Remote Working: How the Working Life Changed During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the introduction of precautionary measures by governments globally in the interest of preventing the further spread of the disease. These measures interfered with the normal daily operations, and people, as well as organizations, had to change and adapt. Changes included complete restructuring and redefining the fundamental processes that keep the society running. Organizations had to find a way to keep providing their services or conducting their daily businesses while maintaining the set measures. Teleworking became the new normal overnight as all sectors turned to it for continuity and maintaining their relevance in their respective industry. Working from home did present some challenges that were not anticipated, and they reduced productivity. Remote working is not a new concept, but its adoption is not something that happens overnight. Overall, the current investigation provides context-related insights and acquires logically applicable bits of knowledge by examining how virtual work characteristics shape the remote work experience in the one of a kind context of COVID- 19.

Key words: remote work, telework, the COVID-19 pandemic, workplace, transition.
J.E.L. classification: J62, J81, M29.

1. Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke, the whole world was brought to a standstill where all the functions of all countries were put on a test. These functions include social, economic, legal, and political processes, which had to undergo complete restructuring in the way they function. Different guidelines were issued by institutions responsible for public health regarding the conduct of operations, and in an attempt to comply, the working life took an unprecedented change. The World Health Organization announced the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic in March 2020, and by July, it had become a global catastrophe damaging the global socio-economic infrastructure, and individuals were forced to change their working styles and employment prospects. These changes were introduced in order to align with the guidelines provided for precaution, and as a result, remote working gained popularity. It befits several working approaches and interpretation, but it is popularly defined as "any activity that involves the processing of information and its delivery via telecommunication link that is carried out away mainly or partly from the main premises of an organization." Remote working manifested as a solution to keep institutions running and maintain the directives of the lockdown procedures caused by the first wave and the consecutive waves.

This paper will shed light on how different organizations transformed their working styles from traditional to remote working. The paper will also reveal the experiences and impact of remote working for different parties and settings. The results will be important for managers to provide an understanding of remote working and the need for operating a flexible institution. The information provided will help in understanding how working life changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature review

Many researches in the field of organizational sciences, according to Johns (2018), have lack of contextual awareness. Remote working is defined as "a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, the worker has no personal contact with co-workers there, but is able to communicate with them using technology" (Di Martino & Wirth, 1990). Current research maintains that remote work is any work conducted outside the premises of an institution utilizing the aid of Information and Communication Technologies ICTs. Research pegs this concept as twofold with strict boundaries of time and involves the performance of duties that are beneficial to the company. Freelancers and start-ups utilize remote work to leverage freedom and independence where the outcome is remote working becomes a third method of working beside the standard and the traditional. Research indicates that ICTs have been significant in the adoption of remote working by different entities, and their continued evolution has increased the efficiency of tasks performed through remote working (Wang et al., 2021). The investigation carry out by Wang et al. (2021) exposes the difficulties employees are challenged by in performing their jobs efficiently (such as work-home interference, inadequate communication, procrastination, and loneliness) and sheds light on the necessity of social support and self-discipline. Employees with more job resources and requests report less boredom at work, according to Metin Taris and Peeters (2016), which can lead to reduced procrastination. Golden and Gajendran (2019) also discovered that the positive connection between remote working intensity and job performance was stronger for employees with limited social support.

Other literature has also investigated and revealed the impacts that working from home has on individuals and their personal lives. According to a study by Vander Elst et al. (2017), the extent of remote working was unfavorably connected to social support, which caused emotional exhaustion to intensify. This research maintains that productivity depends on employees being at a capacity to focus on their tasks and find time to decompress from work-related stress. However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed all this and presented a challenge in maintaining a healthy work-life balance and successfully coping with stress. According to A. Hickman (2019), remote work increases corporate outcomes, attracts talent, and an engaged workforce has the best financial outcomes. They discussed how remote workers are affected by workplace isolation as a result of a lack of management, organizational expertise, and the development and implementation of remote work policies and procedures. On the other hand, according to Kelliher and Anderson's (2010) qualitative study, most remote workers undergone work intensification because they could avoid interruptions at the office and work more intensely. A large number of studies have found that remote working has a positive impact on autonomy.

