

A STUDY ON HOW ‘WORK FROM HOME’ HAS TURNED INTO A CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY FOR EMPLOYEES POST COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Ever since pandemic was declared by WHO, this new trend of work from home came into prevalence and was rather not much off a choice for employees whether to accept it or reject it, since it was a matter of their livelihood and survival. though this new normal had brought many challenges for employees like accepting the new work culture, getting adjusted with companies taking undue advantage by over timing, loneliness of employees, distractions at home, being in a different time zone than teammates, not being able to take vacation time, hard to find reliable Wi-Fi, time management, the pajama mindset, etc. were all pretty hard facts to digest.

The pandemic had its own hidden opportunities for employees wrapped under the banner of work from home, the employees were now saving extra expenses, therewas exclusion of commute time, a little more independence was observed in few cases, better productivity and effective communication was seen,in all it provided more flexibility to employees to explore more.

This research is tested for various employees who had gone through work from home experience,to understand post COVID employee behavior.A survey is being conducted and applied in studies. A questionnaire is made for collecting data on challenges and opportunities that employee are having post covid. Primary data will be collected and analyzed using statistical and research tools.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Challenges, Opportunities, Work from home.*

INTRODUCTION

Working away from the traditional office is increasingly an option in today’s world. The phenomenon has been studied under numerous, partially overlapping terms, such as telecommuting, telework, virtual office, remote work, location independent working, and home office. In this paper, we will use ‘working from home’ (WFH), a term that typically covers working from any location other than the dedicated area provided by the employer. Home-working has several straightforward positive aspects, such as not having to commute, easier management of household responsibilities and family demands, along with increased autonomy over time use, and fewer interruptions. Personal comfort is often listed as an advantage of the home environment, though setting up a home office comes with physical and infrastructural demands. People working from home consistently report greater job motivation and satisfaction which is probably due to the greater work-related control and work-life flexibility. Often-mentioned negative aspects of WFH include being disconnected from co-workers, experiencing isolation due to the physical and social distance to team members. Also, home-working employees reported more difficulties with switching off and they worked beyond their formal working hours. Working from home is especially difficult for those with small children, but intrusion from other family members, neighbors, and friends were also found to be major challenges of WFH. Moreover, being away from the office may also create a lack of visibility and increases teleworkers’ fear that being out of sight limits opportunities for promotion, rewards, and positive performance reviews.

Importantly, increased freedom imposes higher demands on workers to control not just the environment, but themselves too. WFH comes with the need to develop work-life boundary control tactics and to be skilled at self-discipline, self-motivation, and good time management. Increased flexibility can easily lead to multitasking and work-family role blurring.

In summary, until recently, the effect of WFH on employees' life and productivity received limited attention. However, during the recent pandemic lockdown, scientists, on an unprecedented scale, had to find solutions to continue their research from home. The situations unavoidably brought into focus the merits and challenges of WFH on a level of personal experience. Institutions were compelled to support WFH arrangements by adequate regulations, services, and infrastructure. Some researchers and institutions might have found benefits in the new arrangements and may wish to continue WFH in some form; for others WFH brought disproportionately larger challenges. The present study aims to facilitate the systematic exploration and support of researchers' efficiency and work-life balance when working from home.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A forced experiment

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many workers and firms — up to 40% of workers — to experiment with working from home. While the stay-at-home orders that forced this experiment are gradually easing across the developed world, the level of working from home is likely to remain much higher than it was before the pandemic. This forced experiment showed that many people could do their jobs at home just as well as in the office. Workers really valued the time and money saved through not commuting, as well as the extra flexibility in their lives. And some firms can see potential productivity improvements and/or cost savings in a world of more work from home. This is a change to the way many people work, and is unprecedented in terms of size and speed. This poses several questions: What does the increase in working from home mean for people, firms, and urban centers? How will working from home continue to evolve? Will our regulatory frameworks be able to deal with issues that arise? While the process of change will be challenging for some, it is a fundamentally positive development overall, unlocking newfound value to be shared between workers and firms. Governments should not fight it.

Who can work from home?

