

Predictors of Psychological Well-Being of Remote Working Employees during COVID

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Abstract : The sudden break of covid 19 pandemic has almost brought the whole world to a turmoil. Lockdowns announced by governments of various countries from March, 2020 has accelerated a transformation in the work front where most of the organizations have encouraged their workforce to work from home. This remote working has posed a lot of challenges in terms of psychological and behavioural changes among the employees. The overall aim of this study is to explore how remote working influences the psychological well-being of employees especially during the COVID pandemic. A qualitative research approach was followed for this study. Based on reviews and discussions with the experts, an open-ended questionnaire was framed for exploring the well-being of the employees. A non-probability sampling technique using snowball sampling method was used to select the respondents for the study. An in-depth interview using technological platforms like google meet /teams meet was conducted. Data was collected to a stage where it no longer added new dimensions to the information generated. Thematic analysis was carried on the responses, The analysis identified 10 first level themes and further analysis of those led to identification of three major themes that influenced the psychological well-being. The themes identified were Remote work Characteristics, Remote Work Challenges and Adaptive Behavior. Despite the study's many limitations, some recurring themes emerge that can be utilized to assist employers in improving working circumstances in order to reduce the negative effects and increase the positive benefits of remote working on employee well-being. The study aids managers in identifying the varied work job characteristics of remote working as well as the problems of doing so.

Keywords : Remote Working, Psychological well-being, work life integration, isolation organizational trust, social support

Introduction

The sudden break of covid 19 pandemic has almost brought the whole world to a turmoil. Lockdowns were announced by governments of various countries from March, 2020. This has posed a challenge to the entire society today and has forced people to consider different practices to be adopted from work to leisure to travel etc. This has accelerated a transformation in work front where almost all the organizations have encouraged their workforce to work from home all of a sudden without much preparation. Situational theory has described these types of continuous response where organizations

readily adapt themselves to changes responded to the pressure situation (Felstead, Jewson, Phizacklea, & Walters, 2002)

Covid 19 is an extraordinary event fostering an atmosphere of uncertainty. Corporates have implemented new business continuity methods and have migrated their applications and data to cloud. This has also created other challenges like remote working condition where employees started for the first time, started working from home. This actually created an unpredictable work condition, and has impacted the employees professional and personal stress levels. The fear and anxiety of health of the family during this challenging period combined with the uncertainty of lockdown, and pressure of work has impacted the overall well being of the employees tremendously.

Though work from home was considered to one of the flexible options given to the employees, this was the only option available to the organizations during the COVID pandemic for their survival. Organizations were forced to adopt this new norm, without equipping employees with the required competencies for remote work (Vander et al 2020).

As economies started reopening at a slow phase, the chance of returning back to regular office environments and its impact employees is still a question (Shimazu et al 2020). Many organisations prefer to opt for working at home (WAH) even after the pandemic.

Remote Working

Remote work also known as work from home [WFH] or telecommuting is a type of flexible working arrangement that allows an employee to work from remote location outside of corporate offices. Far off working is characterized as "an adaptable work plan where laborers work in an area distant from the workplace with a facility to interact and communicate with the associates using innovative technology. (Di Martino & Wirth, 1990). ILO defines teleworking as the use of information and communication tools, (ICT's) like smart phones, tablets, laptops and desktop to perform work outside the employee's office.

The technological revolution has changed the working patterns enabling many to take the option of work from home. The concept of work from home, though not new, had a limited scope due to various problems like access to resources and so. But the developments in the field of information technology and communication have enabled workers to take up remote work option with greater flexibility (Hickman 2019).

Various studies was carried out on the option of remote working stating both their positive and negative impacts. Yasuhiro & Katia 2018 in their study found that though remote working had positive benefits like flexibility, it also had negative impacts like burnouts fatigue, and so. Employees had to face different challenges like technical issues, sharing of workspace, distractions, working from home.. The remote work which was a desired option once to work, is no more considered the best option

(Lina Vyas2020)

Wellbeing at Work Place

Mental Health issues in workplace has been an area of concern for quite sometime but with the COVID 19 crisis, the psychological challenges faced by employees have spiked up. Corporates are striving to bring a balance in the employees work and well-being. Studies carried out on the employee well-being has highlighted different dimension that could provide the managers with an insight of understanding the challenges of employees in remote working environment. (Forgeard et al., 2011; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Diener, 2009; Michaelson et al., 2009). Ryff & Keyes (1995) in their studies found six dimensions explaining the positive impact suggest remote working and Huppert and So (2013) identify 10 items associated with flourishing. Pradhan and Hati suggested 4 dimensions for measuring employee Well-being. According to Diener and Seligman (2004), a systematic approach to measuring well-being is required because present measurement instruments assess distinct concepts in different ways. The variety of techniques to studying

well-being has resulted in some somewhat broad definitions, with academics using the term "well-being" interchangeably with "satisfaction," "happiness," or "quality of life."

