

Transcending the Norms of Work: Virtual Workplace - A Post COVID-19 Pandemic Study

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic unprecedentedly changed working norms and workplace dynamics, forcing management to swiftly transition to working from home. Working from home or a virtual workplace posed various challenges, such as unfamiliarity with virtual technologies and difficulty maintaining a work-life balance, to name but a few. This study uniquely investigated the impact of working from home during and after the COVID-19 pandemic on productivity, job satisfaction, and work-life balance, providing valuable insights for organisations. The study adopted a quantitative research approach. Primary data were collected through an online structure survey questionnaire (N103), and responses were collected from a convenience sample of 556. Statistical Packages for Social Sciences were used to analyse data. The study findings reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the adoption of work-from-home (WFM) and the use of digital communication tools and collaboration strategies, did not significantly change productivity, job satisfaction, or work-life balance outcomes. The findings of this study provide significant practical implications for organisations considering hybrid or remote work models. They reassure us of the importance of understanding the impact of these models on productivity, job satisfaction, and work-life balance. By highlighting these implications, the study equips the reader with valuable insights for navigating the future of work.

Keywords: Virtual Management, Remote Work, Virtual Workplace, COVID-19 Pandemic, Work-Life Balance

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to address one of the most significant current discussions in management-the transition from traditional office-based work to a working-from-home (WFH) model caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study investigates whether WFH during and after the pandemic has impacted productivity, job satisfaction, and work-life balance, providing insights into the best strategies for WFH management. Several studies have investigated different aspects of WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic, but to date, no study has investigated whether the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the traditional work norm. Hence, WFM, coupled with digital communication tools and collaboration strategies, led to changes in productivity, job satisfaction, and work-life balance outcomes.

This paper has been divided into four parts. The first part reviews current literature on WFH during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the methodology; the conclusions follow the results and discussion sections.

Literature Review

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted work practices among all organisations across the globe. The rapid shifts into working from home and virtual management, which was initially a response to health government authorities, later became an option alongside the traditional workplace practices, with nearly 40% of the workforce continuing this practice post-pandemic compared to 8% pre-pandemic (Productivity Commission, 2021). The transition to remote working, especially in sectors where performing the job from the company offices is the norm, has highlighted the importance of adaptability and flexibility in situations that imply sudden change. The application of remote work due to the Pandemic imposes challenges in reassessing management and work performance, learning, and practices (Kshirsagar et al.,2020). While their study offered an informative list of actions to help build a new foundation for effective virtual learning, it failed to address the complications and challenges of behavioral resistance to a changed learning process.

Productivity and engagement have been subjects of momentous debate in remote working (Iwu et al., 2022; Karl et al., 2022; Williamson & Colley, 2022). The significant challenges of remote work vary among different sectors, particularly those that profoundly depend on human interactions in industries like education, hospitality, and healthcare (Iwu et al., 2022; Oakman et al., 2020; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020). As the realization of the hybrid work model revolutions was confirmed that it is here to stay, discussions about best practices and effective strategies for managers and employers are expanded (Grzegorzczuk et al., 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020; Yang et al., 2021).

While a profound body of research has been conducted in the context of remote working, further investigation is needed as this work model continues shaping the workflow, practices, and operations beyond the Pandemic. Moreover, a deeper examination of the impact of constantly improving technologies and digital and its role in revolutionizing virtual management and remote working is vital. This study builds on the body of knowledge and reflects on lessons learned from the virtual workplace. The findings of this study serve organizations from different sectors and industries valuable practical insights not only to achieve a successful virtual management work model but also to prepare themselves for the unforeseen future.

Research Methodology

To date, various methods have been developed and introduced to study the virtual workplace created by COVID-19 Pandemic lockdowns during and after the Pandemic. The literature review shows a mixed approach; previous studies primarily used secondary data. In this study, a thorough and comprehensive research methodology was employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

It was decided that the best method to approach this study was quantitative because the instrument to collect data for this study was a survey questionnaire.

The survey questionnaire was deemed the appropriate data collection method for this study to test the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis:

(H1): The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the traditional norm of work. Hence, WFM, coupled with digital communication tools and collaboration strategies, led to changes in productivity, job satisfaction, and work-life balance outcomes.

(H0): The COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of Work-from-home (WFM), and the use of digital communication tools and collaboration strategies did not lead to significant changes in productivity, job satisfaction, or work-life balance outcomes.

Sub-Hypothesis:

(H1): WFH led to low productivity

(H0): WFH did not lead to low productivity.

(H1): WFH decreased job satisfaction.

(H0): WFH did not decrease job satisfaction.

(H1): WFH led to poor work-life balance.

(H0): WFH did not lead to poor work-life balance.

This study utilised the Cronbach test to test the reliability and validity of the survey questions.

A nonparametric test, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, was used to decide whether the sample for this study came from a population with a specific distribution.

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the null hypothesis because the participants were divided into two different groups.

A survey questionnaire will be used to collect data. The target population for this study is all employees from various sectors who worked virtually during the Pandemic. A simple random sampling method was used to collect data. SPSS software is used to analyse data.