The ability for people to do their job from home is strongly tied to their occupation and the tasks they are required to perform. Working from home is particularly suited to office-based workers such as managers, professionals and clerical and administrative workers, where workers use computers, interact less with the public, do not perform outdoor work or physical activity, and do not work with immovable structures, materials or equipment. Census data from 2016 shows that approximately 35% of workers had jobs that were amenable to working from home. This potential to work from home is associated with higher levels of education and higher incomes, and full-time jobs.

Why didn't these people work from home before the pandemic?

Prior to the pandemic, the technology allowing many people to work from home existed — but very few took it up. HILDA data show that, in 2019, around 8% of employees had a formal work-from-home arrangement, and worked a median of one day per week from home. Overall, around 2% of total hours were worked from home. Census data from 2016 also suggests that a small proportion of workers (5%) worked from home instead of commuting on census day. A number of reasons can be advanced for low take-up of work-from-home arrangements prior to the pandemic. Management practices and cultural norms in workplaces, and stigma associated with working from home, may have discouraged remote work. Firms would have been reluctant to invest in the technology and systems for large-scale working from home, given uncertainty about its benefits. As the CEO of Morgan Stanley explained in 2020: If you'd said three months ago that 90% of our employees will be working from home and the employer would be functioning fine, I'd say that is a test I'm not prepared to take because the downside of being wrong on that is massive.

A second experiment

While work from home during 2020 and 2021 was not typical of working from home prior to the pandemic, it was better than expected for many, and attitudes and norms have changed. Workers and firms are now embarking on a second wave of experimentation — negotiating, trialing and adjusting — to see what best works for them. While it is not possible (nor meaningful) to predict the outcomes of this experiment, understanding the economic forces that underpin this process can reveal some possible outcomes and help policy makers understand the change and be prepared for it.

What do workers want?

Most workers want to work from home, at least some of the time. About three-quarters of workers surveyed considered that they were at least as productive working from home as from the office. Views from employers are broadly similar, if slightly less positive. The primary benefit for workers is the avoided commute. In 2019, full-time workers in Australian major cities spent an average of around 67 minutes per day commuting, which in terms of forgone earnings amounted to \$49, not including vehicle costs. For those taking public transport, the average time value and transport cost totaled \$57 per day. But few workers prefer fully remote work, and most want to spend some time working from the office. There are actual or perceived costs to working from home, such as reduced opportunities for collaboration and networking, reduced face-to-face interaction with managers, and consequences for long-term career prospects. Nonetheless, many employees highly value the ability to work from home, and are willing to change jobs or accept lower wages in order to continue working from home.

What do firms want?

Firm preferences are largely driven by the actual or perceived productivity and costs of working from home. Working from home may increase co-ordination costs, reduce serendipitous interactions and knowledge-sharing, stymie creativity and decrease the effectiveness of collaborative processes. Separation from managers may also afford workers the opportunity to slack off. • On the other hand, workers may be more productive at home because they have better control over their time and enjoy better work–life balance. Firms will be able to tap into a larger pool of (more productive) labor. And while not strictly a productivity impact, workers have been shown to work longer hours when working from home during the pandemic. • Some firms may also be able to realize office rent savings. That said, firms may be locked into long-term leases and may be reluctant to relinquish office space while they are still experimenting with working from home. But not every firm is a fan of working from home. For example, according to the CEO of JP Morgan Chase, it ‘doesn’t work for people who want to hustle, doesn’t work for culture, and doesn’t work for idea generation’. Evidence is mixed on how working from home affects productivity for individuals in practice. But, over time, as firms and workers negotiate outcomes, learn and adapt, and become more effective at working from home, there are grounds for optimism at the economy-wide level. In all likelihood, productivity will remain the same or improve under more widespread working from home.

How will these differences be reconciled in the short term?

