

Work from Home (WFH): The New Normal?

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ABSTRACT

The study aims at highlighting the worldwide work from home situation set out by the COVID-19 pandemic that has changed the long-held judgment about Work from Home. It possibly looks as though the circumstance won't actually return to how it was: many organizations who have sent all their staff on work from home pattern are now beginning to address why they needed to go in to the workplace in any case.

Today, however, the study opinions around WFH are moving in positive direction. As COVID-

19 cases have flooded, so have the number of organizations expecting that their employees actually adapt to WFH. Yet, WFH doesn't work for everybody, or for all parts of an organization. The study also focuses on the pros and cons of WFH. It also states that the pandemic isn't over at this point and a few nations are seeing an ascent in contaminations, so we should be cautious and stay adaptable in 2021. To understand the future of flexible working and mainly possibility of WFH initiatives, the said topic for research is chosen.

The study concludes on how should companies be making WFH a part of the overall HR policy

starting from the way it must be planned, implemented (ways in which it can be implemented) and the assessed (i.e., understanding the similarity between Trust Based Working (TBW) and WFH, which involves assessment of employees by leaders on their performance alone rather than the time put in).

Keywords: *Work from Home (WFH), Workforce Strategies, HR Policy, COVID-19, New Normal, Flexi Working.*

INTRODUCTION

The on-going COVID-19 pandemic quickly changed how and where the individuals worked. Many individuals stayed at their home to maintain a strategic distance from the illness. Numerous organizations were shut and many individuals worked remotely. Many Nations actualized exceptional proportions of social distancing to tame the spread of COVID-19. These measures also included closing of working environments to restrict interpersonal contact. The degree to which work can be led from home accordingly is a key factor deciding the financial results of social distancing policies.

With the continuous pressing factor and spotlight on the continuity of the business in the midst of the pandemic, organizations are needed to think in both present moment and long-term possibilities in order to keep working. The worldwide work from home situation set out by the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the long-held judgment about WFH. Where once, meeting face to face was viewed as the best way to

complete work, this has changed to meeting over online platforms Zoom Video calls, Teams calls and Skype calls etc. The unexpected expansion in telecommuting is introducing issues just as promising circumstances: on the one hand, new businesses, for example, Slack and Zoom and set up monsters including Google and Microsoft are offering their apparatuses free of charge, with the expectation that individuals who begin utilizing them in an emergency may continue once situation is normal.

It possibly looks as though the circumstance won't actually return to how it was: many organizations who have sent all their staff on work from home pattern are now beginning to address why they needed to go in to the workplace in any case.

Rationale of the study

In some ways, COVID-19 has been a distinct advantage for workplaces and the manner in which we work. In earlier years, WFH was inseparable from 'evading from home', with many connect it with the chance to invest more energy with the fridge, the bed, or the TV. Today, however, the opinions around WFH are moving in positive direction. As COVID-19 cases have flooded, so have the number of organizations expecting that their employees actually adapt to WFH.

It is important to say that flexibility in working is an advantage for the individuals who have been fortunate enough to keep their positions during the pandemic. As there is rise in job losses, the International Labor Organization predicts that almost 50% of the worldwide labor force will get jobless. Yet, WFH doesn't work for everybody, or for all parts of an organization. Peter

May, Chief People Officer at Baker McKenzie says that there has been actually an increase in productivity during pandemic. Dr Michael Ilgner, Global Head – HR, Deutsche Bank mentions that employees have understood the expectations from them during WFH and they have been able to fulfil them. Bala Viswanathan, COO at Mercer says that the pandemic situation and the subsequent changes have brought in surprising benefits in the form of limitless possibilities. Tracy Keogh, Chief Hr Officer, HP says that the situation enhanced the communication and collaboration with employees.¹⁸

The pandemic isn't over at this point and a few nations are seeing an ascent in contaminations, so we should be cautious and stay adaptable in 2021. To understand the future of flexible working and mainly possibility of WFH initiatives, the said topic for research is chosen.

