



IMPACT OF WORKING FROM HOME ON STAFF MOTIVATION AND PRODUCTIVITY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Social Science

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ABSTRACT

Background: Working from home is a universal trend and common way of working in the West. However, it is rather a new concept in the developing country that has been newly applied because of COVID-19. **Objectives:** This study intended to explore the experience of the staff working from home for the first time and assess how it has affected their motivation and productivity towards their responsibilities. **Method:** Hermeneutic Phenomenological approach: 25 staff (teaching and administrative staff) were interviewed using purposive sampling. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was utilized to analyze the data collected. **The results indicated** that working from home has positive and negative influences on the motivation and productivity of the employees. The findings also highlighted some aspects to be considered for refining working from home experience.

KEYWORDS

working from home, remote working, e-work, distance working-influence, impact, motivation, and productivity.

BACKGROUND

The initial identification of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was in Wuhan in 2019. The virus has spread globally, resulting in the 2019–2020 coronavirus pandemic. It infected millions of people and caused hundreds of thousands of mortalities universally. The COVID-19 pandemic turned working lives dramatically. Given the highly contagious nature of the virus, the main alteration happened in where and how work is accomplished. Office work was unexpectedly restricted to avoid direct contact between employees (Eurofound, 2020). To control the spread of the pandemic, the governments initiated several strategies such as cancelling flights, closing schools and universities and closing most businesses. This has resulted in asking employees to work from home to maximize their contact with others and encouraged them to practice social/physical distancing (Bonaccorsi et al., 2020). Working from home (WFH) is also called telecommuting, remote Working and telework. It has been defined as the ability of employees to work in flexible workplaces, mainly at home, by using technology to accomplish work duties (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007, Grant et al., 2019).

Many studies have shown the positive consequences of WFH, such as increased autonomy regarding making decisions around the method of how to complete the work. Lupu (2017) clarified that flexible scheduling allows staff to have certain independence in planning their daily activities, both work-related and personal-related activities, according to their needs. Wienclaw (2019) mentioned some examples such as starting and ending early, being free to sleep in and work late, working forty hours in four days instead of five or six days a week, scheduling personal appointments during office work hours and finishing work later in the evening without using leave days. Also, WFH saves money and time and reduces travelling efforts (Peeters et al., 2013). While the WFH has significant advantages, a growing body of research elaborates on its disadvantages. Ford and Butts (1991) claim that WFH can lead to a loss of control of the organization. They explained that staff might prioritize their personal needs over work needs. They further explained that the staff might ask someone else to do the work, which can cause data security problems. Peters et al. (2004) specify a threat of illegal access to the system.

A vital aspect, therefore, is how WFH affected employee motivation and productivity. Employee productivity has been defined as the effectiveness and efficiency of people in carrying out responsibilities and work duties. Effectiveness implies the degree to which employees can accomplish their responsibilities under a scheduled time limit. Efficiency indicates the extent to which the individual can finish tasks

without wasting any resources (Afrianty et al., 2022). Despite previous research on the effects of WFH on productivity, there are conflicting results. According to Jalagat and Jalagat (2019), individuals who work from home are cheerier and more productive than traditional employees. On the other hand, Golden et al. (2008) found that the professional isolation caused by WFH negatively impacted staff work productivity and reduced their motivation as they missed belonging to a specific group. In addition, Bloom et al. (2015) examined the employees' attitudes and productivity towards WFH. They found that WFH resulted in improved work productivity, and after the study, most participants wanted to switch to WFH. Whereas Battiston et al. (2021) conclude an opposed finding is that WFH decreases productivity and attributes the contrast to the complexity of the tasks in their experiment.

Greer and Payne (2014) reported a lack of sufficient work-related resources, including technological equipment and files stored at the main worksite required to perform work-related tasks, while WFH negatively affected work productivity. Furthermore, Peters et al. (2004) discussed a survey conducted with 66 managers who were against working from home. The data indicated several factors which may have an undesirable impact on work productivity, such as lack of interaction between employer and employee and absence of team spirit. Their study also found that productivity and work quality problems were significant disadvantages of WFH for organizations.