Working from home unlocks a large potential benefit that accrues to workers in the first instance, due to the avoided commute. As such, workers generally prefer more work from home than firms (but more firms than workers prefer the fully remote model). But it is firms that determine work from home policies, at least in the short term. In reality, we expect workers and firms to negotiate mutually agreeable outcomes. Many firms are likely to experiment with the hybrid model, where workers spend two to three days a week in the office and two to three days working from home. If all workers who could work from home did so two days per week, around 13% of all hours would be worked remotely. The hybrid model is intuitively appealing, balancing the benefits of

working in the office — being able to collaborate, innovate and interact with colleagues face-to-face — with the flexibility, quiet and lack of commuting associated with working from home. In practice, the hybrid model may be more difficult to execute well, due to increased management and coordination costs. ‘Work from anywhere’ is a variation of the hybrid model, where workers have more control over where they work each day, but with an expectation of some office time. A small number of firms are adopting fully remote models. This has been observed among high-tech firms (where use of collaborative technologies is commonplace and access to a global talent pool is important), as well as low-skill jobs, such as call centers (where monitoring is easier and collaboration is less important).

And in the long term?

Over time, workers are able to change jobs and choose those that better suit their preferences. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people are already leaving their jobs to pursue the flexibility offered by remote work. Workers may also be willing to accept lower wages to work from home. Survey data from the US suggests that the ability to work from home two or three days per week may be worth a 7% pay rise to workers, and about 40% of workers who currently work from home would seek another job if their current employer required a full return to the office. In reality, we consider that wage reductions are unlikely at the aggregate level. Job switching and negotiation on wages provides firms with information about what attracts (desirable) workers. In this way, switching and negotiation set in motion a process of experimentation in which firms try different arrangements, observe outcomes, relinquish unsuitable arrangements and maintain those that yield desirable results. The simultaneous nature of the current wave of experimentation across firms also allows collective learning through observing others and imitating successful innovations. Over time, the diffusion of successful innovations is likely to reduce the overall costs of working from home and limit any risk of lower productivity. The wellbeing benefit of working from home provides a clear and strong incentive to make it work.

Source: Working from home Research paper, Australian government, Productivity commission, September 2021.

OBJECTIVES:

The objective of the research paper is as under-

1. To study the opportunities and challenges faced by employees post COVID-19.
2. To determine whether WFH was more of a challenge or an opportunity for employees post COVID-19.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

It is a descriptive research which aims to identify the challenges and opportunities faced by employees post COVID. Primary data is collected from 100 employees from Aurangabad city. The 100 respondent that were selected based on convenience and simple random sampling technique. For this purpose a questionnaire was prepared and circulated among people and 100 responses were considered valid for the purpose of study.

DATA INTERPRETATION

The data interpretation is based on the questionnaire which was circulated amongst the employees who had at least once in their lifetime went through an experience of WFH post covid-19. These interpretations have a direct relation to the objectives of this research and give a wholesome view about the mindset of employees. The questions asked in the questionnaire are as follows:

- 1] Is it difficult to concentrate on work because of the presence of family members?

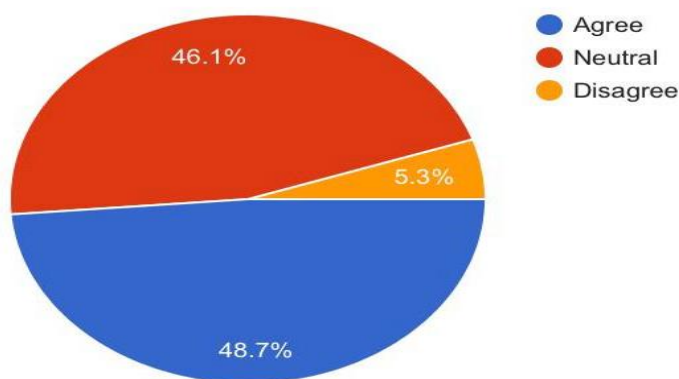


FIG 1

The conclusion that we can draw from the above pie chart, says that 48.7% employees feel that it is difficult to concentrate on work because of the presence of family members whereas 46.1% employees feel it doesn't matter to them as they had a very neutral stance for this question. The employees who disagreed with this question were 5.3% and the overall conclusion that we can draw from this first question is that most of the employees were confused whether it was a challenge or opportunity for them.

2] Do you think there's been a loss of quick communication that was only possible through face to face with colleagues at workplace?