Research Gap

- The detail study is not available in India
- Comparison of opinion about WFH during pre and post COVID-19 needs to be done.
- Generation wise WFH opinion needs to be analyzed.
- Work type and WFH needs to be compared.

Research Problem

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The research problem of this study is to understand whether the work from home initiative, which was implemented during lockdown due to the pandemic situation, will be part of workforce strategies of the companies and the overall HR policy in the post COVID-19 situation.

Research Questions

- Will Work from Home (WFH) initiative be part of the workforce strategies of the companies in the post COVID-19 situation?
- Will Work from Home (WFH) initiative be part of the HR policy in the post COVID-19 situation?

Research Objectives

- To study the pros and cons of Work from Home (WFH) initiative in the post COVID-19 situation.
- To study the feasibility of flexi working as a beginning step towards Work from Home (WFH) initiative in the post COVID-19 situation.
- To study the positive possibilities and driving forces for Work from Home (WFH) initiative being part of the overall HR policy in the post COVID-19 situation.
- To summarize the steps to be followed for making Work from Home (WFH) initiative a part of the overall HR policy in the post COVID-19 situation.

Review of Literature

Possibility of the Work from Home (WFH) initiative being part of the workforce strategies of companies in the post COVID-19 situation.

While WFH is not a feasible option for hospitality, manufacturing, performing arts and heavy industries, it is a new thing for those companies who never had it as part of their culture. WFH has been saviour for many companies who otherwise would have shut down. Even government and PSUs embraced the idea of WFH (Deorah, 2020). People have differing wishes which need to be balanced. On one side they want to save time and work more flexibility and on the other hand they also desire face-to-face contact too. The overall study suggests that the best way to balance these wishes is by having a system which helps some amount of commuting and increased possibility of WFH as per the desire and the possibility (Rubin et al., 2020). A study conducted by Dubey, A., Tripathi, S., (2020) revealed that 73% had positive approach towards WFH whereas 23% had negative approach. Also, while 60% people showed emotions of trust, joy and anticipation for WFH, some showed emotions of anger, disgust, fear and sadness. The study overall concluded that WFH activities had a positive perception worldwide (Dubey & Tripathi, 2020).

On WFH, Jennifer Christie, HR Head at Twitter said in a message to the staff that “We understand this is an unprecedented step, but these are unprecedented times”. Christie added that WFH doesn’t change the day-to-day work. It’s just that the person is doing the same work from a different environment. Chief Executive of WordPress and Tumblr owner Automattic also mentions that the work distribution is already in place in his company and he predicts that these changes will offer an opportunity for many companies to create a kind of culture that promotes work flexibility which has been long overdue (Hern, 2020).

A global research conducted by Lenovo shows that 74% of the respondents from India agreed that they are more willing to work from home post pandemic than they were before it. They are more connected to their devices than ever: 91% have increased the usage of laptops, 95% agreed that they have become their own IT person, and 43% believe that companies should invest more in tech training for further enhancing WFH opportunities (BW Online Bureau, 2020).

In a study by Dingel and Neiman (2020) it has been concluded that 37% of jobs in US Could be entirely in the form of work from home (Gottlieb et al., 2020). This is also mentioned in the study conducted by Su (2020) that 39% of the jobs can be done from home (Alon et al., 2020). In his article Nicholas Bloom mentions that through WFH 33% of increase in efficiency is expected due to calmer climate, which makes it simpler to handle calls. At home, individuals don't experience what we call the "cake in the lunchroom" impact. Workplaces are really unimaginably diverting spots. The other 66% can be ascribed to the way that the individuals at home worked more hours — they began prior, took more limited breaks and worked until the day's end. They had no drive and didn't get things done at lunch. There is also decrease in sick leave from employees working from home (Bloom, 2014).

Organizations keep on wrestling with the continuous business disturbances from COVID-19. Perpetual WFH could supplement cost-cutting estimates that CFOs have just taken or plan to take. In Gartner's latest review, 20% of respondents demonstrated they have conceded on-premise technology spend, with an extra 12% wanting to do as such. An extra 13% of respondents noted they had just made expense decreases in real estate costs, with another 9% intending to make similar moves in the coming months (Lavelle, 2020). However, another study found that poor countries will have significantly lower share of employment that can be done from home (Dingel & Neiman 2020).