A crucial question, therefore, is how these changes in employment practices influence employee productivity. Despite earlier research on the effects of working from home, given the extent of the changes observed during the pandemic, the evidence base is certainly weak. Most research since the start of the pandemic has focused on characteristics of jobs through objective measures. There is little straightforward indication of productivity in the new working environment during this pandemic.

Motivation has been defined as "psychological forces that direct a person's behaviour in an organization, a person's level of strength, and the level of persistence in the face of obstacles" (George Jennifer and Jones, 2012). Mohaimen and Huq (2012) explained that motivation is vital to employee characteristics as it clarifies why people perform the way they do in organizations and how this will enhance organizational performance. They added that the level of employee motivation in any organization influences general organizational performance. There is intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation depends on the individual, whereas extrinsic motivation depends on external forces

that drive the individual to complete the tasks, such as punishment and rewards.

Timsal and Awais (2016) stated that WFH may not match each employee's needs as this flexible working system requires high commitment, attentiveness, and self-motivation. James (2016) detailed that WFH comprises several challenges, and the top one is that it can be particularly difficult to maintain the motivation and self-discipline to accomplish work responsibilities. Moreover, the employee may have fewer communication, interaction, and training opportunities. Barton (2017) also found that WFH can cause a lack of motivation and productivity towards job tasks and responsibility due to the extent of interruptions and disturbance at home.

The research findings indicated conflicting views; consequently, more studies are expected to confirm the findings found, and solutions can be made to counter the negative effects and difficulties brought about by WFH, specifically if the concept of WFH is new in that country or that specific organization. A broader understanding and proper identification of the issues affecting staff motivation and productivity is essential to form a reliable foundation to effectively apply the WFH concept in the future.

The aim of this study

This research was conducted to evaluate the lived experience of the staff (teaching and administrative staff) of working from home and to assess how it has affected their motivation and productivity towards their responsibilities.

METHODS

The hermeneutic phenomenology approach was selected for this study. We methodologically looked to staff to describe how they experience and understand working from home for the first time during COVID-19. With a lack of existing research about this issue in our geographical area, our study sought to understand the participants' lived experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology poses a flexible and attainable approach to phenomenological research. It is intended to provide a complete and in-depth explanation that privileges the individual. In this method, the researcher intends to generate a rich and profound interpretation of a phenomenon through intuition while concentrating on uncovering rather than accuracy and amplification, avoiding prior knowledge (Kafle, 2011). In using this approach, bracketing will be difficult (Chan et al. 2013); therefore, the researchers recognized their instilled beliefs and tried to clarify them to resolve this difficulty.

Ethical considerations

The study was submitted for ethical approval through the Research & Ethical Review & Approval Committee (RERAC). The benefits and risks ratio has been fully considered in this study, and the possibility of risk for all participants is believed to be minimal. Participants were allowed to clear any enquiries and receive accurate information before committing to the study. To assert confidentiality, the participants were assured that any data collected during the research would be used for this research only, including personal, demographic, or any other data. The participants were also assured that their identity is confidential. It was explained to the participants that they could withdraw from the study without penalty, as their participation was voluntary. Participant information sheets were prepared for the participants, and detailed information about the research and the researcher's contact details were included. The consent form was signed by the participant before the start of the interview.

Participants and setting

A purposive sampling was used to recruit 25 staff (teaching and administrative staff, including those with managerial posts) from one of the postgraduate educational institutions who experienced working from home for the first time. The potential participants were recruited during a face-to-face meeting; the study was briefly introduced and explained. A study pack, including an invitation letter, an information sheet, and a consent form, was given to the interested individuals. After receiving verbal confirmation from the interested participants of their willingness to contribute to the study, the interview date was decided, and the interviews were conducted in a reserved room within the institution.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were arranged to guide the discussions. In

the semi-structured interview, the interviewers had a set of questions on an interview guide; however, the interview was directed by the schedule rather than influenced by it. The interviewers were permitted to probe curious areas that arose from participants' interests or concerns. To confirm that a broad coverage of issues is achieved during the semi-structured interview, the interviewers asked focusing but not leading questions about their situation and listened carefully to the participants. To let the participants express themselves freely. The interview guide comprised a number of questions that allow the interviewers to consider the range of issues that need to be covered during the interviews. This will let the interviewers follow the topic of concern guided by these questions while still allowing the participants to introduce concerns of which we, as researchers, had not previously thought (Chan et al., 2013).

