WORK LIFE BALANCE: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES DURING COVID 19

Dr. Shikha Jain, PhD
Rajasthan University

ABSTRACT

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has shaken the entire world and has brought everything to a relative standstill, affecting billions of people worldwide and putting millions of people fighting for their lives. Due to the absence of vaccination for COVID, World Health Organization has recommended that social distancing and staying at home is the only way to safeguard from COVID. Therefore, the Government implemented various measures to prevent the spread of disease. All the workplaces including schools and businesses were to be shut down worldwide to maintain social distancing. As a consequence, organisations had to take stringent precautionary measures to combat the spread of COVID and hence work from the home policy has been adopted by many companies. (Nussbaumer- Streit et al. 2020) These measures have led to occupational and educational disruption and a lot of physical and psychological distress for many individuals. The application of work from home has turned out to be very challenging for organisations and employees alike. Employees have to face many obstacles since they are not used to this kind of work style and also that not all type of work can be done from home. This paper talks about the issues and challenges faced by employees due to the new normal and briefly discusses ways to mitigate these issues.

KEYWORDS: Work from Home, Covid-19, Issues and Challenges, Work Life Balance

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has been labelled as a global pandemic disease by the World Health Organization. COVID 19 has shaken the entire world and has brought everything to a relative standstill, affecting millions of people worldwide. Due to the absence of vaccination for COVID. World Health Organization has recommended that social distancing and staying at home is the only way to safeguard from COVID. Therefore, the Government implemented various measures to prevent the spread of disease. All the workplaces including schools and businesses have to be shut down worldwide to maintain social distancing. As a consequence, organisations had to take stringent precautionary measures to combat the spread of COVID and hence work from the home policy has been adopted by many companies. (Nussbaumer-Streit et al. 2020) These measures have led to occupational and educational disruption and psychological distress for many individuals. The application of work from home has turned out to be very challenging for organisations. Employees have to face many obstacles since they are not used to this kind of work style and also that not all type of work can be done from home.

Work-from-Home is a very new experience for most of us, especially in the Indian context, and hence everyone has a different perception about it. To implement the WFH concept, various technical platforms are used to make sure that employees can work effectively and efficiently. In these changing times, the employees have to adapt to the new way of working and that has caused stress and anxiety among many.

All over the world research surveys are showing that there is an unhappy trend due to this new culture of WFH. People are losing track of their work timings because there are no defined work hours. Despite saving a lot of time in commute employees are spending a lot of time on virtual meetings and discussions. To reserve time for their own self and family has become challenging.

On the other hand the pandemic has revealed various unexpected positive aspects of the organisations over the last few months. It has proved

that many companies prioritize their employees' health and wellbeing and are truly ready to take necessary measures to ensure this.

Various initiatives have been taken by companies to help people adjust to this new arrangement. Many companies have also provided work from home set up for all the employees. Companies are offering additional medical insurance and extra leaves to deal with the work stress.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

"Lockdown" in Indian Context refers to complete restriction on movement of the population except for the essential activities such as health visits and purchase of essential items. Hence, further imposing restrictions on offices and work situations. Crosbie & Moore (2004), working from home means paid work done mainly from home (at least 20 hours per week). Work from home provides flexible working hours for employees and helps to maintain a work-life balance. At the same time, it is beneficial for organisations as well. (Lippi et al. 2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a lot of challenges for HR Managers in helping the employees adapt and cope up with changing work environment. People are used to working inside the physical boundaries of the organisation and now it has become a challenge for them to work remotely. (Joel B. Carnevalea, Isabella Hatakb 2020) Even the people who were working from remote areas find it challenging due to various restrictions and obstacles. All Cafes Libraries and co-working spaces are now shut due to lockdown and now they are not able to meet the work demands due to difficulties in concentrating on work at home. (Achor, Kellerman, Reece, & Robichaux, 2018).

