

A STUDY ON THE PREPAREDNESS OF IT EMPLOYEES FOR WORK FROM HOME DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS

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Abstract: *Work from Home (WFH) has increasingly become an option offered by organisations to their employees, with mutual benefits to the organisation (in terms of decreased office rental costs) and to the employees (in terms of better work-life balance). It has become critical for business continuity for several industries during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during lockdown periods and due to social/physical distancing restrictions imposed by governments to curb the spread of the pandemic. Thus, working from home has become inevitable for some industries. However, the preparedness of employees for working from home has not been studied much in the literature. The objective of this study is to analyse the preparedness of employees for WFH and the satisfaction level of employees with respect to WFH with reference to the IT industry. The data for the study was collected online from a sample of 134 employees working in various IT companies in Chennai through a structured questionnaire. The study period pertained to the COVID-19 lockdowns from March 2020 to June 2021. The results of the study showed that most IT employees had never WFH before the COVID-19 lockdowns and that most IT employees initially were not fully prepared for WFH, particularly women employees as compared to men employees, younger employees as compared to older employees, and employees residing in rural areas as compared to employees residing in urban areas. The results of the study also showed that the overall satisfaction of the IT employees with WFH was most significantly impacted by satisfaction with processes, followed by satisfaction with the work environment (at home) and satisfaction with training during WFH. This suggests that IT companies should focus on processes, work environment (at home), and training to foster employee satisfaction with WFH.*

Keywords: *Work from Home (WFH), Preparedness, Satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of remote working and WFH arrangements in firms has increased over the past decades due to advancements in information and communication technologies. In recent years, many IT companies have provided their employees with the option to work from home for a few days each month. WFH is expected to increase employees' autonomy in scheduling and organising their work, which in turn would give them a stronger intrinsic motivation, and are therefore willing to provide more work effort. Moreover, by offering agreeable working conditions, firms can attract and retain highly skilled and hard-working employees.

WFH has opened up a new range of possibilities for the way businesses can work and structure themselves. Many employers have realised the benefits that it can bring to their business and the improved work-life balance for their

employees. WFH has been quite prevalent for the past several years.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses have leveraged WFH to provide the flexibility they need to continue their operations while prioritising employee and customer health and well-being as part of their public health responsibility to minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19. Dingel and Neiman (2020) suggested that 37% of work, including financial work, business management, professional and scientific services, could be completed at home, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. Some jobs, especially those related to healthcare, farming, and hospitality, cannot be performed from home.

The Indian IT industry has been quick to adapt to the "new normal" of WFH. The lockdowns imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic have given IT companies a practical

insight into how WFH affects their business and employees, which in turn can be used to consider which aspects of its operations can be efficiently managed under WFH.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The WFH concept has evolved since the 1970s, initially called “telecommuting” or “telework” (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016), followed by terms such as remote work, flexible workplace, telework, telecommuting, and e-working, which refer to the ability of employees to work in flexible workplaces, especially at home, by using technology execute work duties (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Grant et al., 2019). WFH is, however, distinct from these general terms; Shafizadeh et al. (2000) pointed out the distinction between home-based telecommuting and center-based telecommuting.

Some studies have suggested that WFH can provide several beneficial effects on employees, including enabling greater convenience, flexibility, and agility in working arrangements, increasing work-life balance (Grant et al., 2019), resulting in greater employee engagement, motivation, productivity and performance (Collins & Moschler, 2009; Delanoëije & Verbruggen, 2020), and improved health and well-being. Ultimately, this results in greater job satisfaction, lower absenteeism and turnover and higher talent retention (Mello, 2007; Robertson, Maynard & McDevitt, 2003). Other advantages that organisations can derive from WFH include reduced expenses, including rent, maintenance, computers, telephones, offices, utilities, equipment, and so on (Lupu, 2017), reduced office space costs (Ford & Butts, 1991), and reduced costs of parking space for the employees (Beño, 2018). However, there are also some disadvantages of WFH for employees working at home, including increasing the feeling of isolation and demotivation, negative impacts on mental health, and increasing risk of burnout. From the point of view of employers, WFH has thrown up several new challenges, including difficulties in monitoring employee performance, and difficulties in assessing and managing employee development.

