

## The Effect of Working from Home as a Result of Covid-19

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Received: 07 Aug 2021

Accepted: 23 Aug 2021

Published: 28 Aug 2021

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### Citation:

Willie MM, The Effect of Working from Home as a Result of Covid-19. *Ann Clin Med Case Rep.*

2021; V7(5): 1-4

### 1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic hit the world unexpectedly, and to respond swiftly to it, lockdown and social distancing measures had to be implemented to combat its spread. As a result, this forced changes to the working environment since many could not commute to work and have since been working remotely. Due to so many COVID-19 waves that affected different countries at various times, it proved impossible to return to the office and to work from home became entirely possible, and it also reduced the incidence of workers' unsettlement.

In most instances workers, other than essential workers, were advised to work from home full time, which previously was only done by unique employees for certain types of work, on an occasional basis. However, the practice now seems to have been adopted thoroughly by many companies. All these changes were to limit the spread of COVID-19 as it spreads through respiratory droplets or contact with contaminated surfaces.

Exposure also occurs in the workplace, where more than two people usually share the same office space. In some instances where people travel together to work in lift clubs also poses a risk of transmission (WHO, 2020) [5].

According to Xiao et al. (2021) [6], working from home will become more common even after the pandemic, since employers will have already paid the fixed cost to set up remote work systems for their employees; and seeking to reduce operational costs in that way could be adopted permanently. Studies showed that the transition from the office, although it seemed to be a great challenge at first, is now proving to be successful.

### 2. Advantages

- Working from home saves daily commuting time and cost.
- Vyas and Butakhieo (2020)[4] reported that it would enable flexible time to complete the work. You get to work at times where you are the most productive. It allows you to have more flexibility and a more relaxed time to complete work. You get to work during the most suitable times for you.
- It gives one freedom to cultivate a very comfortable space by controlling environmental factors such as space, light, temperature, humidity, air quality, and noise, all of which influence positive attitude and behaviour.
- Xiao et al. (2021)[6] reported that it could be beneficial for avoiding distractions from co-workers and only encourages necessary work engagements, which positively impacts satisfaction.
- Research studies suggest that working from home influences produces increased productivity.

### 3. Disadvantages

- Vyas and Butakhieo (2021)[4] reported that according to Baker, Avery and Crawford (2007), household characteristics such as the size of the living area and the number of family members sharing the same accommodation might be detrimental when one is working from home.
- Extended hours of screen exposure due to full-time computer work could lead to fatigue, tiredness, headaches,

and eye-related symptoms.

- Complications may arise due to the stress of dealing with a COVID-19 infected person in the home, should there be one, and the need to focus on your work.
- Health complications could arise due to a lack of physical movement under lockdown, which could affect productivity.
- A lack of social support due to less social engagements with colleagues could lead to mental issues (Xiao et al., 2021)[6].
- A lack of boundaries where work interferes with family or vice versa could cause work versus family conflict, leading to emotional exhaustion and a negative effect caused by changes in routine and eating habits.
- Difficulty monitoring performance.
- **Confidentiality and Information security risk:** many companies currently do not have policies that safeguard the company's intellectual property when employees are not office-bound. This risk should be assessed and dealt with urgently.
- Abuse and misuse of the internet: Companies will need to develop stringent controls regarding monitoring data and internet usage to ensure optimal use of company resources to benefit company objectives.
- Many companies continue to incur the rental cost of office space because only a portion of their employees has adopted a working from home stance. Many companies will need to review their business operating model in this regard and may need to check their lease arrangements and agreements.
- Working from home is more challenging for women since they tend to be more responsible for household chores and other home activities. The uncertainty around the pandemic and its effect on many families sometimes becomes overwhelming for some employees. They may feel pressure from kids due to a lack of support from day care centres and babysitters during working hours. Working from home has also seen a need for creating a much-needed balance between work, home-schooling, and normal home-based activities and chores.
- Increase in work volumes when working from home: a recent survey revealed that a larger number of respondents experienced an increase in their volume of work, the intensity of work, the pace of work and the pressure of work, compared to when working at an office (Taylor,

Scholarios & Howcroft, 2021)<sup>2</sup>.

- Employees bear some costs to working from home since they now buy their stationery etc.
- Challenges in connecting virtually may include network connection or signal.
- Unreliable power infrastructure such as load shedding impacts the ability or risk of optimal connections, which may limit connectivity from home, as most companies have generators or backup systems that are enabled whenever there is a power outage.
- Lack of social and human interaction, in some instances, may impact emotional stability. A Robert Walters' 2021 Salary Survey showed that the lack of social interaction or physical contact between employees has made professionals less formal and more conversational with colleagues and acquaintances<sup>3</sup>, which may not be optimal in specific working environments.