Research goes further to indicate that even experienced remote workers find it difficult to execute effective stress coping strategies. Additionally, remote working is filled with physical and digital distractions, which impact the focus of individuals. There is also research concerned with the takeaway from the pandemic, especially how the magnitude of the pandemic affected the speed of institutions changing and adapting. This research indicates that the Human Resource executives were on the front lines of the problems and changes presented by the pandemic (Nyberg et al., 2021). If there is a department in the working world that can issue insightful lessons on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the HR department because they experienced it firsthand and continuously. Hence the saying, experience is the best teacher. Organizations had to make fast changes to remain relevant and keep their organizations running, even those which were unwilling to change (Reimer & Bryant, 2020) .

However, not all organizations were caught off guard by the pandemic and forced into shifting from conventional to virtual working methods. Some were ready for such a scenario, and their transition was gradual and organized. This research indicates that remote working is not a new concept, and organizations have been utilizing this concept since the advent of the internet. Institutions used remote working- which this research maintains is the concept of working away from the physical premises- to maximize flexibility and schedule planning. A nation like the United Arab Emirates had a smooth transition into virtual working, prioritizing the health sector and later incorporating all public sector employees (Al Marar et al., 2021). Similar efforts were also encouraged for the private sector. Remote working was also extended to the education system, where

learning moved to e-learning. Lessons were conducted virtually, and teachers had to work remotely to provide lessons to their students.

Additional research maintains that the COVID-19 outbreak forced organizations globally into a de facto experiment and suddenly made remote working the 'new normal. The outcomes of remote working might be substantial between workers with extensive remote working knowledge and those who are not accustomed to remote working. This research incorporated work design in their research to better understand remote working during the pandemic and the role of the virtual work features in mounding working settings. Additionally, research indicates that there is a difference in remote working caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and prior remote working (Rudnicka et al., 2020). This is because remote working prior to the pandemic was voluntary compared to the one during the pandemic, which research terms as forced Working from Home (WfH), which is involuntary. It is highly likely that this situation will erupt new challenges and deterrents to remote working.

There is also literature that maintains that lockdowns were the most significant causes of remote working because they restricted mobility and, in turn, commuting to the workplace. Information from surveys indicates that the number of individuals working from home skyrocketed with the COVID-19 outbreak. The greatest challenge for most people was the lack of familiarity with Information Technology, which is odd considering that we are in a digital era (Prasad et al., 2020). The shift from conventional to remote working meant that employees had to up-skill or re-skill swiftly to remain relevant to the organization or be cut out. It also maintains that remote working has its benefits and its shortcomings. Management would prove to be difficult if, as a manager, you are managing an unskilled and unorganized workforce because there would be no flow of work and really hard to maintain high productivity.

3. Research methodology

This paper reports on a review of current research into the COVID-19 pandemic and remote working as presented in various settings and numerous manifestations in which remote working has evolved amidst the pandemic. The study finds the explorative approach suitable for obtaining insight about existing knowledge about remote working as an outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will make new contributions to the existing knowledge to create a deeper understanding of how the working life changed during the pandemic focusing on remote working.

In an effort to address the research problem, the study utilizes a systemic review methodology and analyses the variables related to remote working. The researcher identified and chose the sources for review and data collection utilizing an open-ended series of searches from relevant search engines such as Google Scholar, online libraries, and other journal publication databases. For effective results, the study incorporates terms such as remote working, COVID-19, working from home, and pandemic crisis included in book chapters, thesis, research chapters, and publications. Studies qualifying to be included in the review for this study were publications that were published in the last ten years, published in English, and are directly associated with COVID-19 and remote working or both in different organizational environments. The studies under scrutiny for this research include peer-reviewed articles, essays, journals, thesis and books. All these sources were put under a scope and analyzed for the dependability of the information collected by examining their methodologies, samples, findings, and implication to other sources. The study eventually identified critical conclusions, different themes, content examination, and contrasting summaries.

4. Findings

The outbreak of the COVID-19 changed the ordinary lifestyle of people globally and the established procedures of conducting the daily tasks, including the most serious ones such as the energy sector, economic models, and the health sector that keeps the societies running. The introduction of precautionary measures to curb the spread of the disease changed our perception of our daily activities. This outbreak put the spotlight on the health sectors of every nation globally, where world leaders attempted to keep their health systems from capsizing, and the economy was put in an artificial coma. This crisis created inefficiency in the fundamental systems and left them vulnerable (Kylili et al., 2020). This, in turn, led to a swift change of the economy and service

delivery from office settings to home settings aided by teleworking. In an effort to convert homes to offices, numerous challenges arose that hindered the efficiency of working and integrity. There was little time to anticipate that there would be power outages, no backup power, insufficient internet connection, and water shortages that affected the completeness of tasks. Local authorities and service providers had the most difficult time attempting to incorporate remote working in their environment.