Companies who have already invested in building a better digital workplace during pandemic, will see going back to the old normal as a step taken backwards. Alexandra Levit, winner of Radar award in 2019 from Thinkers50, says that COVID-19 has divided the businesses into two camps: ones who will continue with remote work and who already were having WFH to begin with, and the others with entrenched office culture not changed their minds as yet. She says that the new reality of WFH is the situation we would have faced a decade later.

The businesses who have still not changed their mind about WFH will have to think about new way of structuring their workplace. The social distancing requirement will need to a Rota system temporarily in place, as different teams alternate between office and home. However, Hybrid work will remain. In US there could be massive shift to WFH. The paper by National Bureau of Economic Research found that 35% of the

companies already think that more than 40% of the current switch in WFH will be permanent (Nugent, 2020).

Possibility of Work from Home (WFH) initiative being part of the overall HR policy of companies post COVID-19 situation.

While organizations are demonstrating adaptability and obliging to the new normal, Risk Management Plans will get looked into, infrastructure and security protocols will be refreshed to give portability and adaptability to address any such circumstances that may emerge later on. Besides, an advanced change will occur and innovations like Cloud Computing, AI and others will assume a significant part in forming the worldwide economy now like never before. Many organizations are already planning to make WFH model a perpetual part of their workforce strategies post COVID-19 (Vadakkanmarveettil, 2020). As indicated by McKinsey research, 80% of individuals mentioned that they enjoyed WFH. 41% felt they were more productive than they had been previously. Numerous employees were freed from long drives and travel, have discovered more gainful ways to invest that energy, appreciated more flexibility in maintaining work life balance, and concluded that they like WFH instead of the workplace. Companies have realized that they can get to new talent pool with less locational issues, inculcate innovative processes to support profitability, make a much more grounded culture, and essentially diminish land costs. Leading organizations will intensely examine long held suspicions concerning WFH and the role of the workplace. There is no one-size-fits-all arrangement. The appropriate response, diverse for each organization, will depend on the talent requirement, which jobs are generally significant, how much coordinated effort is vital for excelling, and where workplaces are located today, among other factors. The recommendation mentioned in the article are: i) Reconstruct how work is done – organizations to identify important processes for each major business, geography and function and completely re-envision them with involvement of employees. It will provide a strong foundation of an improvised operating model, leveraging the best of both employees and WFH, ii) Decide ‘people to work’ or ‘work to people’ – they can decide which roles must be carried out from office and to what extent. The roles can be reclassified into fully remote (net positive value-creating outcome), hybrid remote (net neutral outcome), hybrid remote by exception (net neutral outcome) and on-site (not eligible for remote work), iii) Redesign the workplace to support organizational priorities – create office space to support the kind of interactions that can’t be done remotely. The boundaries between being physically present in office and out of the office need to collapse. It will maintain productivity, collaboration, learning and preserving corporate culture, iv) Resize the footprint creatively – it is necessary to have a transformational approach to reinventing offices. Some companies may continue to have spaces in big cities while some may go for suburban campuses. Companies should use this moment as an opportunity to break the past inertia by doing away with suboptimal old habits and systems (Boland, 2020).

The challenges which the companies could face in WFH are; implementing WFH in a structural way, developing an infrastructure for remote working and maintaining work life balance of employees. The leaders will need to define the goal by asking questions on why WFH to be continued beyond the need of the current crisis. One the goal is clear and defined, the first step would be to make the leadership adapting to the new way of working. This needs to be followed by clear guidelines for employees to adapt to the new ways of working. These guidelines should be reflected in the adjusted

HR policy. WFH is here to stay and hence, instead of short-term solutions, companies need to plan for long term and accordingly adapt their corporate culture. The next step would be training and feedback of employees and adaptability as per necessity. While doing all this, it is important to keep a track of employee sentiments. They need to increase cooperation among employees and monitor their togetherness. The business leaders should think about the potential returns on the investments: i) having a new operational model, ii) more internally and externally connected corporate culture, iii) alignment of business goals to culture and employee expectations, and iv) data driven analysis method to understand learning patterns, employee sentiments etc. WFH is going to stay and will become an integral part of the overall operational process. It is the right time for companies to prepare for the ‘back to the new normal’ (EY Belgium, 2020).