The segmentation between work and home spheres have become a challenge especially because of the closure of school and day-care services which has increased the responsibilities for the working parents. Not only the people who have children are facing issues but also the employees who are childless or are single are facing the negative consequences of these new working conditions. They have started to feel lonely and often feel a lack of purpose. Ashforth et al. (2000) suggested that the proximity of work responsibilities and home is very demanding and it leads to negative emotions and a lot of fatigue. Cluver and colleagues (2020) talk about the negative impact of social distancing measures on work and family life. Coyne and Team (2020) in their study states that it has been very stressful for people because of the collision of roles and responsibilities all at the same time. There has been an increase in marital conflict and domestic violence due to the stress of balancing work and home between working couples. The future is still uncertain and because of schools and day-cares shutdown they have to balance work and children (Campbell, 2020)

As the stress of balancing work with fulltime child-rearing at home increases, experts have warned about the risk for increased domestic violence and child abuse. COVID-19 is also expected to have negative consequences on family work. Due to lack of household help, increased housework and childcare resulting from the closure of schools and creches. Many parents are struggling to balance it or even work at all, given that there is a need for at least one of the parents to stay home and engage the children continuously (Queisser, Adema and Clarke, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A lot of qualitative and quantitative research is been done on the impact of Covid-19 on different businesses. Many of them discuss about the challenges due to work from home as well. However, considering this is a new phenomenon especially for a nation like India pleasantries and personal connections matter a lot in any business, there is a need to find different facets of these issues and challenges. Therefore, there is a dire need to find relevant research done and opinions shared on this subject and come up with recommendations which depict the true picture of the unique issues and challenges that companies in India are facing. Therefore, this research paper conducts relevant secondary research published both before and during covid-19. This study uses descriptive analytics method. The sources used are research papers, articles, 10 in-depth interviews, books, journals, thesis, websites, and government notifications, global and national news.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES DUE TO WORK FROM HOME

1) No defined work hours/ Schedule: As Work from home is becoming more of a norm, companies are getting flexible in the working hours. Work is being determined instead of the number of hours that an employee clocks in. This has helped companies and employees alike to cope with the uncertain times. Ashforth et.al (2020) However, this is a sudden change for many companies and employees coupled with other factors such as less to no availability of house-help, more responsibility of kids as their schools/ creches are closed and both parents working in a nuclear family has derailed a routine completely. This all results in house and family work during 'normal official working hours' and therefore extended meeting and office working hours.

2) No separate Personal and professional life: Along with the blurred lines between office hours and 'home' hours, there is a difficulty in creating a distinction between office and home. Due to lack of space, equipment and resources, it is difficult for most of the Indian employees to create a designated working zone. This leads to an unorganised life where personal and professional worlds co-exist not just in mind but in physical world as well. Many employees have started to work from their beds or sofas where it is comfortable but at times too comfortable to get the work done. This has led to extended but less efficient working hours.

3) More Distractions: In an office set-up, there are colleagues around talking about work. For any small issue or help, an employee can consult the person sitting next to her. Moreover, there are a lot of resources which are provided to get the work done more efficiently. However, in work from home set-up, everything around drives an employee away from work. Many employees face challenge in focussing or attending meetings without any disruption. Some employees complain about consistent running TV around while some other raise concerns about a nagging kid or spouse. Craig(2020) Apart from these, there are household chores which need to be done along with the office work. In many states in India, electricity and water supply are not consistent and one has to adopt lifestyle as per their availability. In such a scenario, electricity failure, internet signal loss during an important meeting or work disrupts the whole meeting/ work. Therefore, a general one hour meeting takes more than 90-120 mins in a work from home set-up.

4) Leading a digital life: The frequent lock downs, restricted movement and closed offices, schools, parks and malls have changed the way we used to work and live. The in person meetings are digital. The entertainment channels are all digital. The networking and casual talks with colleagues are all digital. From grocery shopping to Schools for kids are all digital. We rely completely on digital work for personal and professional work. (Amin et.al 2020) The social distancing has also reduced the human interaction. Therefore most of the work from home employees are now completely dependent on the digital world and are losing touch with the physical world.

5) Lack of coordination and communication: Right Communication is key to success for any business. However, in the work from home environment, the points mentioned above prevail which lead to lesser communication and lower coordination among the employees and other stakeholders. This leads to sub-optimal working and more resource to get the work done. The cost of this lack of communication and coordination may vary from loss of time and energy of employees to financial losses for businesses.