There are very few empirical studies on employee satisfaction with WFH arrangements. Akbar et al. (2020) used qualitative methods to explore the influence of WFH on employee productivity, work-life balance, time flexibility, comfort, multitasking, work motivation, and communication. They found that there were mixed advantages and disadvantages of WFH for both employees and employers; further, they suggested that WFH was not feasible for all organisations. Kazekami (2020) studied the factors affecting employee productivity during WFH, including the balancing of work and domestic chores, work satisfaction, and life satisfaction.

She found a positive relationship between telework hours and productivity, and she suggested that telework increases work satisfaction and life satisfaction. She also suggested that the stress of balancing work and domestic chores decreases productivity indirectly, through decreasing life satisfaction. Alghaithi and Sartawi (2020) suggested that WFH increases employee productivity if their organisations offer them the necessary support, such as enhanced communication and the provision of support services, as a result of the work-life balance of the employees and flexibility of the work hours.

Chakravarti and Chaturvedi (2020) developed a mapping of countries in terms of their robustness of key digital platforms, the resilience of their internet infrastructure to traffic surges, and their digital payments infrastructure. They found that the countries that were best prepared for remote work at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 were the developed countries: Singapore, followed by the Netherlands, UK, Canada, US, Norway, Germany, and New Zealand, along with Estonia and South Korea. In the opposite, quadrant were the developing countries with low robustness of digital platforms and low resilience of internet infrastructure: India, followed by Indonesia, Thailand, Chile, Malaysia, Philippines, Turkey, Russia, China, Poland, and Italy. They pinpointed India as the least prepared country for remote work, highlighting the plight of migrant workers who had no scope for remote work; they also pointed out that, despite the lockdown, a third of IT employees in India were still going to work in mid-April 2020 in order to manage essential functions for businesses worldwide.

According to Chung et al. (2020), the positive experiences of workers WFH during the COVID-19 lockdowns have positively affected their perception towards flexible working. They also found that a section of workers did not want WFH due to lack of interaction with colleagues, lack of equipment or space at home to perform their work, and lack of boundaries between work and home life. They suggested that managers need to support employees’ requirements during WFH for more effective productivity and work-life balance, especially for women employees and more so for mothers with young children.

According to an Ipsos survey¹ of workers from twenty nine countries by the World Economic Forum in July 2021 relating to the future of work, 66% of workers were found to want to work flexibly after the pandemic is over, particularly among women, young adults aged under 35 years, parents with school-going children, and those with higher levels of education and income. Further, 30% of workers were

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/07/back-to-office-or-work-from-home-survey/>

prepared to quit their job if they were forced to return to the office on a full-time basis, particularly young adults aged under 35 years, parents with school-going children, those with higher levels of education, and those with lower levels of income.

WFH has increasingly become an option offered by organisations to their employees, with mutual benefits to the organisation (in terms of decreased office rental costs) and to the employees (in terms of better work-life balance). It has become critical for business continuity for several industries during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during lockdown periods and due to social/physical distancing restrictions imposed by governments to curb the spread of the pandemic. Thus, working from home has become inevitable for some industries. However, the preparedness of employees for working from home has not been studied much in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

The objectives of the study were to understand the preparedness of employees in IT companies for WFH and to examine their perceptions towards WFH, with reference to IT companies in Chennai, India.

The data for the study was collected online from a sample of 134 employees working in various IT companies in Chennai through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire structure was as follows:

Name: _____

Gender: Male / Female

Age: Less than 25 yrs. / 25 - 35 yrs. / 35 - 45 yrs. / Greater than 45 yrs.