Data analysis

The data obtained was analyzed by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Firstly, the audio records of the interviews were transcribed, and each transcript was read several times to allow the researchers to acquaint themselves with the transcript's content to obtain a general impression of it. The initial notes to systematically capture observations were made, themes for each case were developed attending to reflexive echoes connections, and emergent themes for each case were searched. Then, the researchers moved to the next case, and finally, the researchers searched for patterns across the cases.

RESULTS

Twenty-five participants were interviewed individually. The final analysis revealed seven (7) themes:

Theme 1: Feeling of ambiguity

Most participants expressed that the unexpected shift to WFH created a feeling of role uncertainty and led to stress among them, as it was a whole new experience for the employees and the organization.

It was my first time trying to WFH. I was unsure and did not know what it was to WFH; I was hesitant if I could do it; the transition was quick and sudden. To be honest, I was stressed.

Theme 2: Positive influence on motivation and productivity

Some participants explained that saved time, work flexibility and lack of interruptions offered by WFH made them more productive.

WFH saved time to get ready in the morning and travel to and from work, which allowed more time to be utilized to finish work-related tasks.

The flexibility that WFH brought allowed me to be more organized and able to prioritize my goals and tasks and accomplish most of the goals that were supposed to be performed on that day.

At the workplace, sometimes they call for frequent sudden meetings or sometimes attend social events such as farewell parties that were not planned; I mean, we are forced to postpone our work based on attending these meetings. WFH stopped these unnecessary interruptions and made me fully engaged and more productive.

All the participants agreed on the benefits of WFH, such as saving time and money, reduced stress, and fewer expenses, and all were positive factors that improved their motivation.

WFH avoided getting stuck in a traffic jam every morning on the way to the office; I saved travelling money as well as time, consequently reducing stress and improving my readiness to work.

Three participants expressed that WFH allowed room for innovation as they were forced to learn to deliver lectures using new technologies and think about new educational tools.

It was very challenging when I found myself forced to learn about new technology, such as using Zoom and other platforms to give my lessons for the first time to my students during COVID-19; however, that made me feel innovative and creative.

We started bringing new ideas and thinking about new tools to match new technology of education that we are experiencing for the first time with our students, such as online exams and online rubrics. I did not expect the achievement to be so impressive and fast.

Working from home has benefits, particularly for female staff to spend more time at home and take care of children, especially since the kids experienced online education for the first time.

It was excellent spending time with my kids, teaching them how to use online platforms and making sure that they attended all the classes while I was working at home.

Theme 3: negative influence on motivation and productivity

On the other hand, WFH might negatively affect motivation and productivity as WFH needs work discipline and self-control as the work-at-home atmosphere differs from the office, as expressed by 2 participants.

Honestly, I considered it [WFH] as a vacation, as if I am in my comfort zone and can finish the work at any time, with no rash.

When I am working in the office, I am more focused, and work can be accomplished on time, but at home, I feel laziness and have no impulse to work, and no staff are around me; I feel alone, just me doing the work, and say no- later I'll do it, and that makes me a bit lazy.

Four participants stated that lack of face-to-face guidance from the supervisors caused delays in the work.

When working at the office, many people are there around us to seek help and some direction, and we feel motivated by talking to them. We go and clarify any doubts with our supervisors, whereas, at home, you have to depend on the phone to ask them. The answer might be delayed for one reason or another, or the answer can be misinterpreted, which slows the accomplishment of the work; face-to-face may lead to better and faster interactions.

We need to speak to our managers face to face because the conversation will be more precise, both parties will understand the desired outcome quicker, and it will be easier to clear doubts.

Lack of resources was expressed as a significant concern that affected the speed of productivity, as described by most participants.

I had no printer, computer or scanner at home; I only used my phone. It was challenging for me to accomplish the assigned work, such as sending some scanned documents via email; I had to go out and use my expenses to finish the job, which was hectic and expensive.

Weak internet connection was also another factor that affected motivation and productivity, especially for teaching staff.

It feels Frustrating, especially when the internet is suddenly disconnected, and I don't know the reasons. There is no net, and I had to postpone the lecture.

Staff paying from their pockets to run WFH was annoying and caused dissatisfaction, affecting their discipline towards the work.