Results And Discussion

Cronbach's test was performed to check the reliability and validity of the questionnaires as a research instrument. Table 1 below presents Cronbach's test results. A Cronbach's alpha greater than .70 is considered reliable. Thus, the questionnaire used in this research is reliable and valid.

Table 1: Cronbach's test result.

Cronbach's alpha
0.861147316

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check for normality. Based on the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, which indicated highly non-normal then, the Mann-Whitney test is deemed the correct test statistic for this research. Table 2 presents the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results.

Table 2: Normality test (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results)

<i>Kolmogorov-Smirnov</i>		
Statistic	df	Sig.
.239	103	<.001

Table 2: Normality test (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results)

If the significant value ($p = .001$) is less than a significant (α) level of .05, then the data is highly non-normal. Therefore, the Mann-Whitney U test was deemed appropriate for the hypotheses.

Table 3 below presents the results of the Mann-Whitney test for the three hypotheses.

Table 3: Mann-Whitney test results

	H1	H2	H3
Mann-Whitney U	46.500	38.500	45.000
Wilcoxon W	236.500	59.500	235.000
Z	-.706	-1.206	-.795
Asymp. Sig (2-tailed)	.0480	.228	.426
Exact Sig	.512 ^b	.246 ^b	.475 ^b

For H1, the significant value ($p = .512$) is more than a significant (α) level of .05, then the null hypothesis 1 is accepted as shown in the following table. This means that there is no significant evidence that WFH led to low productivity. This finding contrasts with some of the studies covered as part of the literature review for this study that indicated that productivity was not particularly low during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kun & Shaer, 2022; Thomaz et al., 2021).

For H2, if the significant value ($p = .246$) is greater than a significant (α) level of .05, then the null hypothesis 1 is accepted, as shown in the following table. This means that there is no significant evidence that WFH decreased job satisfaction. This finding corroborates with the literature that suggests job satisfaction did not decrease during WFM (Productivity Commission, 2021; Working from Home, 2021).

For H3, if the significant value ($p = .475$) is greater than a significant (α) level of .05, then the null hypothesis 1 is accepted, as shown in the following table. This means that there is no significant evidence that WFH led to poor work-life balance. This finding is somewhat surprising, given that the literature argues that the correlation between WFH and work-life balance is not strong (Jones et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2021).

Table 4 summarizes hypotheses tested based on the Mann-Whitney U test using median values.

Low Productivity Hypothesis		
	p value	Test Results
(H1): WFH led to low productivity	(p =.512)>.05	Reject
(H0): WFH did not lead to low productivity.		Accept ✓
Job Satisfaction Hypothesis		
	p value	Test Results
(H1): WFH decreased job satisfaction.	(p =.246)>.05	Reject
(H0): WFH did not decrease job satisfaction.		Accept ✓
Work-life Balance Hypothesis		
	p value	Test Results
(H1): WFH led to poor work-life balance.	(p =.475) >.05	Reject
(H0): WFH did not lead to poor work-life balance.		Accept ✓

Table 5 below summarizes the main hypothesis. Based on the above test, the null hypothesis is accepted.

Table 5: Summary of the main hypothesis

Main hypothesis	
(H1): The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the traditional norm of work. Hence, WFM, coupled with digital communication tools and collaboration strategies, led to changes in productivity, job satisfaction, and work-life balance outcomes.	(Reject)
(H0): The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the adoption of Work from Home (WFM) and the use of digital communication tools and collaboration strategies, did not lead to significant changes in productivity, job satisfaction, or work-life balance outcomes.	(Accept) ✓

The study's finding rejects the alternative hypothesis, leading to the acceptance of the null hypothesis “The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the adoption of Work-from-home (WFH) and the use of digital communication tools and collaboration strategies, did not lead to significant changes in productivity, job satisfaction, or work-life balance outcomes”.

Several studies corroborate this finding, illustrating how WFH became a critical alternative during the pandemic and led to profound changes in workplace dynamics. For instance:

Productivity: Bloom et al. (2021) found that WFH had mixed effects on productivity, varying by individual circumstances. Notably, employees with a dedicated workspace and fewer distractions demonstrated higher productivity, while others, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, experienced declines. This adaptability of the workforce to new work conditions is a testament to their resilience.

Job Satisfaction: The flexibility of WFH generally improved job satisfaction. According to a study by Buffer (2022), 91% of surveyed employees stated that remote work increased job satisfaction due to its autonomy. This positive impact on job satisfaction is a promising aspect of remote work, despite challenges such as social isolation and difficulty unplugging that negatively affected some employees.

Work-Life Balance: WFH blurred the boundaries between personal and professional life. The OECD (2020) reported that many employees faced longer working hours, but those who established clear boundaries between work and home experienced better work-life balance.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on productivity, job satisfaction, and work-life balance in the context of working from home (WFH). The following conclusions can be drawn from the present study: the COVID-

19 pandemic, along with the adoption of Work-from-home (WFH) and the use of digital communication tools and collaboration strategies, did not lead to significant changes in productivity, job satisfaction, or work-life balance outcomes. The findings suggest that organisations can have reassurance if they want to continue with the mode of WFH as there will be no significant changes to the productivity level, job satisfaction, and work-life balance. The current study has only examined WFH from employees' perspective. More broadly, research is also needed to determine the WFH from employers' perspective.

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