Psychological Well -Being at Work

Inspite of facilitating business functioning (Zhang & Wang, 2008), remote working is said to create psychological impacts on employees. Social isolation, emotional isolation are a few challenges faced by employees working in virtual environments (Golden et al., 2008, Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011).

Mental health of employees has always been of great concern to corporates as these may lead to problems like absenteeism, negative impact on productivity and so It also impacts employee morale adversely. Emotional wellness is a significant determinant of the general well -being and can be a reason for problems like hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular conditions, among others. Psychological well-being is the core element of overall well- being and is connected to physical health, mental health, longer lives for individual employees (Kundi 2020). People are happy when they subjectively believe themselves to be happy.

Though various studies is carried on the well-being of employees, but the influence of it on job performance is still unexplored. Many studies have actually found that happy workers are more productive than less happy or unhappy workers (Di Maria *et al.*, 2020).The mental health of employees also impacted the productivity and turnover at workplace. Its also proved that psychological well-being was stronger when engagement levels were high.

The review of the literature indicates well-being as one of the major determinants of productivity of employees. A lot of studies have been carried out to find out the factors that influence the psychological well-being of employees working remotely. The studies were basically carried out when work from home was an opted option among employees and not in situations like COVID -19 where employees were pushed into action all of a sudden without any prior preparation. Fear of the pandemic, health conditions of the family members, sharing of workspaces at home. The present study tries to identify the factors that influence the psychological well-being of employees working remotely in the technology sector during the pandemic period.

Objective of the Study

The study is carried out with an objective of identifying the predictors of Psychological well- being and have an understanding of remote working challenges experienced by the employees in technology enabled sector and its influence on Psychological Well -Being.

1. Research Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research approach was used. Sanders, Cugin, and Bainbridge (2014) define qualitative research as "the collection of data that provides contextual information and contributes to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon." In order to grasp the perspectives of the participants, the researcher took an objective method. The researcher was able to better understand the research issue by gathering employee opinions and experiences about remote working and its impact on their well-being using a qualitative technique. In comparison to quantitative research, the researcher has the option to employ open-ended questions (Myers, 2013).

Sampling Method

The overall goal of this research is to see how virtual working affects remote workers' psychological well-being. The target audience was chosen to be remote workers in the technology-enabled sector. During the COVID pandemic lockdown, the research was conducted. A non probability method using snow ball sampling method was used to select the respondents for the study. Because the study was exclusively conducted on remote employees in the technology-enabled sector, one of the major advantages of using a

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snowball sampling strategy was that it allowed the researcher to have complete control over the sample.

Data Collection Method and Procedure

An in-depth discussion was conducted with eight senior professionals of IT industry to have an understanding of remote working and its impact on work. Based on reviews and discussions with the experts, an open-ended questionnaire was prepared for exploring the well-being of the employees.

The researcher along with the research associate conducted an in-depth interview using technological platforms like google meet, teams meet. A few responses were also collected through online. When the information from the interview was almost saturated and no new information could be generated, data collections was stopped. Around 32 respondents were interviewed and all the responses were transcribed.