In crisis management many feminine values and traits can be effective including communal orientation in moral decision making, high sensitivity towards risk, mainly health issues, high conscientiousness and more attentive communication styles. It is important to build positive and productive interactions which would aid in creating roadmaps for new patterns of work (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Kate Lister, President of Global Workplace Analytics, mentions that according to their estimate ‘By the end of 2021, 25-30% of the employees would be following WFH for multiple days in the week. Also, 50 to 60 % of the times the employees have not been at their desk which is a huge waste of space and money.’ The reasons for the same would be; increasing employee demands for WFH, reduced fear among managers and executives about WFH, more pressure on WFH as preparedness for disaster, increased awareness about cost saving opportunities in WFH, increased awareness about impact of WFH on sustainability, less travel for business (Lister, 2020).

Angelique Parungao in her article mentions 3 common predictions which are; i) WFH is here to stay ii) The important role technology will play, iii) strengthened WFH policies (Parungao, 2020).

Sigve Brekke, President & CEO, Telenor Group says that WFH had busted the hierarchies and had made everyone more efficient. He further adds that its actually possible to bring down layers in the company, with more focus on cross functional, project-based work. It will boost efficiency, as decisions would be quicker and will involve more people. As ‘presenteeism’ is fading, it will also give rise to new styles of leadership. There is similarity between Trust Based Working (TBW) and WFH, which involves assessment of employees by leaders on their performance alone rather than the time put in. Brekke mentions that Telenor is already embracing it and he predicts that it will work. They call it ‘Tight. Loose. Tight.’ Which means tight on expectations, light means giving more empowerment and freedom, and then again tight means more follow up and accountability. One of the learnings to be gained from the pandemic is that, having speeded up better approaches for contemplating how to coordinate and work with each other, we have got insights about what adaptable work models can resemble. The main task to preserve and develop it’ (Whiting, 2020).

To summarize, WFH is going to be more permanent. If companies are maintaining financial gains with minimum effect on productivity levels and staff wellbeing, they will not go back to the traditional working styles post pandemic. With the digital workplace is able to create replica of all elements of working together in the office, many companies are going to use it as a long-term solution. Companies will adapt hybrid workplace styles with teams A & B working on different days. In order to

ensure strong workplace culture and smooth operation it would be important to properly design remote work policies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

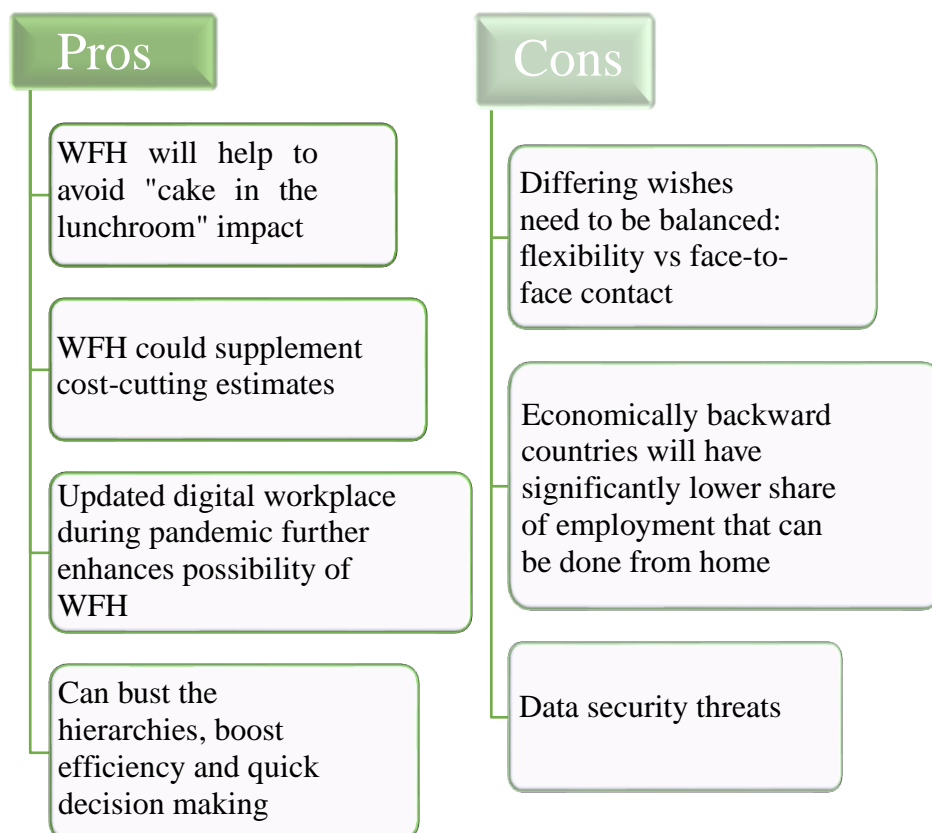
Literature review research design is used for this study. The Literature focusing on the use of WFH during COVID-19 was collected and reviewed. The study of literature covered the time period between April 2020 - January 2021. It included extensive literature review from the research papers, research reports, media reports and articles which provided many insights for the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Possibility of the Work from Home (WFH) initiative being part of the workforce strategies of companies in the post COVID-19 situation.

