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Work from home and employee well-being: a model based on literature survey

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Abstract

With the onset of new normal, organizations today face the challenge of coping with unprecedented events and have to constantly find solutions to sustain their productivity. Workplace flexibility, a term coined way back in the IT industry is the most extensively discussed concept now. This paper is to understand the employees' perception of the enforced work from home post Covid-19. While the results show positive effects e.g., work-life balance and cost reductions, it also has contradicting results on employees e.g., work family interferences and unpaid overtimes. This paper has taken into scope the entry levels employees in an IT firm. The authors have tried to see how employees are managing things virtually in an organization where targets are high, and attrition is also increasing steadily.

Key Words: Covid-19, pandemic, employee well-being, work from home, remote working, organizational health

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed lifestyles in ways people could not think of. With its outbreak, medical organizations have come up with strategies to help people curb the spread of the virus. One of the most important strategy was social distancing to decrease the transmission of the virus in a population by minimizing physical contact. All of them affected work life and consequently the daily life routines. As a result, most organizations also had to come with a solution, which was 'work from home' almost without no preparation.

Like any other organizational change, this complete remote working also had its pros and cons. On one hand it fosters work life balance since employees have been able to invest more time with their families, on the other hand it forced most employees to work from home without the necessary skills and resources to support the change.

However, work from home is not a recent concept. Over the past few decades, more and more organizations started implementing work from home practices due to several reasons. It helps achieve work life balance, reduces company costs, reduces absenteeism, attracts women with children and people with elder care responsibilities. A part of the working population feel that it is 'the best of both worlds', as it creates a balance between paid work and family. Others feel that it is like 'cutting my own throat' because of the negative intrusions at home while working.

In practice working at home can affect subjective well-being in different ways. First, it might either create a work-life balance (Azarbouyeh and Naini 2014; Wight and Raley 2009) or on the contrary, might create issues due to constant interruptions at home (Baines and Gelder 2003). Second, remote working gives an employee much more flexibility with respect to time, place etc and also autonomy, that allows them to manage their work better (Kemerling, 2002). Third, it reduces travel time, which is stress reliever for many (Gottholmseder et al. 2009; Roberts et al. 2011; Wener et al. 2003). Fourth, people who are engaged in complete remote working can manage the work better as compared to people who work in the office and bring work to home resulting in tiredness. Finally, unpaid overtime work at home is meaningful for well-educated supervisors and managers incase they are due for any promotion (Song 2009).

While, most studies found that remote working is beneficial for organizations and its employees, and even for the urban economy (Apgar 1998; Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Nätti et al. 2011). It is associated with perceived autonomy (Dambrin 2004; Wilson and Greenhill 2004), higher productivity

(Kemerling 2002), higher work–life balance and less stress (Azarbouyeh and Naini 2014; Felstead et al. 2002; Raghuram and Wiesenfeld 2004; Sullivan and Lewis 2006), greater employee satisfaction (Wheatley 2012), and better job performance (Fonner and Rolof 2010). Moreover, it is also useful for employees who have more responsibilities at home (Golden 2006; Shockley and Allen 2007). On the other hand, quite a few literature studies have shown the opposite. One negative aspect of telework is reduced communication among co-workers which may lead to social isolation and worsen individual and group performance (Sparrowe et al. 2001). Also working from home leads to less face-to-face interactions with managers, which can affect their evaluations, limit their opportunities for promotion, and increase their role stress (Weinert et al. 2015). One more concern is the increased conflicts at home that leads to stress increase stress because it blurs the boundaries between home and workplaces (Hardill and Green 2003; Mann and Holdsworth 2003; Russell et al. 2009; Standen et al. 1999; Sullivan 2012; Wheatley et al. 2008). Mirchandani (2000) states that homeworking is a cause of anxiety and stress as the employee will have to strike a balance between job and fmily demands simultaneously. Workers with young children at home doing menial jobs are stressed as the remote working does not improve that quality of life (Moore, 2006).

Literature Review
Organizational health and well-being at workplace have become most discussed and crucial topics in the last few decades. Physical, mental and subjective well-being affect the employees both at work and also tend to spill over to non-work domains. Health and well-being, if not taken care can lead to negative consequences, such as low productivity, absenteeism, low quality of work etc. Health has been defined as state of complete well-being and not just an absence of disease. Well-being has many components - subjective, mental and physical well-being to name a few.
Subjective well-being (SWB) is defined as 'a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life' (Diener, Lucas, & Oshi, 2002, p. 63). The cognitive part refers to a one's perception of his or her life satisfaction as a whole or in specific areas. The affective area talks about emotions, moods and feelings that are either positive (eg. Affection, happiness) or negative (eg. anger, shame etc). Based on this SWB can be divided into 3 components:

Life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect.