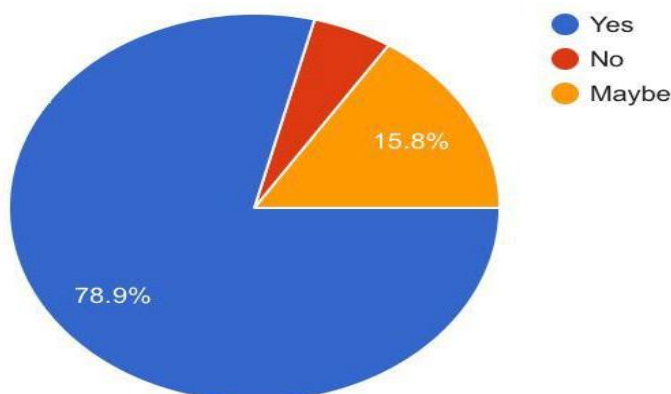


FIG 2

The conclusion that we can draw from this question is that, it is more of a challenge for employees as they feel that they have lost quick communication which was only possible through face to face with colleagues at workplace and the percentage of employees who agreed with this were 78.9% whereas 15.8% employees weren't sure about this question. The majority of employees were more inclined towards challenge.

3] Have you started a new task when your old tasks were completed?

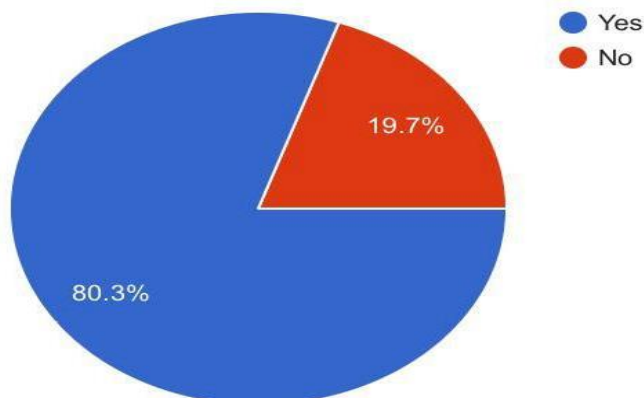


FIG 3

The above pie chart shows that 80.3% of employees agree that they have started a new task when their old tasks were completed whereas 19.7% employees gave a response that they didn't take up new tasks. So from the above we can conclude that this was more off an opportunity for employees since they had a liberty to explore more which was not possible when they were physically attending their office.

4] Have you worked on keeping your work skills up to date?

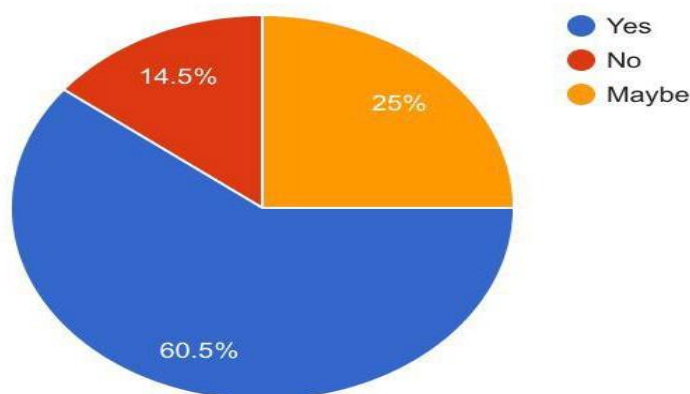


FIG 4

The pie chart shows that 60.5% of employees have worked on keeping their work skills up to date whereas 25% of employees weren't sure about whether they worked on updating their work skills and 14.5% employees didn't work on their work skills. This marks the conclusion that WFH has been more of an opportunity for employees as far as keeping themselves updated about their work skills.

5] Has work from home increased your regular time of office hours or remained same?

