basis for developing the proposed framework.

3.5 Theme Identification

The analysis proceeded by identifying recurring themes across the selected literature. Concepts that appeared consistently in multiple studies were grouped according to their conceptual similarity. Three dominant themes emerged repeatedly throughout the literature, namely disrupted daily routines, shrinking social networks and professional identity crisis. These themes were not predetermined but emerged through repeated comparison of theoretical discussions and empirical findings. The review also identified two recurring contextual conditions that influenced retirement adjustment. These conditions were the digital divide and established work culture. Unlike the three principal themes, these conditions did not represent the core structure of the syndrome. Instead, they consistently appeared as factors that intensified the challenges associated with retirement adjustment.

3.6 Conceptual Synthesis and Framework Development

The conceptual framework was developed by synthesising the themes identified during the comparative analysis. The synthesis began with the identity transition model proposed by Froidevaux et al. (2019), which explains changes in professional identity during retirement. This perspective was subsequently integrated with the principle of role loss underlying *Empty Nest Syndrome* and with empirical findings concerning daily routines, loneliness and social relationships. Rather than combining theories mechanically, the synthesis examined the relationships between concepts across different studies to develop a unified explanation of post-retirement adjustment. The analysis demonstrated that disrupted daily routines, shrinking social networks and professional identity crisis continuously influence one another throughout retirement. The digital divide and established work culture were then incorporated as reinforcing factors that intensify interactions among these three dimensions. The resulting framework therefore represents an integrated conceptual explanation derived from theoretical comparison and literature synthesis rather than from a single existing theory. This framework provides the analytical foundation for the findings and discussion presented in the following chapter.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Loss of Daily Routine Structure

Throughout working life, daily activities are largely organised by workplace schedules. These schedules determine waking hours, commuting, working hours and rest periods. After retirement, this structure disappears. Ekerdt and Koss (2016) described the adjustment as *time work*. The term refers to the effort required to reorganise time previously structured by employment. Retirees must therefore create new daily routines based on their own priorities and preferences. This adjustment has long attracted attention in gerontological research. Atchley (1976) explained that retirement often begins with a honeymoon phase. During this period, retirees enjoy freedom from occupational demands. However, this experience may gradually give way to disappointment when daily life lacks a clear sense of purpose. Ekerdt and Koss (2016) further argued that routines serve purposes beyond filling leisure time. They help retirees manage time meaningfully while creating a stable and well organised lifestyle. Without clear routines, post-retirement freedom may become a source of psychological distress.

The *empty desk* metaphor introduced in Chapter 2 illustrates this transition. For many years, the office desk serves as the centre of everyday working life. Leaving it behind disrupts routines established throughout a professional career. Yeung and Zhou (2017) found that individuals who planned activities, social relationships and daily routines before retirement adapted more successfully. They also reported higher levels of well-being during retirement. Although retirement experiences differ, every retiree must establish a new pattern of daily living. Some choose full retirement, whereas others retire gradually or continue working on contract.

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Several studies further emphasise the importance of developing new daily routines. Fadeeva et al. (2025) found that retirees without early routine planning were more likely to lose their sense of purpose. Alavi et al. (2023) also identified inadequate planning as a barrier to successful adjustment. By contrast, Topa et al. (2018) showed that preparation addressing psychological, social and lifestyle factors improved well-being and life satisfaction. These findings indicate that retirement preparation should extend beyond financial planning. Changes in daily routines also influence professional identity and post-retirement self-definition. Froidevaux et al. (2019) argued that individuals with stronger professional identities often require longer periods of adjustment. Former senior executives were particularly likely to experience this challenge.

4.2 Shrinking Social Networks

The workplace serves purposes beyond professional responsibilities. It also provides a setting for daily interaction and fosters a sense of belonging among employees. Comi et al. (2022) reported that retirement changes the composition of an individual's social network. Relationships with former colleagues often decline, whereas family relationships become more prominent. However, this shift does not necessarily reduce the overall size of social networks. Instead, retirement changes the pattern of relationships previously centred on the workplace. Granovetter (1973) introduced the concepts of weak and strong ties to explain the different functions of social relationships. Weak ties include relationships with colleagues and acquaintances. Although less intimate, these relationships remain important in everyday life. They provide access to new information, experiences and perspectives that strong ties may not offer. Retirees therefore lose more than workplace acquaintances when these relationships end. They also lose valuable opportunities for daily interaction that stimulate thinking and broaden life experiences. This reality often becomes apparent only after retirement. Workplace relationships develop through shared schedules, responsibilities and physical spaces. Once these shared experiences disappear, many relationships gradually weaken. This change may occur even when workplace relationships were previously close and meaningful.