It is not my responsibility to pay for a Zoom subscription; we are not obligated to pay from our pocket like what happened to us. That disturbed the workflow, and I did not want to do anything about it; it was the institution's responsibility.

Theme 4: Supervision challenges

Three supervisors stated it was difficult to manage several team members consistently outside the main office and follow the work progress.

It wasn't easy to follow the staff's progress in some work-related assignments. For example, when I asked them to finish some work and to submit it at a specific time. Some could not complete the work at the stated time because WFH allowed them to take breaks at different times.

Theme 5: Work preferences

All participants in this study preferred to allocate one day per week or two days per month to work from home, as this can improve work performance.

Having the option to WFH for one day /week would frankly create a lot of flexibility for people, and on the contrary, productivity would be

more because of less interruption.

Two days a month will be excellent because it means fewer meetings and will allow us to focus on some tasks that need high concentration without unnecessary disturbances.

Theme 6: Work-life balance

Two participants stated that their personal time was interrupted during WFH.

WFH was like working the whole day; many work-related tasks were sent after duty time, and there was no consideration that it was outside duty hours. I felt I needed to check my phone messages and Emails before I went to sleep. That made me anxious.

Even after duty hours, I have been asked to send some documents through my email, and it was always urgent; it wasn't duty time, and I was out for some personal issues, which was disturbing.

Theme 7 : Future suggestions for improving WFH

Ten participants expressed the possibility of considering WFH as an available option whenever needed, such as attending a whole-day virtual conference or delivering online classes.

It would be great if we would be given the option to work from home whenever possible, such as attending online conferences from home instead of coming to the office.

Having WFH as an option will be great, specifically if you need to be at home for some reason, so instead of taking off and delaying or cancelling the work, you can still do it while you are at home.

Three participants highlighted the importance of developing plans and guidelines and implementing a system to regulate WFH effectively, considering any unexpected future disasters, including pandemics.

We must have a specific plan to deal with the pandemic or any emergency that might happen in the country, such as a hurricane or earthquake; we should be ready. I think we must have a clear and specific strategy to support the staff to be safe and, at the same time, to be able to work from home efficiently.

Almost all participants highlighted the institution's importance in ensuring the availability of all the needed facilities that allow the employee to work effectively, such as computers, printers, scanners, prepaid phone cards, subscriptions to online platforms, net.

Ensure that we had the equipment needed to finish the work was essential like computers, printers, scanners, prepaid phone cards, subscriptions to online platforms, internet.

Three of the teaching staff stressed the importance of ongoing training on using online platforms to be ready for any future unexpected circumstances.

Training on using Zoom or Google classes should be continued to be ready for the future if needed. It took me time to learn about Online Teaching, and I do not want to forget the skills that I have learned.

One participant emphasized the importance of allocating some budget to make the sudden transition to WFH, if needed, easy and effective.

Since we are expected to WFH for one reason or another, the institution is compelled to assign a budget to offer the staff the proper support by providing the necessary equipment when needed, for example, laptops, scanners, suitable chairs to work at home or stationaries.

DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study focuses on the experience of the staff working from home and how it has affected their motivation and productivity towards their responsibilities. Staff who experienced WFH for the first time have developed feelings of vagueness towards their role, consequently elevating their stress level. Alblihed and Alzghaibi (2022) highlighted that role ambiguity could lead to stress among employees due to a deficiency of information related to the task assigned to the employee due to organizational variables.

WFH positively affects individuals' work productivity and motivation,

as most participants expressed that WFH permitted work independence regarding prioritization, time and ways of accomplishing the task. It was also reported that a lack of interruptions at home allowed them to be more productive. In this view, previous research suggested that flexible working arrangements can increase work productivity, allowing staff to have certain autonomy in planning their daily activities, whether personal or work tasks (Galanti et al., 2021, Krasulja et al., 2015, Lupu, 2017, Mishra and Sharma, 2022). The most common advantage of WFH expressed by all participants was that it saved money, time and effort, which increased their motivation (Monteiro et al., 2019, Ipsen et al., 2021). Andreas (2022), explained that WFH saves time and reduces stress, which all work as positive motives towards work and the work environment. The work-related motivation of employees is influenced by their intentions and focus; the more exciting and enjoyable the work experience, the more satisfied and motivated (Adriansyah et al., 2023).