2. Analysis, Findings and Discussions

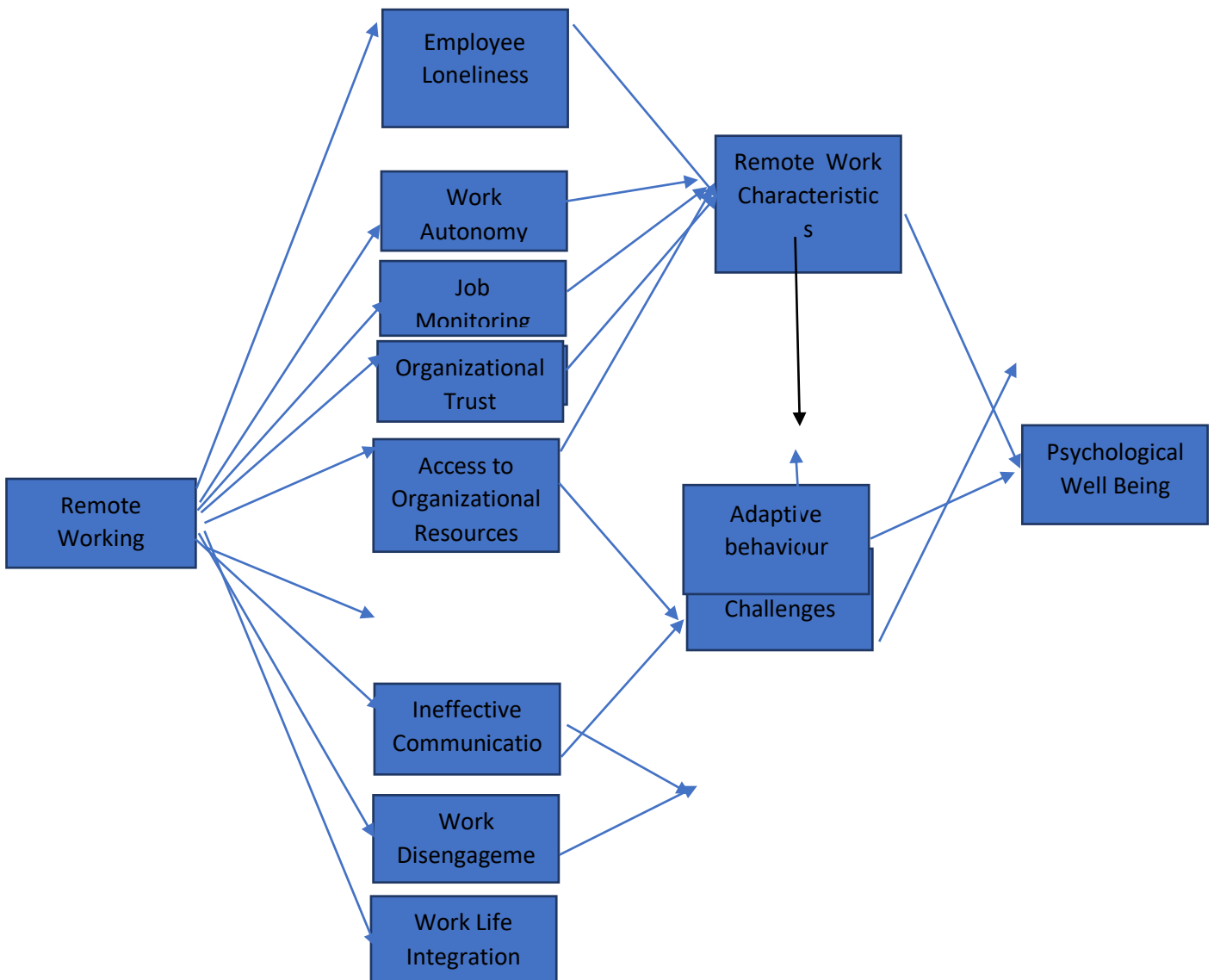
To discover the underlying patterns of content and meaning in the data set, a thematic analysis (TA) approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Willig, 2013). The shared data was highlighted, coded, and sorted into themes for thematic analysis. Initially, to familiarise ourselves with the themes raised by the respondents the transcripts were read several times.

After reviewing each transcript individually, the data was cross-referenced with other transcripts to determine the most common themes. Common themes in each transcript were determined, and codes were assigned. The data was carefully analysed and coded, and 11 themes were discovered during the investigation. The researcher went on to examine the topics further and group them into three main themes that emerged from the data. Table 1 lists the themes identified as well as the codes.

Table 1 Themes identified along with their Codes

Items	First level codes	Final variables
Feeling very left out and alone, mental stress, loneliness, missing the people around	Emotional loneliness	Remote work Characteristics
Missing the chat over the short coffee break, no one around to chat, tied up at home, not much interaction with friends, missing the team outings.	Social Isolation	
Can plan and schedule my work at my convenience, free to Work at your own, flexible timings to work ,freedom and independence in making decision.	Work Autonomy	
Lack of team bonding, not much of team interaction, unable to reach out the team/superiors at time, good team support	Social Support	
Continuous checking on calls ,submission of daily reports, expecting of immediate reply to mails, monitoring the checking/checkouts, keep on the camera during the meetings, lack of monitoring	Job monitoring	
Bias in the superior's approach, unbalanced work allocation, being unfair, not understanding the individual's view point	Organizational Trust	
Unable to perform due to lack of information, poor internet connectivity, children uses the laptops for their school works, continuous work on mobiles, notable to access the resources	Access to organizational Resources	Remote work challenges
Not able to reach the team members, unable to understand mails clearly, too many mails at a time, frequent calls form the team members/managers	In effective Communication	

I think I am working all time, working late even after working hours, not able to switch from job after working hours, checking mails or attending calls late nights,	Work disengagement	
Distractions from family, not able to concentrate on the work ,completely, not able to work efficiently, unable to meet the demand of the family and kids, no child care due to lockdown, work life balance	Work family Integration	
Got used to work from home, it is more convenient, prefer To have a mixed work pattern(hybridmodel),rejoicing working from home	Adapting to changes	Adaptive behavior



Thematic representation of the factors along with themes identified influencing the psychological wellbeing of the employees.