Home Location: Rural / Semi-Urban / Urban / Metropolitan

Designation: Trainee / Software Engineer / System Analyst / Programmer / Team Lead / Project Manager / Others

1. Prior to COVID-19, did you work from home? If so, how often?

- a) Two or thrice a week
- b) Once a week
- c) Once a fortnight
- d) Once a month
- e) Once a quarter or less
- f) Never

2. Do you have a quiet, distraction-free area at home while

working from home? Yes / No

3. Do you have good network connectivity while working from home? Yes / No

4. Do you have all the support from your employer to work from home? Yes / No

5. Do you have a team that supports you while working from home? Yes / No

6. How often do you connect with your team?

- a) Once a day
- b) Every two hours
- c) Twice a day
- d) Once in two days
- e) Once a week
- f) Other

7. How do you connect with your team? Video Conference / Call / Chat / E-mail / Other

8. Do you feel comfortable communicating with your team online? Yes / No

9. Do you take regular breaks while working from home? Yes / No

10. How many hours a day do you prefer to work from home? 8 / 9 / 10 / 10+ hours

11. What challenges do you face while working from home?

- a) Gaining access to essentials
- b) Too many distractions at home
- c) More social responsibility
- d) Communication with team
- e) Keeping a schedule
- f) Not enough productivity tools
- g) Internet connectivity
- h) Anxiety surrounding COVID-19
- i) Depressing news
- j) Technological infrastructure
- k) Workspace infrastructure

12. Rate your satisfaction level on the following factors during Work from Home

	Highly Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Highly Dissatisfied
Work Environment (at Home)					
Processes					
Goals					
Employee Wellness					
Training					
Overall Satisfaction Level with Work from Home					

13. Do you look forward to returning to the office? Yes / No
Why/Why Not?

The profile of the respondents was as follows: 66.4% of the respondents were men, while 33.6% of the respondents were women. In terms of age, 22.4% of the respondents were in the age group 18-25 years, 66.7% in the age group 25-35 years, and 11.9% in the age group 35+ years. In terms of home location, 17.9% of the respondents resided in rural areas, 14.9% in semi-urban areas, 35.8% in urban areas, and 31.3% in metropolitan areas. Finally, in terms of designation, 7.5% of the respondents were trainees, 19.4% were system analysts/programmers, 22.4% were software engineers, 12.7% were team leads, 11.9% project managers, and 26.1% others.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The first finding was that 53.0% of the respondents had never worked from home before the COVID-19 lockdown. Further, 15.7% of the respondents had rarely worked from home (once a quarter or less), 8.2% had worked from home once a month, 3.0% once a fortnight, 5.2% once a week, and 14.9% twice or thrice a week.

In terms of WFH arrangements, 68.7% of the respondents had a quiet, distraction-free area at home for working, 77.5% had good network connectivity while WFH, 77.6% had support from their employer for WFH, and 67.2% had a team that supported WFH. Overall, however, only 47.8% of the respondents had all of these WFH arrangements and were thus prepared for WFH. In particular, preparedness was marginally better for men (51.7%) than for women (40.0%), for younger employees (51.8%) than for older employees (45.2%), and for employees residing in urban/metro areas (52.2%) than for those residing in rural/semi-urban areas (38.6%).

In terms of the preferred hours of WFH, 55.0% preferred to work for the standard eight hours, 21.7% preferred to work for nine hours, 10.9% preferred ten hours, and 12.4% preferred more than ten hours. Also, 58.2% of the respondents take regular breaks while WFH.

In terms of connecting with their team during WFH, 6.7% of the respondents rarely connected with their team, 5.2% connected infrequently/once a week, 50.0% connected frequently/daily, 21.6% connected twice a day, and 16.4% connected as frequently as once every two hours. In terms of the mode of connecting with their team, 78.4% of the respondents connected by call, 70.9% connected through chat, 54.5% via e-mail, 33.0% through video conferencing, and 7.5% through other modes. 78.4% of the respondents were comfortable connecting with their team online.

The most prevalent challenges faced by the respondents whilst WFH during the lockdown included internet connectivity (47.0%), communication with team (43.3%), workspace infrastructure (43.3%), too many distractions at home (39.6%), and keeping a schedule (28.4%). The less prevalent challenges included gaining access to essentials (20.9%), more social responsibilities (20.9%), technological infrastructure (14.9%), not enough productivity tools (12.7%), anxiety surrounding COVID-19 (15.7%), and depressing news (11.9%). Overall, 67.2% of the respondents looked forward to returning to their offices soon.