Changes in social relationships do not follow a single pattern after retirement. Kenny et al. (2025) found that some retirees experienced lower levels of social isolation during the early retirement period. However, this effect declined over longer observation periods. Comi et al. (2022) similarly reported that social networks depend on maintaining existing relationships while developing new ones. This challenge becomes more pronounced in urban environments. Zhu et al. (2025) found that higher levels of urbanisation were associated with prolonged loneliness among older adults. The literature also suggests that population density does not necessarily strengthen social relationships. Consequently, urban retirees may require more time to establish new social networks after leaving employment.

Fadeeva et al. (2025) identified the loss of social networks as a major challenge following retirement. Their findings also showed that maintaining existing relationships while building new ones supported successful adjustment. Social relationships and daily routines influence one another throughout retirement. Workplace interactions usually develop within structured schedules. When these schedules disappear, opportunities for regular interaction also decline. Conversely, active social relationships help retirees establish more organised daily routines. Retirees should therefore rebuild daily routines and social networks simultaneously because both strengthen the adjustment process after retirement.

4.3 Professional Identity Crisis

Professional positions and expertise often shape how individuals understand themselves throughout their working lives. Employment provides more than financial security. It also shapes personal identity, social status and a sense of purpose. Retirement therefore involves more than leaving employment. It also changes how individuals understand their roles and contributions within society. This transition may create identity conflict when career-based self-perceptions no longer fit post-retirement life. Froidevaux et al. (2019) described this process as an adjustment following the loss of the foundation supporting professional identity. Identity adjustment usually develops gradually rather than beginning on the final working day. Individuals must adapt as responsibilities, authority and professional recognition progressively diminish. Successful adjustment depends on psychological, social, health and environmental factors. Retirees must also establish new sources of meaning to maintain purpose and direction after retirement (Wang et al., 2011). These challenges are often greater among former managers and professionals. Their experiences suggest that workplace recognition, influence and trust are difficult to replace after retirement. For some individuals, this transition weakens confidence in their social position and personal value. Fadeeva et al. (2025) similarly found that former senior executives experienced greater difficulty relinquishing their professional identities.

Developing a new identity also requires time because individuals must reinterpret their place in life. Research involving retired academics showed that identity reconstruction begins with releasing former professional identities before new ones emerge (Miron et al., 2022). This transition is rarely linear. Psychological well-being, social relationships and life experiences continue to shape adjustment throughout retirement (Wang & Shi, 2014). As discussed in Chapter 2, this adjustment shares important similarities with *Empty Nest Syndrome*. Both begin with the loss of a long-established social role. The difference lies in the context. *Empty Nest Syndrome* occurs within family life, whereas *Empty Desk Syndrome* arises after leaving employment. Despite these different settings, both require individuals to reconstruct their identities to adapt successfully to a new stage of life.

The discussion in this chapter demonstrates that daily routines, social networks and professional identity are closely interconnected. Disrupted routines reduce opportunities for social interaction. This process gradually weakens workplace relationships established over many years. These changes subsequently influence how individuals evaluate their social roles and personal contributions. Conversely, retirees who remain strongly attached to their professional identities often experience greater difficulty adapting to post-retirement life. The interaction between these three dimensions suggests that *Empty Desk Syndrome* is a psychosocial experience shaped by multiple interconnected changes rather than a single causal factor.

4.4 Factors Reinforcing *Empty Desk Syndrome*

Beyond the three core dimensions discussed previously, several conditions may intensify *Empty Desk Syndrome*. This study highlights two reinforcing factors, namely the digital divide and established work culture. Neither factor directly causes the syndrome. Instead, both may amplify the challenges encountered after retirement. Limited digital competence has become an increasingly important challenge among retirees. This difficulty often reflects limited exposure to technology, inadequate training and the complexity of digital applications (Kim et al., 2023). During

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employment, many workers rely on organisational infrastructure and information technology support. After retirement, they must manage digital tasks independently because this assistance is no longer available (Schlomann et al., 2020).