People who spend a major part of their everyday lives at work, need to have a fulfilling job for their mental well-being. A lot of studies have been done to prove mental well-being is the key to higher productivity. In simple words, mental well-being can be defined as the way we think and feel and act. It is our ability to deal with stressful situations and make choices.

The third component of well-being discussed in this paper is physical well-being. It is the ability to perform physical activities and carry out social roles that are not obstructed by physical limitations and experiences of bodily pain, and biological health indicators.

Employee well-being serves as the stepping stones for organizational health as a whole. Organizations today work hard to cater to employee well-being. However, with the outbreak of Covid-19, the working landscape has changed to a large extent. Although work from home has been commonly used in the IT sector since the last 2 to 3 decades, this was not a usual way of work for the other sectors. This has now become a buzz phrase with the world witnessing a new normal. or, mainly to ensure engaging the workforce, to reach out to the internal and the external stakeholders, to retain the talent and maintain attrition rate to its low on one hand. The current situation has thrown new challenges to every organization in the form of either up-skilling or re-skilling without much time in hand.

This remote work or work from home is a practice that allows employees to work in a setting which is different from the usual office setting. It brings into picture the concepts of flexi time and flexi place. However, like any other change, remote working comes with its own advantages and disadvantages. Flexibility traditionally meant putting the control in the hands of the employees, so that they feel the responsibilities assigned to them and they take ownership. This would help them effectively respond to the job demands (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Workers' flexibility therefore refers to a situation where they themselves decide where, when and how long to work (Lewis, 2003). This flexibility primarily comprises of schedule flexibility (like part time, compressed work weeks, flex time etc.) and location flexibility (remote work, telework). Flexibility is believed to help employees respond positively to stressors and enhance well-being.

The shift to complete work from home arrangements provide a unique context to study the relationship between WFH and well-being. The different aspects of work from home affect the employee well-being in different ways. The extended and continuous stay at home have contributed to general depression or anxiousness. The change in earlier routines, eating habits, sleeping habits have caused stress to many people. Apart from these changes, another notable aspect is the need for physical space to set up the workstations at home. Also, few might have to share the workspaces with other family members. In such a situation, it is important from organizations to adapt strategies that would ease their way of work as much as possible amidst all the stressful situations.

Problem Statement
With the pandemic situation, several organizations had to immediately shift to remote working without any scope of upskilling the employees. Therefore, it has affected the employees both positively and negatively. But none of the papers talk about the long-term impacts if this pandemic situation persists and the organizations are unable to go back to the usual work from office in the future. Moreover, in IT sector WFH has been accepted as a new norm in HR policy. In fact, very few research discussed about the short term and long-term impact of missed social life on individual stress level and productivity, as social interaction is an essential part of organisation work culture. Therefore, a detailed discussion on WFH and Employee well-being has been emerged as area to be researched and explored extensively.

Research Gap
There are no research papers with a model that describes the effect of work from home on subjective, mental and physical well-being separately. Approximately 60 research papers have been studied to gather secondary data on the antecedent and descendent relationship between various components of HR practices, leadership styles, socio demographic parameters and employee well-being. 10 different conceptual papers on employee well-being and approximately similar number of papers on work from home have been reviewed, where work is mostly done in countries like UK, Italy, USA, Spain, Netherlands. In their research papers, Daniel C. Ganster, Christopher C. Rosen, 2013; Sven Tuzovic, Sertan Kabadayi, 2018 have taken into consideration employee well-being as the whole, and did not break down into its components. Similarly, Juan Sandoval-Reyes et. al. have talked about only effects on work-life balance in their paper. None of the papers discuss on the different aspects of work from home that is causing an impact on subjective, mental and physical well-being among entry level associates in an IT company in India.

Objectives
- To find out the different aspects of work from home that can affect the employees.
- Bring together all separate strands like Work from Home with other HR practices, elements of leadership effectiveness, employee wellbeing and inherent socio demographic variables of individual employee in a common platform.

- To study whether remote working acts as a positive or negative factor for well-being among entry level associates in an IT sector.
- To create an aggregator model depicting the relationship between work from home and subjective, mental and physical well-being.

Research Methodology
This paper is a conceptual paper based on literature survey of papers related to remote working and employee well-being in the recent pandemic situation. Literature and journals reviewed mostly starting from 2000 till present to write this paper. Also references related to changes in the pandemic changes have been taken from papers starting from 2020. The research will be done on entry level associates in an IT firm to understand whether work from home has been creating positive or negative impacts on an employee's well-being at 3 levels-subjective, mental and physical. Over 60 conceptual papers have been thoroughly studied in order to derive the secondary data for this research.