COVID-19 caused a global restructuring of the complete truth of work and work practices. To make sense of this statement, we infer a term known as gamma change which involves forcing people to redefine their institutional truth to the level that is incomparable to the previous State. Gamma changes involve eternal major forces, in this case, COVID-19 pandemic to change an institution which aid the institution regain some extent of stability through immense adjustments, in this case, remote working. Additionally, remote working also presents challenges in the new settings of working from home (Bezzina et al., 2021). This is because maintaining the boundary between personal life and work-life in conventional working settings is easy. However, in remote working, this boundary becomes very thin and blurry, which means numerous distractions and less productivity. Gender stereotyping within the household was reported to have been amplified by the lockdown procedures, which increased tensions in households compared to the desired supportive environment for productivity.

Human Resource facets experienced serious changes as a result of the mass migration into virtual working. Job searches and vacancies also changed since institutions now hired according to the new process of working, which is remote working during the pandemic. The methods of conducting interviews transitioned to virtual, including positions of seniority. This approach of doing things could have been actualized eventually, but the pandemic fast-tracked this process. It is apparent that numerous organizations are embracing a future that involves utilizing virtual hiring methods as part of the process. The issue that is disturbing employers is how to handle employees who have wholeheartedly accepted remote work and wish to continue working from home (Nyberg et al., 2021). Some of their concerns include how to maintain high output over time, modifying the physical establishments to fit the workforce make-up, and effective cost reduction. Evidence supports the notion that teleworking produces results and that employees found the transition easy. These employees also maintain that they have more room to work. Meeting deadlines has been easy; however, this notion appears to support employees earning top dollar while middle-income and low-income employees don't subscribe to this notion.

The current era is a digital era, and technology is ever-evolving in an effort to address the surging fast-paced life, which is why remote working is not a new concept to some parties. However, regardless of the credibility of this information, the transition requires to be a gradual process which is why the COVID-19 pandemic caused an imbalance in the adoption of remote working by nations. Some sectors had few complications in making it work, while others faced numerous challenges. The education sector is among those sectors that were affected by remote working where teachers had to conduct lessons virtually. Analyzing the case of the United Arab Emirates, research indicates that the Ministry of Education took measures after the pandemic hit to respond to these serious conditions (AlMarar et al., 2021). To effectively transition into virtual learning, the Ministry deployed policies aimed at successfully achieving virtual learning to three target groups: General Education, Higher Education, and within the Ministry of education departments. These policies included numerous procedures, including providing laptops/tablets to the less privileged families to enhance accessibility by all students. This learning method had its upside and a downside, but numerous nations have adopted it, and they have bent it to their will.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need for working remotely. Employees can work flexibly in different settings and access their labor tasks by utilizing Information and Communication Technologies. Interestingly, the pandemic caught people off-guard, and since there were no warning signs, organizations and governments lacked the appropriate response. This meant that the adopted responses were new to most people, and there was no time for getting familiar. Additionally, when remote working became the suitable alternative to conventional working, employees were forced into it (Rymaniak et al., 2021). With the execution of lockdown and quarantine procedures, mobility became limited, and as nations turned to telework, countries with low telework were having a very difficult time. However, some countries such as Sweden and Netherlands had incorporated remote working in their workforce, and studies maintain that before the pandemic, these countries were

already well over 30%. Research also maintains that earlier studies into remote working suffered the weakness of selection bias because the nature of remote working was voluntary. A study conducted among Spanish social workers revealed information about employee perceptions, as represented in *figure 1* and *table 1*. The same research also found that workers felt overwhelmed, and there was a great extent of overloading of executives who telework. Incorporating forced telework and in the workplace produced correlations between the views of working conditions and the prospective changes that the pandemic on the labour market may produce. This information is represented in table 1.

