

The Concept of Working Remotely in an Organization – A Literature Review

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Abstract: The concept of remote work has gained prominence due to technological advancements, such as video conferencing and conferencing software. Remote work refers to employees not physically present at their organization's office but still effectively carrying out their tasks. This literature review explores how remote work impacts an organization's leadership style, considering challenges and opportunities. Qualitative analysis of numerous articles sheds light on this topic. Remote work presents advantages like cost savings and reduced environmental impact. It became a "new normal" during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, challenges include distractions from home activities, difficulties in supervising employees, and potential isolation leading to negative psychological effects. White-collar employees benefit from savings on commuting time and expenses, but prolonged screen usage may have adverse psychological consequences, necessitating employer-provided remote work options for employee well-being. Remote work reduces an organization's environmental footprint, eliminating the need for commuting. However, it lacks a transition period into work mode, affecting productivity. The COVID-19 pandemic created business opportunities, with increased sales of ICT equipment, software, and medical supplies. The education sector also benefited from online learning, albeit with challenges in areas with poor connectivity. This review explores the impact of remote work on leadership styles, emphasizing transformational leadership, which moderates the negative effects of physical and psychological distance on organizational relationships. Future research should focus on remote work and leadership dynamics during pandemics and unpreparedness, considering the capacity of organizations and governments to provide services, health care, and education during crises. Research should also explore how developing countries can prepare for future pandemics and the role of remote work. In conclusion, remote work offers numerous benefits but presents challenges that require further research, particularly psychological and behavioral aspects. Face-to-face communication remains valued for its rich sensory experience, making it an intriguing area of study.

Keywords: Remote working, Leadership style, Challenges and opportunities, COVID-19, pandemic, Psychological effects.

Introduction

The idea of working remotely or working virtually has been there for some time since the advancement of technology of video conferencing and improvement conferring software and hardware. Remote working implies that the employee of an organization is not physically at the office premises of the organization they work for. Rather they are away from the station but still executing the tasks and daily work as required by the employer. Such work arrangements are mostly common for Information, Communication

and Technology (ICT) related work such as that for database administrators or mobile phone call center employees.

This literature review is focusing on the effect of working remotely on the leadership style of an organization and how that creates challenges and opportunities. The biggest question is whether working remotely has more advantages than the worker being physically present on their job office. The approach in the literature review is qualitative and a number of articles will be analyzed on the topic to be able to shed more light on the topic.

Positive and negatives have been identified in research on remote working in an organization. Some of the benefits of remote working has been identified such as saving on costs, reduced carbon print, and with the term in the recent COVID 19 pandemic of it being a “new normal”. COVID-19 brought its own opportunities in business especially pharmaceutical companies and ICT organizations. This implies that during pandemics organizations have to adjust and in some cases the adoption of remote working is swift and can have negative effects, some of the negatives include distraction from other home activities, inability to supervise subordinates effectively, employees can feel isolated and that can have negative psychological effects. In addition to having more alternatives for scheduling flexibility and childcare needs, employees like white-collar educated ones also save money on gas, commuting time, and yes, even work attire (Jacks, 2021).

Research Method

This research was based on secondary literature review of published articles. A number of articles relating to the topic provided some critical insight in remote working in an organisation and its potential impact to performance. This is a systematic literature review and content analysis of literature on the related subject. A systematic literature review entails critically reviewing studies already done on the topic area to have a better understanding of where we are coming from and where we are at this moment in time. This way, systematic literature review helps us have a better understanding of the topic and identify gaps for future studies to add to the knowledge already in existence.

In this literature review, Google Scholar was used to gather the literature with key words such as Remote working, Leadership style, Challenges and opportunities, COVID-19, pandemic. The period covered in the research was from 2011 to 2023, that is, a limited 12-year period for literature review. However, for historical purposes, there are exceptional years selected before 2011 just to give the research a better understanding, mostly in the introductory and methodology sections.

The use of literature review as a methodology has its own challenges and limitations, both inherent to the researcher and due to the availability of peer-reviewed articles on the topic being researched. With the dual goals of expanding the knowledge base and guiding policymaking and practice, medical science has made an effort over the past fifteen years to enhance the review process by synthesizing research in a methodical, open, and repeatable way (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003).

Effects of Remote Working

It has been elaborated that in some cases remote working is considered effective and produces innovation in employees. The rise of remote work is evidence that innovation does not only occur in face-to-face settings, that people can be productive outside of official offices, and that organizational culture is not compromised when employees perform their jobs from remote locations (Georgiana & Constantin, 2017).

Remote working has meant that employees in most organization have to learn new skills and unlearn the old work style. This meant having employees learning new skills such as use of applications such as zoom, Microsoft teams etc. While the majority of us, if not all of us, are willing to acquire new abilities, we also ought to be willing to unlearn old routines that no longer serve us in a different

circumstance (Raybourn, 2020). However it has been found out in research that use of screens for a long time has negative psychological problems. In their study Prasad, Vaidya, & Mangipudi, (2020) stated that “wherever possible, the remote working options need to be worked out by the employer, in all the sectors to reduce the stress and enhance the psychological well-being of employees”. Therefore, organizations should include there long term plan for their employees to have access to remote platforms. This may include computers and laptops of workers with preloaded and licensed applications. Having an internet connection from home maybe costly to be always available to employees at home all the time. However, organizations are required to have contingency or emergency plan that can be executed and is updated regularly. Such a plan should always be known by all employees for it to be a success when needed in unforeseen circumstances.