Discussion

Employee Loneliness

It's a psychological phenomena in which employees perceive a lack of social and emotional relationships with their coworkers (Mulki and Jaromillo 2011). Eighteen of the thirty-two respondents said they miss office breaks, team outings, and chat over the coffee table, among other things. Employees gain a better understanding of the organization's culture as a result of these interactions at work. Employees who work from home see themselves as individuals rather than as members of the company (Cooper and Kurland 2002) During remote working, there is a sense of workplace isolation due to a lack of interpersonal networking, spontaneous discussion, and face-to-face connection (Brooks). Work-place isolation can increase the stress level which negatively affects the emotional wellbeing

Work Autonomy

Employees who have job autonomy can choose when and how they do their work. Job autonomy benefits people's performance and well-being since it allows them to balance work and rest and choose the most productive ways to conduct their work. According to Petrou and colleagues (2012), job autonomy has a favourable impact on employees' psychological well-being. Work-family balance was also improved by job autonomy. It has a positive impact on the psychological well-being of people. Job autonomy lowers superfluous reporting to superiors and so increases positive feelings among employees, resulting in a greater degree of psychological well-being. Seven respondents felt that they experienced a lot of freedom in working and were free to take up decisions. They also had a flexibility in planning and scheduling their work. this flexibility helped them to balance the work life and had a positive impact on the productivity and well being

Job Monitoring

Monitoring in remote work is a topic that is rarely explored (Lautsch et al., 2009). Nine participants said they were subjected to various forms of supervision from their bosses, including daily reports, weekly reports, checking of login and logouts, using various applications, keeping the camera on during work. Continuous monitoring led to trust issues among the employees which effected their emotional well- being. Monitoring also had contrast effects. Three of respondents felt that lack of proper monitoring led to inefficient working. Some of the respondents also felt that monitoring helped them to focus on the work and overcome distractions.

Social Support

It is a set of communication between the co workers that reduces uncertainty about a situation (Sias2009). The extent to which the workers provide support to each other in the work place has a significant impact on the psychological well being of the employees (Cooper, Dew and Driscoll,2001).Fifteen respondents in the study felt that they were not able to connect with their co workers as they would in office. Assistance from the team members, good team relationships at workplace , would reduce the emotional exhaustion of employees thus decreases feeling of burnouts and isolation. Studies have confirmed that encouraging social support as an integral part of the organization culture will surely benefit the organization, especially during the COVID pandemic.

Organizational Trust

Organizational trust is defined as having faith in one's organisation and its leaders in order to achieve organisational goals by establishing a horizontal and vertical intra-organizational value chain. Trust is a feeling of assurance based on the expectation of meaningful participation. According to studies, there is

a link between organisational trust and organisational performance. Employees who trust their co-workers and senior leaders do far better than those who don't. Covid 19 has confirmed this relationship where many companies were forced to go entirely remote. Most people have less faith in their company's strategy now than they did before the outbreak because of the shift and unpredictability. Organizational trust appears to be a necessary prerequisite for employee well-being as well as offering a competitive advantage.

Work life integration

Work-life integration refers to how employees manage their work and personal lives. According to the findings, WFH for some workers entails combining work and personal life. Workers spread their work beyond the hours they would normally spend at the office, maybe to squeeze in non-work duties during the day, due to the way they allocate time to work and personal responsibilities. This could lead to a clash of professional and personal life, with the lines between the two becoming increasingly blurred. In the study respondents have reported that due to the closure of child care centers, schools they faced various distractions at work. Organizations should have a clear strategy that helps the employees to formally develop boundaries between work and family.

Ineffective Communication

Communication is described as a process where the employees receive clarity in the work-related matters. Kim and Lee (2009) found that effective communication would reduce the burnout levels among employees and lowers the turnover intentions. To communicate and interact with colleagues, supervisors, and clients, remote employees rely heavily on ICTs. Because workers were unable to attend face-to-face meetings during the epidemic, ICT-mediated interactions were the only choice. During this time, twenty-one individuals said they had low productivity as a result of poor communication. The study identifies the need for creating a culture of communication in the organization so as to reduce the stress among the employees.

3. Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the factors that impacted the psychological well-being of employees. Various studies have been carried out in this area, when work from home was a preferred option among employees. The forced shift to remote working due to COVID-19 has impacted the well-being of employees as they were not mentally ready to accept this. This study identified certain key factors that would influence the well-being of employees working remotely. Despite the study's many limitations, some recurring themes emerge that can be utilised to support employers in improving working circumstances in order to reduce the negative effects of WAH and increase the good benefits of WAH on employee well-being. The study helps the managers to identify the various work characteristics and working challenges in practicing remote working.

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