Figure no.1 Comparisons of work-related variables before and after the forced adoption of telework in Spain
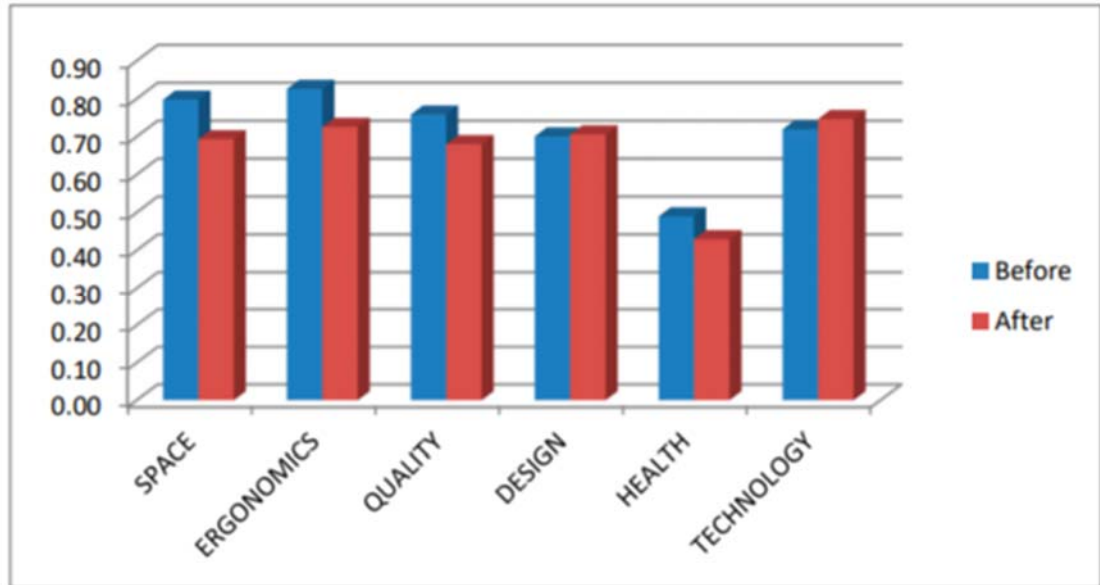
Note: The variables take the values between 0 and 1, where 1 indicates strong agreement with employees' perception of the surveyed statements.
Source: (Sustainability, 2021, 13, 7180)

Table no. 1. Correlations of the employees' working conditions after the forced adoption of teleworking with the impact of the pandemic on the Spanish labor markets conditions.

Impact of the Pandemic	Space	Ergonomics	Quality	Design	Health	Technology
Salary cuts	−0.023	−0.307	−0.488 *	−0.092	−0.450 *	−0.032
Changes in tasks	−0.115	−0.462 *	−0.420 *	0.015	−0.506 *	0.033
Changes in work contracts	−0.296	−0.510 *	−0.496 *	−0.120	0.340	−0.220
Layoffs	−0.260	−0.428 *	−0.544 **	−0.137	−0.154	−0.306
Changes of working downtimes and breaks	−0.308	−0.596 **	−0.441 *	−0.292	−0.405	−0.357
Temporary telework	0.091	0.127	0.310	0.156	0.106	0.223
Permanent telework	−0.390	−0.275	−0.173	0.040	−0.296	−0.208

Level of significance: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: (Sustainability, 2021, 13, 7180)

5. Conclusions

Remote working is not a new concept, but this is a very new concept for most developing countries. However, the transition to remote working is a necessity and happens in dire conditions. Employees had to find ways of getting acquainted with remote working or risk being laid off by their respective institutions because they could not deliver. The COVID-19 pandemic caused institutions

to respond without anticipating challenges that would emanate from adopting remote working. As it stands, remote working for some people, especially those with families, presented a major challenge maintaining a work-life balance and boundaries between personal and professional work. From the information collected, remote working supported gender equality to some extent and amplified gender stereotypes in homes. Nobody had anticipated that bringing the office home could have caused some major social issues. Remote working has taught people the value of having the right environment to maximize productivity. Additionally, effective adoption of remote working requires making efforts to boost employees' organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

More studies need to be conducted to look into the feasibility of remote working in the future and how responsive organizations and employees will be towards the idea. There is also a gap in knowledge about remote working during the pandemic and what lessons organizations and government have made to better prepare for such a moment in the future. However, the research that exists will be of great importance to a manager who decides to adopt remote working permanently because it will give them a better insight into what works and what does not. They will be able to design tasks better for their employees to be acceptable to the essence of remote working. Additionally, the manager will have better luck managing a virtual workforce from the lessons that their counterparts before them who were pioneers of remote working in their respective organizations faced. We continue to figure out the long-term implications of COVID-19 and the workplace.

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