An organizations footprint is reduced in environmental pollution as the workers don't have to drive to and from the office to work and conduct meetings. However, measuring a company's carbon footprint by the mile is the most straightforward method, because every mile a worker avoids driving reduces the company's environmental effect (Hickman & Robison, 2020).

Even though employees have reduced environmental footprint, they have missed out on another psychological issue of transitioning into work mode. When an employee is in traffic or train their minds are in a state of transitioning into office environment and they are refocusing their attention to achieve certain milestones that day. This is a researched phenomenon that a person inner being transitions into a mode of work and off work. Mostly working remotely has no transition period and can create psychological challenges. Research shows that the most-desired commute length is 16 minutes, so when you're working remotely, take that time to find another way to transition into work mode (Howe, Whillans, & Menges, 2020).

Opportunities in Remote Working Phenomenon

In every challenge there are opportunities which are business related or otherwise. The businesses are able to sale more ICT equipment and software during the COVID-19 pandemic. This created a business opportunity, not only for ICT, but also for suppliers of medical supplies and equipment and not forgetting the vaccines that raked billions of dollars into pharmaceutical companies.

Among other things, the pharmaceutical industry's emphasis on profit, the use of vulnerable populations in clinical trials, and the subsequent aversion to medicines and vaccinations have rendered the human right to health inaccessible for many people as the focus is boosting revenues (Binagwaho, Mathewos, & Davis, 2021).

Apart from the business sectors the education sectors also benefited from remote working as it meant that they could cover more students who have access to the online classes at their own time. During covid-19, due to lockdowns and movement restrictions, students were not expected in schools for some time ranging from weeks to months. This made schools and Universities to start online classes. Creating a new learning methodology which has continued in some places and universities especially, have realized the great opportunity in online learning. “E-learning not

only accesses information (e.g., putting up web pages), but also helps learners with specific results (eg achieving goals and in addition, to delivering e-learning teaching, it can monitor student performance and report student progress (Yuhanna, 2020).

However, this change to learning paused a number of challenges to learners who are accustomed to face-to-face learning. In some cases, especially developing countries this created a challenge due to poor connectivity and even lack of it. Findings demonstrated that studying remotely is difficult in these tough times because, in addition to the ongoing issues with access and pricing, new worries about financial security and emotional support also interrupted learning engagement (Abel, 2020).

Leadership Style Effect Due to Remote Working

There are a number of leadership styles, but one that stands out in the modern era is the transformational leadership style which focuses on the impact of superiors on its subordinates to be focused on the vision of the organization, able to positively influence employees to strive to achieve the organizational goals. Physical and psychological distance have been proven to negatively affect the quality of relationships, but the supervisor's level of transformational leadership moderates this relationship by reducing the negative impacts (Brunelle, 2013).

In most organizations across the globe have had to adopt “working from home” concept in an unplanned manner and this has entailed that the organizations have some level of change management issues to address. Change in some cases is good but it can only achieve its objective if well managed. In a pandemic for example an organization is forced to change the way they supervise and work and such may bring in aspects of change. This change may not be welcome by all employees and this is what is called resistance to change. Resistance to change to adapt to the change will cause business disruption and in some cases affect business viability and profitability. Organizations must respond quickly to adapt to changing surroundings by implementing change, from simple modifications to fundamental transformation. On the way to obtaining good organizational results, there are many challenges to overcome, not the least of which is resistance to change, which limits the degree of mobilization necessary for a successful transformation (Appelbaum, Degbe, MacDonald, & Thai-Son, 2015).

Future Research Areas in Remote Working

Future research can be in areas that have been looked at less such as the ability to respond to working and leadership style in the advent of vicious and sudden spread of pandemic such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers in the scientific world has indicated that such pandemics happen in every century and is usually sudden and has devastating effects due to unpreparedness of organizations and governments across the world. Such pandemics bring unexpected and grave humanitarian crisis and business collapse. They also bring economic slowdown and loss of jobs as goods and labour is unable to move freely.

There's also to delve more into the effects of working remotely on how leadership is affected and transformed. “However, very few studies as yet have attempted to understand the impact of distance on leadership dynamics” (Brunelle, 2013).

During the COVID-19 it was noticed that organizations and governments were never ready for the effects that the pandemic could bring. Governments had challenges providing public services and meeting the requirement of the public. In the health sector, staffing dwindled significantly as a good number of medical personnel succumbed to the pandemic and died. Businesses had to down size and lay off some workers and in some worse scenarios of lack of capacity to continue the businesses had to shut down completely. Even after some control being restored across the globe, some business have never recovered and have been shut down for good.

How developing countries are coping with the remote working phenomenon and whether they should start planning for the future in this direction given that a pandemic is always expected sometimes in future. Is the developing world going to be more ready than today to adapt then to provide leadership and continue providing public services such as student learning and health care in a pandemic crisis?

Conclusion

The future of remote working is a phenomenon that is here to stay and has more benefits. There are some challenges and risks in working remotely and these are some of the areas that may need further research such as psychological matters of human behavior and change. However, it's expected and known that humans prefer face to face as it provides other stimulus benefits and is considered more effective. The face-to-face communication channel is what communication researchers refer to as stimuli rich, meaning that we utilize all of our senses—hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling—to communicate verbally and nonverbally without mostly being oblivious of it (Raybourn, 2020).

Business executives must invest in technology that will be future ready to address the challenges that come with pandemics such as remote working and managing strategies for being effective and efficient while working remotely. This may entail that some tasks can be done remotely as being standard practice such as work of a call center worker. This way organisations will not have a lot of goods and services provision disruption to clients. This will require to have transformative leaders that can look to the future and plan now for future organisational management.

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