The descriptive statistics of the satisfaction level of the respondents with respect to different factors whilst WFH are presented in the table below:

Table 1: Satisfaction Levels of Employees With Respect to Different Factors Whilst WFH

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness
Satisfaction with Work Environment during WFH	3.7910	1.1042	-0.9023
Satisfaction with Processes during WFH	3.7090	1.0465	-0.6695
Satisfaction with Goals during WFH	3.9552	0.9645	-1.1345
Satisfaction with Employee Wellness during WFH	3.7239	1.1464	-0.7468
Satisfaction with Training during WFH	3.6045	1.0261	-0.4136
Overall Satisfaction about WFH	3.6045	1.0334	-0.3470

All of the factors during WFH were found to have significantly higher than average satisfaction levels. The mean satisfaction level of goals was found to be the highest among the productivity factors during WFH, followed by the work environment, processes, employee wellness, and finally training.

The stepwise regression results of overall satisfaction with WFH on the factors are presented in the table below:

Table 2: Results of Stepwise Regression of Overall Satisfaction with WFH on Different Factors

	Coeff.	Std. Err.	Std. Coeff.	t Stat	p-Value
(Constant)	0.8870	0.2810		3.1620	0.0020
Satisfaction with Work Environment during WFH	0.2390	0.0850	0.2560	2.8090	0.0060
Satisfaction with Processes during WFH	0.2880	0.1100	0.2910	2.6120	0.0100
Satisfaction with Training during WFH	0.2060	0.0970	0.2050	2.1380	0.0340

$R^2 = 43.7\%$, $F \text{ Stat} = 33.690$, $p = 0.000$

The only significant factors affecting overall satisfaction with WFH were found to be satisfied with processes, followed by satisfaction with work environment and satisfaction with training during WFH.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study showed that most IT employees had never WFH before the COVID-19 lockdowns. During the lockdowns, they all had to WFH, and they initially faced a lot of issues. The experience they have gained from the lockdown helped them to understand the process of WFH and to learn how to be more productive during WFH in the future.

In order to be prepared for WFH, employees should have a quiet, distraction-free area at home, with uninterrupted power supply and network connectivity, with support from their employer and preferably with support from a dedicated team. Such conditions would permit them to work efficiently. The results of the study indicate that most employees initially did not have access to all these conditions, particularly women employees, younger employees, and employees residing in rural areas. With time, however, the situation improved, with employees and employers realising that these were essential for employee productivity during WFH.

One of the greatest challenges faced by employees during WFH was internet connectivity, particularly for employees residing in rural areas. There were also issues with data speed and data limit, particularly for video calls. Due to the data limit, employees would prefer to connect with their teams through voice call, e-mail, and chat, but this would reduce their productivity. This led to demand for high-speed broadband connections and more robust high-speed mobile network services with unlimited data for more effective communication with their teams.

Most of the employees were found to be satisfied with work environment (at home), work processes, goals, wellness, and training provided by the management during WFH. Overall satisfaction of the employees with WFH was found to be most significantly impacted by satisfaction with processes, followed by satisfaction with work environment and satisfaction with training during WFH. This suggests that IT companies should focus on processes, work environment (at home), and training to foster employee satisfaction with WFH.

Most of the employees were found to be satisfied with WFH but also were looking forward to returning to the office at the earliest. However, with IT companies later extending WFH due to prolonged lockdowns, gradually both employers and employees found WFH mutually beneficial, to the extent that many employees were unwilling to return to the office and were willing to switch companies to remain WFH.

The results of the study suggest that WFH is a practicable alternative to conventional office work for IT employees and that at least some flexible work arrangements would persist into the future. For such arrangements to be effective, however, managers should streamline processes and offer adequate support for employees in terms of communication, training, infrastructure, and productivity tools. Further, they should strategise by offering across different employee segments based on their requirements, optimising their productivity and work-life balance.

There were some limitations inherent in the study. The sample size used for the study was relatively small, with only 134 employees working in IT companies in Chennai, so the results of the study may not be generalisable to the entire information technology industry. There is scope for further research in examining the factors affecting productivity during WFH.

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