6) Difficult to change to a new 'WFH' savvy performance parameters: The sudden change in the way business was being done left no time for companies and employees to adapt to the new ways of working. This is leading to a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty on the performance metrices and parameters on which an employee's performance will be measured. For some employees, the parameters have been changed multiple times which others are not aware how the performance is going to

be managed and benchmarked. Companies are also finding it difficult to quantify the parameters on which they are going to gauge the employees and coming up with a robust performance matrix which can cover all the aspects is very difficult and time consuming to come up with and implement.

7) Health Issues: The lack of disconnect from office, abundance of household work, fully connected digital life and no schedule are all impacting the mental and physical well being of the employees. From irregular eating habits to disrupted sleeping patterns, employees are facing a lot of challenges in order to cope with the current crisis. Such a lifestyle for a short time is manageable however, in the long term it can have very dire consequences.

8) Stress and Anxiety: Over reliance on digital life, the looming danger of the disease and the pressure and uncertainty from office coupled with a fear of job loss adds to the pressure on the WFH employees. Campbell (2020) The physical wellbeing is disturbed and added pressure on mind has created a lot of anxiety in the minds of the work from home employees.

9) Marital Conflicts: Due to lockdown and physical distancing social life and interactions have reduced. Couples are confined in house 24/7 and have lot of work pressure and household responsibilities to cater to. It has led to stress and conflicts between couples. Couples who don't have kids feel lonelier and more stressed. At the same time people with kids have increased load of baby care and online studies of their children. Boca et.al (2020) All this has disturbed peace between couples as they are not able to spend quality time together.

MITIGATION OF THESE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

As mentioned above there are a lot of issues and challenges when employees have to work from home. This is now a new normal and even after the Covid-19 crises settles, the impacts, especially the incorporation of work from home, are expected to be long lasting. However, there is a dire need to address these issues and concerns sooner than later.

The onus lies with both the employee and employer to mitigate the negative impacts.

For example, some employers are providing a onetime package to buy equipment at home to enable work from home. On the other hand, some employees have kept designated area for office work. Where there are both spouses working, they are taking turns to do office and household work. Some employees are moving to their hometowns to live in a joint family leading to lesser stress, more social and interpersonal interaction while taking limited risks. Some employees have started Yoga and meditation for which neither do they need to go out to Gyms or parks nor do they need to engage in digital life.

Some parents have found innovative ways to keep children engaged in different activities while some have made closed groups within a small society or locality to ensure limited interaction. These groups keep on interacting and engaging in different activities together and thus reducing the stress. The in-depth interviews reflected that the most important step for employers and WFH employees is to identify their key issues and challenges. Addressing those issues is a conscious step which can be taken together basis the available resources and the constraints that they face. During the interviews, employees could come up with one or two practical solutions once they identify their key issues.

CONCLUSION

Covid-19 cases in India are increasing day by day and hence working from home is going to be a new normal and even after the Covid-19 crises settles, the impacts, especially the incorporation of work from home, are expected to be long lasting. There are a lot of issues and challenges that work from home employees are facing such as undefined work hours, blurred office and home space, distractions, over-reliance on digital media, uncertainty in personal and professional life. Such issues pose a threat to maintaining physical and mental well-being. The onus of mitigating these issues lies with both employers and employees. The crucial step in that direction is to identify the key issues and then finding a solution on the basis of the available resources.

REFERENCES

1. Achor, S.Kellerman, G. R., Reece, A., & Robichaux, A. (2018), "America's loneliest workers, according to research", Harvard Bus Rev. March, 19.