Digital competence provides benefits beyond managing everyday activities. Technology skills also promote independence and psychological well-being among older adults (Schlomann et al., 2020). The literature further indicates that communication technologies reduce social isolation when users receive continuous training and support (Chen & Schulz, 2016). These findings suggest that providing digital devices alone is insufficient. Retirees also require opportunities to develop new skills and confidence in using digital technologies. Limited digital competence directly affects social relationships. Many interactions now occur through communication platforms and social media. Individuals with weaker digital skills often experience greater difficulty maintaining relationships with friends, former colleagues and family members. This limitation reduces opportunities for regular interaction. It may also slow adjustment to post-retirement life (Kim et al., 2023; Schlomann et al., 2020).

Beyond technological challenges, established work culture also influences retirement adjustment. *Workaholism* refers to a persistent tendency to devote excessive time and effort to work because of internal motivation rather than organisational demands (Harpaz & Snir, 2003). This pattern suggests that employment has become central to an individual's values and sense of purpose. Its effects become more apparent after retirement. The literature indicates that workaholic behaviour and previous experiences of job burnout may hinder adaptation to new lifestyles (Alavi et al., 2023). Individuals with stronger professional identities also require longer adjustment periods after retirement (Bartol & Grah, 2024). These findings suggest that excessive dependence on work increases psychological challenges during retirement.

This discussion demonstrates that the digital divide and established work culture reinforce the three core dimensions of *Empty Desk Syndrome*, namely daily routines, social networks and professional identity. Limited digital competence may restrict social interaction while disrupting the development of new routines. At the same time, excessive dependence on work makes lifestyle changes more difficult to accept after retirement. When both factors occur together, adjustment becomes considerably more challenging. These factors should therefore receive greater attention when preparing individuals for retirement.

4.5 Conceptual Framework of *Empty Desk Syndrome*

The discussion in this chapter demonstrates that *Empty Desk Syndrome* does not result from a single factor. Instead, it develops through interactions between disrupted daily routines, shrinking social networks and professional identity crisis. Together, these dimensions explain how psychological and social changes emerge after retirement. They also account for the different adjustment experiences of individual retirees. The process begins when structured daily routines established during employment disappear. These routines organise more than time. They also reinforce responsibility, personal significance and life direction (Ekerdt & Koss, 2016). When this structure changes, individuals may experience tension between career-based identities and post-retirement realities. Froidevaux et al. (2019) described this tension as identity conflict that may eventually develop into a professional identity crisis.

Identity change also influences social relationships. Retirees who struggle to accept changes in their social roles often reduce participation in social activities. They may also withdraw from relationships with former colleagues. These responses limit opportunities to establish new social connections. At the same time, developing new social networks requires willingness to adapt and sustained participation in social environments (Fadeeva et al., 2025; Comi et al., 2022). Social networks also play an essential role in post-retirement identity reconstruction. Interaction, recognition and feedback from others help individuals reinterpret their social roles and personal contributions. As social relationships decline, opportunities to receive this support also diminish. This process slows the development of a more stable post-retirement identity (Miron et al., 2022). The reciprocal relationships between disrupted routines, identity change and shrinking social networks demonstrate that these dimensions continuously influence one another throughout retirement adjustment.

Beyond these three core dimensions, the digital divide and established work culture also influence the development of *Empty Desk Syndrome*. These factors do not form part of the central conceptual framework. Instead, they reinforce interactions between the three principal dimensions. Limited digital competence may restrict social interaction and reduce opportunities to maintain relationships. At the same time, individuals who remain strongly dependent on work often require longer adjustment periods after retirement. The combined presence of these factors makes retirement adjustment increasingly complex. The proposed framework integrates the theories and empirical findings discussed in Chapter 2. The model developed by Froidevaux et al. (2019) explains the relationship between professional role loss and identity conflict. The principle of role loss underlying *Empty Nest Syndrome* further demonstrates that similar adjustment processes extend beyond employment. They also occur when individuals lose long-established social roles. This theoretical convergence strengthens the argument that *Empty Desk Syndrome* represents a form of psychosocial adjustment following the loss of a dominant social role.

Overall, the proposed framework explains that *Empty Desk Syndrome* develops through dynamic interactions between disrupted daily routines, shrinking social networks and professional identity crisis. These interactions become more complex when reinforced by the digital divide and established work culture. The framework integrates theoretical perspectives and previous research into a unified explanation of post-retirement adjustment. It therefore conceptualises *Empty Desk Syndrome* as a psychosocial phenomenon emerging from multiple interacting factors rather than a single isolated change.