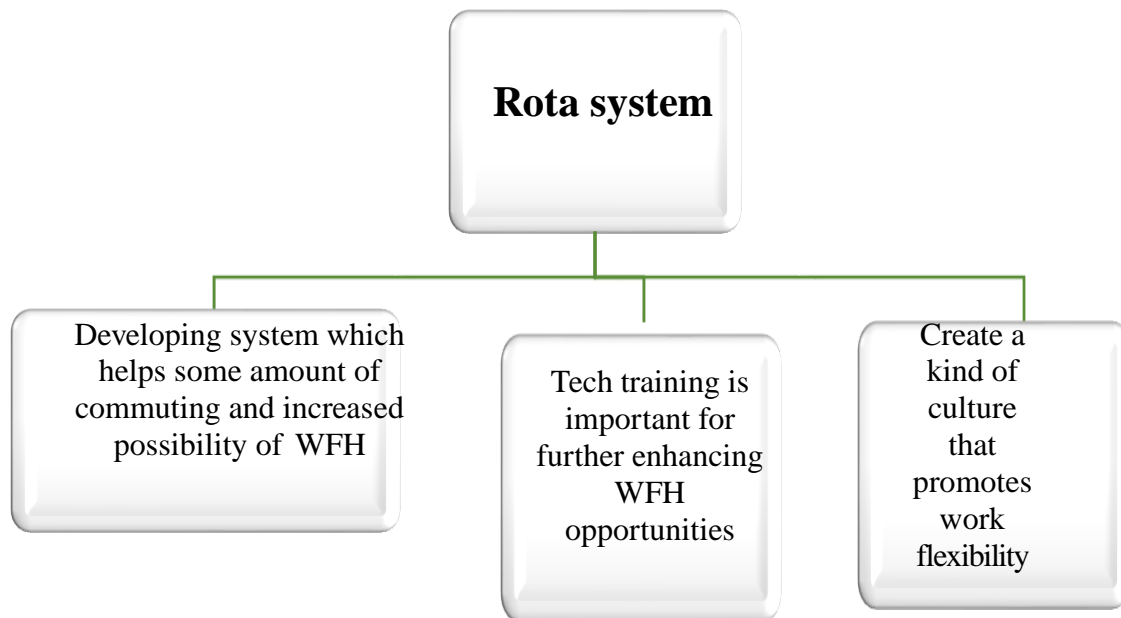
WFH activities had a positive perception worldwide. COVID-19 has divided the businesses into two camps: ones who will continue with remote work and who already were having WFH to begin with, and the others with entrenched office culture not changed their minds as yet. Fig 1. highlights the pros and cons of WFH that need to be taken into consideration:

Fig 1. Pros and Cons of WFH



The new way of structuring the workplace is possible through - Rota system: Different teams alternate between office and home. (Fig 2.)