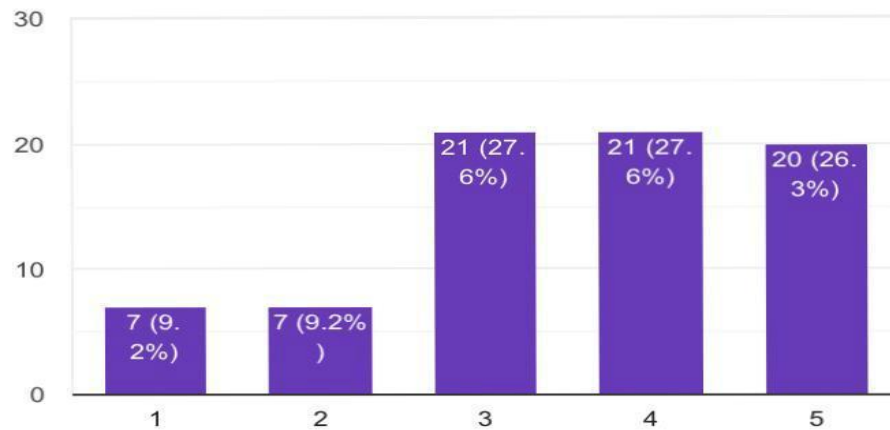


FIG 5

The above bar graph has scale indicating as 1 being (remained same) and 5 being (increased in work time) and when we look at the graph, we can easily make out the employees felt that the normal working time has increased in WFH rather than pre COVID era and this change in trend gives us a clear picture that this in fact has been a huge challenge for employees but on the other hand has been an opportunity for companies to get more work done from employees by over timing.

6] Do you think work from home has removed the barrier of locations?

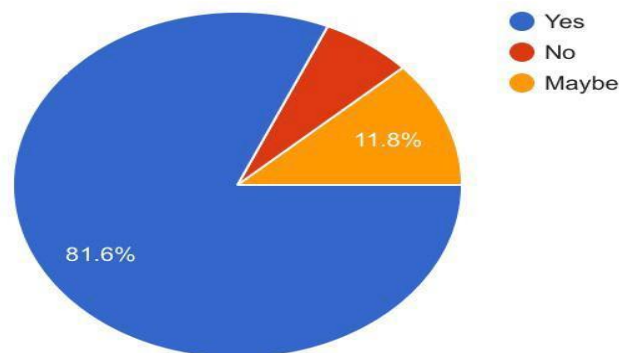


FIG 6

The pie graph shows that 81.6% of employees felt that WFH has removed the barrier of locations and 11.8% employees gave a neutral response to this question whereas 6.6% of employees felt that WFH didn't remove the barrier of locations. These Responses give us a testimony that as far as locations was concerned, WFH has been beneficial and has proven to be an opportunity for majority of employees, since WFH provides with virtually connecting from home itself.

7] Is work from home reducing expenses on daily basis?

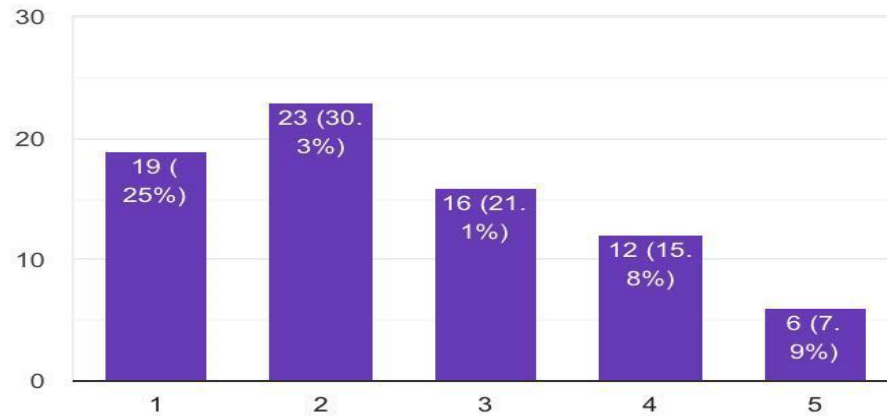


FIG 7

The above bar chart has a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 indicates (strongly agree) and 5 indicates (strongly disagree). The data represents that majority of employees were accepting that work from home has been effective in saving a lot much of their expenses which use to occur when they were physically attending their office and only few employees disagree with this question. We can conclude that it was again more an opportunity for employees, since they were saving expenses.