4.6 Conceptual Implications

The conceptual implications presented in this chapter indicate that post-retirement experiences develop through interactions between disrupted daily routines, shrinking social networks and professional identity crisis. Changes in one dimension influence the others, creating an interconnected adjustment process. *Empty Desk Syndrome* should therefore be understood through a holistic examination of these interacting dimensions. The discussion also suggests that retirement preparation should not focus exclusively on financial planning. Strong financial security does not necessarily ensure successful adjustment when retirees continue facing identity, routine or social relationship changes. These findings broaden current perspectives on retirement preparation by placing psychological and social dimensions alongside financial preparedness.

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Retirement experiences also vary according to factors that reinforce *Empty Desk Syndrome*. The digital divide and established work culture may expose some individuals to greater adjustment challenges than others. These differences demonstrate that retirement adjustment is diverse and does not follow a uniform pattern. Residential context also shapes post-retirement adjustment. As discussed in the literature review, higher levels of urbanisation are associated with prolonged loneliness among older adults (Zhu et al., 2025). These findings suggest that urban retirees experience distinctive adjustment challenges. The urban context therefore provides an important foundation for interpreting *Empty Desk Syndrome* in this study.

The principal conceptual contribution of this study lies in integrating professional identity theory, the principle of role loss underlying *Empty Nest Syndrome* and previous retirement research. This integration offers a more comprehensive explanation of the psychological and social factors shaping post-retirement experiences. Nevertheless, the proposed model remains conceptual. Empirical research is still required to evaluate its applicability in real-world settings.

5. CONCLUSION

This conceptual study developed the *Empty Desk Syndrome* framework to explain the emotional challenges experienced by urban retirees after leaving employment. The findings indicate that retirement involves more than economic change. It also brings psychological changes that may undermine mental well-being when individuals struggle to adapt to post-retirement life. The analysis identified three core dimensions underlying *Empty Desk Syndrome*. These dimensions comprise disrupted daily routines, shrinking social networks and professional identity crisis. The study also identified two reinforcing factors, namely the digital divide and established work culture. Both factors intensify adjustment difficulties during the transition to retirement. The findings also extend current understanding of post-retirement adjustment. This experience does not arise from a single factor. Instead, it develops through interactions between daily routines, social networks and professional identity. This perspective contributes to theory development because previous studies have generally examined these dimensions separately. The analysis further indicates that disrupted daily routines may gradually lead to emotional emptiness and loneliness when changes remain unmanaged. The literature also shows that existing retirement policies continue to prioritise financial preparation, whereas psychological and emotional readiness receives comparatively less attention. Based on these findings, organisations and employers should strengthen pre-retirement programmes by incorporating mental health, emotional adjustment and identity transition modules. They should also consider phased retirement arrangements. This approach allows employees to adjust gradually to changing daily routines before leaving employment completely. Gradual transition may reduce psychological disruption during the move into retirement.

Policymakers should also expand community services supporting urban retirees. Digital literacy programmes and community activities may reduce the digital divide while preventing social isolation. Future retirees should begin planning their daily routines at least one year before retirement. Participation in voluntary work, lifelong learning and regular physical activity may help establish balanced post-retirement lifestyles. Preparation should therefore include mental, physical and spiritual dimensions to facilitate successful adjustment. This study is based on a narrative literature review and conceptual framework development. Consequently, the proposed framework should be regarded as a theoretical explanation of post-retirement adjustment that requires empirical validation. Although the framework integrates professional identity, disrupted daily routines and shrinking social networks into a unified conceptual model, its applicability has not yet been examined through empirical investigation. Future research should therefore evaluate the proposed framework using in-depth interviews, questionnaire surveys or mixed-method approaches involving urban retirees. Comparative studies between public and private sector retirees would further clarify differences in adjustment processes. Future research should also examine the framework across different cultural contexts because much of the supporting literature originates from Western countries. Despite these limitations, this study provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding *Empty Desk Syndrome*. It also offers a theoretical foundation for future empirical research and supports the development of more comprehensive pre-retirement interventions that integrate psychological, social and emotional well-being alongside financial preparedness.

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