2. Amin, K.P.,Griffiths, M.D. & Dsouza, D.D(2020), "Online Gaming During the COVID-19 Pandemic in India: Strategies for Work-Life Balance", Int J Ment Health Addiction . https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00358-1

3. Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., & Fugate, M. (2000), "All in a day's work: Boundaries and micro role transitions", Academy of Management Review, 25(3), 472–491. http://sci-hub.tw/10.5465/AMR.2000.3363315

4. Boca, Daniela Del and Oggero, Noemi and Profeta, Paola and Rossi, Mariacristina,(2020), "Women's Work, Housework and Childcare, Before and During COVID-19", Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3644817

5. Campbell, A. M. (2020), " An increasing risk of family violence during the Covid-19 pandemic: Strengthening community collaborations to save lives", Forensic Science International: Reports, 2, 100089. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsir.2020.100089

6. Craig, L, Churchill, B.(2020), "Dual-earner parent couples' work and care during COVID-19", Gender Work Organ 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12497

7. Crosbie, T., & Moore, J. (2004), "Work-life balance and working from home", Social Policy and Society, 3(3),223

8. Ives, J., Greenfield, S., Parry, J.M.(2009) et al., "Healthcare workers' attitudes to working during pandemic influenza: a qualitative study", BMC Public Health 9, 56 . https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-9-56

9. Irawanto, D., (2020), "Unexpected and Habit Driven: Perspectives of Working from Home during the Covid-19 Pandemic", APMBA (Asia Pacific Management and Business Application),Retrieved fom https://apmba.ub.ac.id/index.php/apmba/article/view/362/273

10. Kramer, A., & Kramer, K. Z. (2020), "The potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on occupational status, work from home, and occupational mobility", Journal of Vocational Behavior, 119, 103442. http://sci-hub.tw/10. 1016/j.jvb.2020.103442

11. Lena Waizenegger, Brad McKenna, Wenjie Cai & Taino Bendz (2020), "An affordance perspective of team collaboration and enforced working from home during COVID-19", European Journal of Information Systems, DOI: 10.1080/0960085X.2020.1800417

12. Lippi, G., Henry, B. M., Bovo, C., & Sanchis-gomar, F. (2020), "Health risks and potential remedies during prolonged lockdowns for coronavirus disease", Diagnisis, 7(2), 85–90.

13. Li, Kai and Liu, Xing and Mai, Feng and Zhang, Tengfei,(June 21, 2020) "The Role of Corporate Culture in Bad Times: Evidence from the COVID-19 Pandemic", Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3632395 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3632395

14. McDonald, K. (2020)., "Parenting in a time of COVID-19", The Lancet, 395(10231), e64. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30736-4

15. Queisser, M., W. Adema, and C. Clarke (April 2020), "COVID-19, employment and women in OECD countries", CEPR VoxEu.org.

16. Savić, D. (2020), "COVID-19 and work from home: Digital transformation of the workforce", Grey Journal (TGJ), 16 (2), 101–104.

17. Song, L., Wang, Y., Li, Z., Yang, Y., & Li, H. (2020), "Mental Health and Work Attitudes among People Resuming Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic -A Cross-Sectional Study in China", International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17(14), 5059. doi:10.3390/ijerph17145059

18. Suprapti, S., Asbari, M., Cahyono, Y., & Mufid, A. (2020), "Leadership style , organisational culture and innovative behaviour on public health centre performance during pandemic Covid-19", Journal of Industrial Engineering & Management Research, 1(2), 76-88. https://doi.org/10.7777/jiemar. v1i2.42

19. Usher, K., Bhullar, N., & Jackson, D. (2020), "Life in the pandemic: Social isolation and mental health", Journal of Clinical Nursing, 29, 2756–2757 http://sci-hub.tw/10.1111/jocn.15290

20. World Health Organization (2020), "Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic. Retrieved June 24, 2020, https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

21. Davis Brian K. (2020), https://www.moneycrashers.com/challenges-working-home-business-avoid-failure/

22. Pinola M. (2020), https://zapier.com/blog/remote-work-challenges/

23. Natalia L. (2020), "Business Insider", https://www.businessinsider.com/working-remote-challenges-work-from-home-2019-10

24. Ashford K. (2020), "The Muse" https://www.themuse.com/advice/remote-work-challenges

25. Ranger S. (2020), "ZDNet", https://www.zdnet.com/article/working-from-home-your-common-challenges-and-how-to-tackle-them/

26. https://www.vault.com/blogs/workplace-issues/challenges-of-working-from-home