In addition, WFH has benefited, particularly female staff with kids, from spending more time at home and taking care of children who are experiencing online education for the first time. Awada et al. (2021) pointed out that WFH has allowed female workers to create a much-needed balance between work and home responsibilities. In comparison, Mustajab et al. (2020) had opposite findings in their study, where female staff during WFH could not manage their work and family responsibilities during COVID-19. This discrepancy may be due to field, nature and work focus. Some participants believed that WFH created an opportunity for innovation, such as using online platforms for teaching and assessment, as long as the necessary training and resources are provided. Contradictory to that, Colclasure et al. (2021) and Malisch et al. (2020) found that employees were not satisfied due to unfamiliarity with WFH, which was considered a challenge. Bloom et al. (2015) stressed that WFH might negatively affect the motivation and productivity of employees as they need to adapt to new methods and work atmosphere. Henke et al. (2022) emphasized that adequate training and support to WFH will elevate confidence and efficiency while working from home.

On the other hand, the lack of facilities required to shift to WFH and its associated extra expenses and internet interruption were the most significant challenges expressed by most participants, negatively influencing their productivity and motivation to work. This study showed that WFH likely reduces the supervisor's ability to manage their staff to accomplish the work on time. Flassak et al. (2023) stated that the managers' efficiency in guiding employees toward achieving the organizational objectives was negatively affected by WFH due to a lack of observation and direct monitoring.

Furthermore, a lack of face-to-face guidance was considered a challenge in this study. According to Aziz et al. (2021), a non-conducive communication climate causes a loss of in-person interactions with colleagues while working online, and it isn't easy to implement group communication virtually. They recommended comprehensive organization communication policies and extensive employee digital communication training. However, WFH's negative effect depends on the task's nature and the need for individual collaboration (Chen, 2021).

Reflecting on the data, it is evident that all participants showed their interest in having WFH partially as an option. Similarly, Stefaniec et al. (2022) found that many of the working population in Irish have a significant desire to continue some form of WFH in a post-Covid world. According to Paul (2020), WFH is a recognized staff incentive and British, American, Australian and Indian Businesses, among others, all use WFH flexibility as a way to attract and retain staff. He also emphasized that the option to WFH allows those with health or personal circumstances to accomplish the work without commuting daily. Flexible duty option will ensure continuity of the work anywhere and at any time. However, institutional support is essential when it comes to applying such changes.

Few participants felt that personal time was interrupted during WFH, consistent with Grant et al. (2019) study, which found that WFH causes employees to be overburdened due to difficulty managing boundaries between working and non-working time. On the other hand, Mustajab et al. (2020) indicated that many employees during WFH feel a balance in carrying out their work and social life. Likewise, several studies showed that WFH is positively associated with family and life satisfaction as there is balance and fairness in performing family-

related tasks and work responsibilities, and makes family relationships better and more harmonious when employees do WFH (Arntz et al., 2019, Chan et al., 2013).

Participants in the study suggested some suggestions to allow WFH to run smoothly and effectively. For example, creating guidelines and policies to regulate WFH and ensure resource availability. Enaifoghe and Zenzile (2023) highlighted that introducing a formal WFH guideline for employees and employers is imperative to make WFH more practicable locally. It is also essential to Consider staff expectations in the guidelines, and budget to stipulate minimal needs for technology preparation for virtual office and technical facilities for WFH (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021).

Strengths and Limitations

Since the nature of academic work differs from other disciplines, whether our findings are generalizable across other non-educational organizations can be questioned. Furthermore, it suggests that our findings might be limited to one academic organization. However, despite these limitations, we consider our results of how WFH affect motivation and productivity can be generalized across other educational institutions. Our study adds to local literature and helps to understand the encouraging and discouraging factors contributing to successful transitions to WFH. Future research is vital to understand WFH from a long-term perspective.

CONCLUSION

Our research has contributed to understanding how employee motivation and productivity were affected during WFH for the first time ever in our organization. A sudden switch brought out different influences on the staff and the progress of the work. Yet, all the participants still favour having the option to WFH occasionally. The study suggests that proper policies and guidelines should be in place to regulate and make WFH possible. In addition, matters such as training, resources, budget, communication and work-family balance should be considered.

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