Fig 2. Rota system: Different teams alternate between office and home



Possibility of Work from Home (WFH) initiative being part of the overall HR policy of companies post COVID-19 situation.

The appropriate response, diverse for each organization, will depend on the talent requirement, which jobs are generally significant, how much coordinated effort is vital for excelling, and where workplaces are located today, among other factors. Fig 3. shows the Positive Possibilities and Driving Forces which can lead to WFH being part of overall HR policy.

Fig 3. Positive Possibilities and Driving Forces



The steps that could be followed while making WFH a part of the overall HR policy:

Plan

- Identify important processes for each major business and completely re-envision them with involvement of employees
- Decide which roles must be carried out from office and to what extent
- Create office space to support the kind of interactions that can't be done remotely
- Transformational approach to reinventing offices: to have spaces in big cities or go for suburban campuses.
- Plan for long term and accordingly adapt the corporate culture

Implement

- 'Tight. Loose. Tight.' concept could be implemented, which means tight on expectations, light means giving more empowerment and freedom, and then again tight means more follow up and accountability.
- Leaders will need to define the goal, make the leadership adapting to the new way of working, clear guidelines for employees to adapt to the new ways of working, guidelines should be reflected in the adjusted HR policy
- Feminine values and traits can be effective including communal orientation in moral decision making, high sensitivity towards risk, mainly health issues, high conscientiousness and more attentive communication styles
- Training and feedback of employees and adaptability as per necessity

Assess

- Use data driven method to analyze and keep a track of employee sentiments
- Understand the similarity between Trust Based Working (TBW) and WFH, which involves assessment of employees by leaders on their performance alone rather than the time put in.

Limitations of the study

This is Literature review research, and has its own limitation. This study would have been more quantitative by collecting real time data from the various entities involved in the study i.e., HR professionals and working professionals across various industries. Due to paucity of time and COVID-19 situation, the research had to be concluded with the help of secondary data.

Implications on further research

The steps suggested for WFH initiatives post COVID-19 are generalized in nature and its implementation can be further investigated through industry specific study. It will provide better insights on further making WFH as part of the HR policy of respective industry.

Conclusion

The situation of pandemic faced by the countries and companies around the world has led to major changes in the way life is lived and businesses are run. It has brought in a number of creative and fruitful initiatives which has taken us ahead of time in implementing it. Hence the study is aimed to understand the usefulness and continuation of WFH initiative post COVID-19 situation.

The study highlighted the pros and cons of WFH initiatives. The pros of WFH have been identified as less wastage of time, support in cost cutting initiatives, updated digital workplace, help in busting hierarchy and enable effective and quick decision making. The cons of WFH initiatives are the varied sentiments of the employees, limitations for economically backward countries to implement WFH initiative, and data security threats. The concept of ROTA system, which facilitates different teams alternating between home and office, can be initial step towards WFH. The driving forces for WFH to be part of HR policy are the updating of risk management plans, advances changes and innovations will form the worldwide economy, and easy availability of new talent due to less locational issues.

Finally, to make WFH part of the HR policy it would be necessary to plan, implement and access its effectiveness for each business individually. The first step i.e., Plan will include analysing the processes and roles involved in the business and the extend to which the roles can be performed remotely, redesigning office space and using transformational approach in reinventing offices. The plan should be long term and should be supported by a strong corporate culture. The second step i.e., Implement can incorporate 'Tight, Loose, Tight' approach, leadership will play a major role in defining the goal and ensuring its smooth implementation, incorporating more feminine

values and traits in company culture, training employees and collecting feedback from them. Assess would include studying and analysing employee sentiments on the basis of concrete data. Similarity between Trust Based Working (TBW) and WFH need to be understood and employees should be evaluated based on their performance. The lessons learnt during COVID-19 need to be taken further and should be incorporated in designing remote work policies. A key component is flexibility which would help in keeping the employees safe.

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