Discussions
There is little reason to believe that the pandemic situation will be short-lived and hence its consequences on organizational life. The organizational changes which have been brought upon by the Covid-19, are far from being over. The new reality offers new opportunities and way of life. This paper would create a framework to understand the link between remote working, which is the most important organizational change, and employees' well-being at subjective, mental and physical levels.
From the literature survey we have derived 4 hypotheses, that we would be testing based on our secondary data.
Physical and mental well-being have decreased and health issues have increased. There are quite a few mediating factors like employees' lifestyle, for example eating habits, physical activity, physical aspects of the home workspace etc. (Yijing Xiao et. al., 2020).

Working at home has heterogeneous effects. Bringing work to home and work from home, both affect the subjective well-being of employees with children negatively than the employees who are non-parents. This happens more on weekdays. It also says that on weekends/ holidays the positive effects of working from home is more (Younghwan Song, Jia Gao, 2019).

H₁ Work from home positively affects subjective/ mental/ physical well-being of the employees.
Co-worker's support and interaction among them are essential to foster successful remote working and to balance the psychological aspects of well-being (Christine A. Grant et. al., 2013).
H2 Employees have adjusted well in remote working setup and does not want to move back to commute to work.
What happens at work tens to spill over at home. In such a situation positive behaviour and negative behaviour (stress) tend to impact the relationships in the family (Ana Isabel Sanz-Vergel et. al., 2014). Boundaries between the work and private life have collapsed. The fact that employees are available 24 hours a day, leads to chances of unpaid overtime. This affects the work life balance badly (Christine A. Grant et. al., 2013).
H₃ Work from home has increased work-life balance among employees.
Building interpersonal relationships both at work and outside is important for psychological well-being. Studies have shown that there are employees who prefer working in the office than at home (Christine A. Grant et. al., 2013).

Leadership can be considered as a job resource since it plays a vital role in achieving organizational goals. Engaging leadership is defined by a practice in which managers support and involve themselves in forming and implementing the HRM practices and also in creating the employees' perceptions

towards these practices. Engaging leadership acts as a moderator in the relation between HRM practices and employee well-being (Andres Salas-Vallina et. al., 2021).

H4 Leadership effectiveness and socio demographic variables act as moderating factors which affect the relationship between work from home and employee well-being.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to several challenges for the organizations to cope up with. The organizations had to come up with policies to help their employees move radically from working in the offices to remote working structures. Further the lines between the work and family spheres have been blurred due to this. With the closing down of schools, parental demands have also increased and employees find it difficult to manage work and family life. Another challenge during this time is unpaid overtime. Often employees are asked to extend beyond their office hours to complete the work assignments due to the work from home arrangement.

At the same time, if we look at the positive side, few opportunities like spending more time with family has improved the work-life balance. Also, the cost and time which was earlier spent in commuting, was also saved.

Below is the diagrammatic representation of the relationship between the work from home (independent variable) and subjective/ mental/ physical well-being (outcome variables) with the moderating effects of leadership effectiveness and socio demographics.
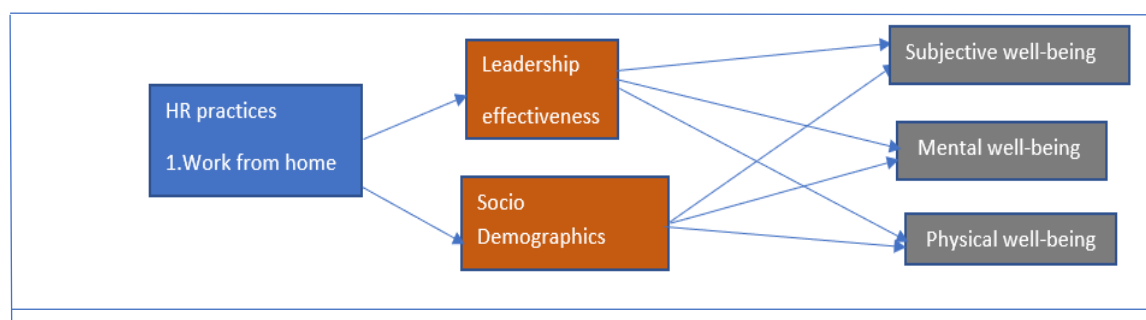

Figure 1. Model representing relationship between work from home and employee well-being

Scope for future study

The final outcome of this research is the model to understand the relationship between HR practices, majorly work from home and its impact on subjective, mental and physical well-being. The scope for further studies would include studying each element of HR practices in details and also to study the moderating or mediating variables and validating the model with Empirical research.

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