8] According to you, is work from home a challenge or an opportunity for employees?

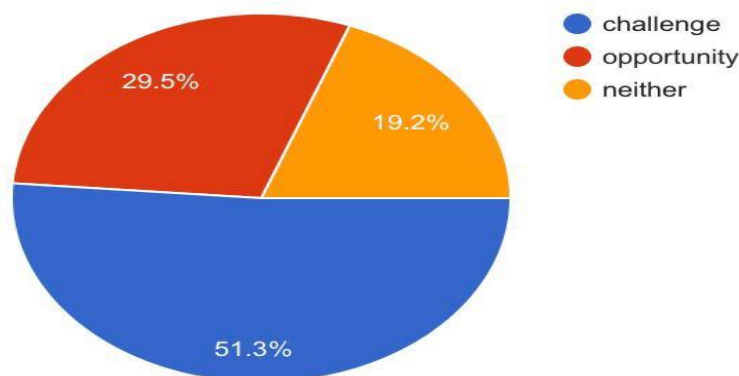


FIG 8

The pie chart shows that when asked directly to employees about whether WFH is a challenge or an opportunity, majority of them that is 51.3% employees responded it with being a challenge and 29.5% employees responded it as an opportunity and 19.2% employees choosing it to be neither. According to interpretations it reveals that for employees when asked directly about challenge or an opportunity for them, they had already made a mindset which calls them to choose it as a challenge because if we look at prior questions in those employees weren't hesitant to be accepting it as opportunity, as that what the reality is but because of psychological change and employees being asked to come out of their comfort zone might have led to this type of response.

9] If you had a choice, what would you prefer?

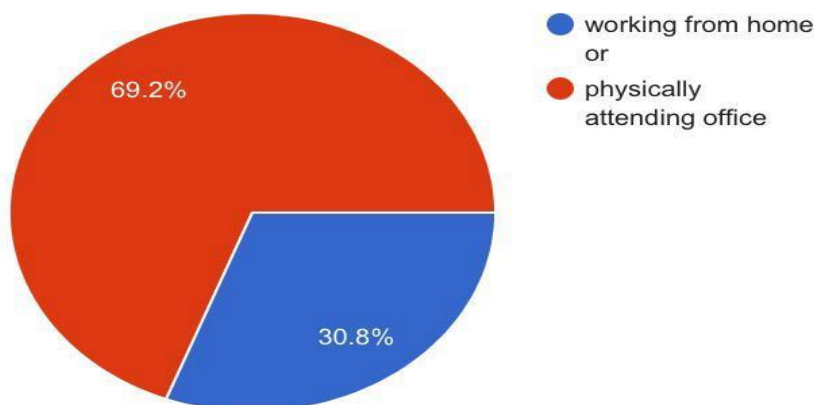


FIG 9

The above pie chart shows responses of those employees who when given a choice between working from home and physically attending office, they had been more inclined towards physically attending office as 69.2% of them were more comfortable in going and attending office physically, whereas 30.8% of employees felt that working from home was more convenient for them. The conclusion is very well depicted from the pie graph and has a direct connection from the objectives set at the start of this research.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

From the data received it can be concluded that first objective of research i.e... ‘To study the opportunities and challenges faced by employees post COVID’ is getting fulfilled because the questionnaire was designed in such a way that it threw light on various possible challenges and opportunity that an employee might have.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the data received is, employees felt that it was more of a challenge rather than opportunity and if they were to have a choice between WFH or physically attending, majority of them will prefer going to office and not WFH.

There are many reasons that attribute towards such conclusions because it was noticed that even if employee had appreciated and accepted the positives of WFH but were yet more inclined towards not opting for WFH. Hence even many of them were in dilemma.

Suggestions

Based on data and observations derived from data, I feel that employers (firm, company, etc.) must provide a hybrid option to their employees.

Even if employers feel that WFH is much more feasible, they should bring a practice of assigning targets on daily basis to their employees and provide them with incentives.

Employees must be supported with enhanced work culture and must check on over timing which usually gets dragged due to overburdening of work.

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