#### 4. Gaps In The Work-From-Home Transition

The advent of COVID-19 resulted in an abrupt transition from working in the office to working remotely. As a result, policies and guidelines were not laid down, that sought to govern the new working arrangements to seek better working rules and oversee those employees who continued to do their work effectively. That initially led to challenges, and companies have since been forced to make rules and policies that seek to advance the company and protect its employees from unfair situations due to the new working arrangements.

Vyas and Butakhieo (2020) advised that policies must be adopted, keeping in mind the practical needs of both employers and employees. Better guidelines and procedures from the government and individual companies should be in place to properly regulate and make working from home more feasible.

Digital orientation and digital capacity are of the utmost importance, and they significantly affect productivity in the case of working from home. So proper access to IT training, management support, and digital infrastructure needs to be prioritised, significantly affecting employees' productivity.

Information Technology (IT) has undoubtedly been the area that has been most affected by transitioning or working from home. This occurs at various levels, including readiness and preparedness. Studies have already identified areas that could be improved and could make working from more effective and efficient. A survey conducted by Metova (2020) showed the following findings (Metova, 2020)[3]:

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.stuc.org.uk/files/Policy/Research-papers/WFH\\_Preliminary%20Findings.pdf](http://www.stuc.org.uk/files/Policy/Research-papers/WFH_Preliminary%20Findings.pdf)

<sup>2</sup><https://www.news24.com/fin24/companies/industrial/many-south-africans-want-to-work-from-home-but-say-bosses-wont-let-them-survey-20210212>

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- Forty-eight percent (48%) are more productive working from home (29 percent say they are less effective).
- Fifty-seven percent (57%) would prefer to work from home in the future.
- Sixty-eight percent (68%) have others in their household also working from home (including students).
- Thirty-one percent (31%) think that working from home is less secure than working in the office.
- Eighteen percent (18%) say that their employer does not have clear security guidelines in place for working from home.
- Twenty percent (20%) do not always follow their company security guidelines or do not have any guidelines.
- Thirty-seven percent (37%) have encountered possible security issues while working from home.
- Seventy-six percent (76%) use video conferencing as part of their daily work.
- Fifty-three percent (53%) have experienced glitches or dropped audio with video conferencing.
- Fifty-four percent (54%) have upgraded their technology (computer, printer, laptop) to work from home.

**Box 1:** Metova Working from Home COVID-19 Survey results<sup>3</sup>

Proper mental health support should also be made easier and accessible because people are working from home and are also affected by other effects of the pandemic, which could negatively affect their job performance.

High tech security and binding laws need to be implemented to protect company information and deal with confidentiality issues.

Bloom et al. (2011)[1] studied the effects of a randomised work-at-home pilot programme on worker productivity, employee satisfaction, and promotions. Employees selected to participate in the programme worked four days remotely and once a week in the office.

The study showed that working from home freed up commuting time and improved self-care and family responsibility activities. This led to less employee turnover and a general improvement in employee sentiment towards their work. Secondly, they could not receive real-time support from their supervisors, which led to an overall business slowdown. Lastly, they generally worked alone and in a quieter environment than employees in the office, which improved their performance.

Gibbs et al. (2020)[2] studied the impacts of work from home, using personnel and analytics data from over ten thousand skilled professionals in China. While they found an increase in the number of hours worked, they also found a slight decline in output. This could be attributed to many issues, ranging from the impacts

of WFH on gender roles in the household to a lack of valuable interactions among co-workers.

A closer look at the determinants of changes in productivity reveals that employees with children (male and female) had more significant declines than those without children. The impact of WFH productivity for organisations/employers increased, as did time spent on coordination and meetings. However, uninterrupted work hours decreased in some cases. Employees communicated with fewer individuals and business units, both inside and outside the firm, and received less coaching from supervisors.

Vyas and Butakhieo (2021)[4] used an exploratory framework and a SWOT analysis to investigate the experiences of employers and employees in Hong Kong, since the COVID 19 outbreak. Their results showed that the main strength of WFH was the improvements in autonomy and work-life balance, while the main weakness was a lack of support and supervision from employers. The foremost opportunity provided by WFH was the possibility of hybrid models where employees could enjoy the benefits of in-office and out-of-office work environments, while the main threat was threats to cybersecurity and a lack of WFH policies/regulations.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/survey-of-those-working-from-home-due-to-covid-19-reveals-new-realities-of-productivity-security-and-technology-301049053.html>

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