

# REMOTE WORK AND INNOVATION DURING THIS COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN EMPLOYERS' CHALLENGE

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly transforming the remote work culture of many organizations. The demand for online work-from-home has significantly increased during this pandemic. Though it has a significant advantage in eliminating travel time and positively impacting the environment and productive family time, some organizations raise the alarm over the new work style patterns. We discuss some organizational survey results and perspective employees permanently working from home. Some responses have a solid negative relationship on how the work from home affects their organization's innovative culture and work habits. But at the same time, some have expressed positive views and show a strong promise of a cultural shift with sustainable growth. Furthermore, we analyse the present and future pandemic era and how the C-level executives at each organization take the challenge forward to get maximum returns in this competitive global marketplace.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Innovation, COVID-19, work culture, digitalization, sustainability, C-Suite reset, WFH, employee safety.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused a rapid shift to full-time remote work for many workers. This remote-work shift seems like a natural experiment for many firms to test how they perform in these pandemic-confounding factors [14]. This unforeseen situation has forced individuals and organizations to rapidly train employees and adopt online working styles, seeking to maintain the same or greater level of productivity as working from the office. In the initial days of the COVID-19 pandemic, many remote workers faced difficulties adapting to using online tools and combining their working hours with daily routines and family commitments [1]. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, at most, 20% of Americans worked from home for more than three days per week, whereas it is found that currently, as many as 71% of Americans were working from home full-time (Parker, 2020). Many technology companies, such as Twitter, Facebook, Square, Box, Slack, and Quora, have taken a step onward by announcing some permanent, remote work policies that will allow at least 50% of their workforce to work remotely, even after a pandemic [2].

The pandemic continues to distress our daily lives by affecting our communities and organizations across the country and around the globe. Institutions have seen a significant and ongoing impact on services, spaces, and many other professional aspects. Many of those provide services entirely online, and many personnel work remotely. This paper examines remote work considerations in enterprise services, focusing primarily on educational corporations, and examines the history and existing literature on remote work. A study by Carroll and Conboy

(2020) highlighted that COVID-19 forced organizations into rapid 'big bang' sudden adoption of online working from home practices [6]. They draw on the normalization process theory and its underlying components to understand the dynamics of implementing, embedding, and integrating new technologies and practices into business. This paper contributes to the research literature on remote work, virtual team, and telecommuting, analysing the large-scale natural experiment to study results from the home strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2. PRE-PANDEMIC WORK CULTURE**

The consideration and implementation of remote work in information and technical services are not new to the profession in practice. Literature review from the 1990s reflects early explorations of remote work in technical services-particularly in cataloguing through discussion and testing. Remote work eliminates in-person communication; however, we found that people did not simply replace in-person interactions with video and voice calls. A study found that shifting to a firm-wide remote work has caused an overall reduction in observed synchronous communiqué in the department or organization, such as planned meetings and audio/video calls. By contrast, the research found that remote work caused employees to communicate more through asynchronous media, sending emails, and many more instant messages (IMs). The theory of self-determination offers insights into how employees have been encouraged to embrace the new-working style from home and excel in a short period. The self-determination theory suggests that individuals are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to behave in specific ways [11].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been constant public and academic interest in how different virtual teams function organized. Recent telemetry and survey data analyses show that the pandemic has affected both the who and how of collaboration in information firms while working remotely [14]. The same study also reveals that the workers are spending less time in meetings but are communicating more by email, collaborating more with their strong ties than their weak ties, and exhibiting more communication patterns siloed and less stable.

Remote work arrangements have historically been implemented in technical services for several reasons, but previously a global pandemic has not been one of them. Because of the relative newness and severity of this pandemic and the rapidly changing nature of national and international circumstances, the published literature does not yet reflect how organizations have handled the implementation of remote work in technical services [4]. However, with many personnel in the global community working remotely due to the pandemic, these accounts may still be developing [7]. As remote work was mandatory during the pandemic, it is easy to quantify the effects of firm-wide remote work, most relevant for firms considering a transition to an all-remote workforce [9]. Furthermore, as the classical specification decomposes the overall effects of firm-wide remote work into ego remote work and collaborator remote work effect, some outcomes also provide some insight into the possible impacts of remote work policies such as mixed-mode work and hybrid work [9]. As per a Gallup survey, only the white-collar job categories traditionally perform jobs behind computers as it is well suited to their work-life, but the blue-collar class has to perform physical labour considering the unique orientation of remote work setups [12].

## **3. LITERATURE SUMMARY REVIEW**

A total of 50 articles were retrieved from different databases for this research. We narrowed our search to the final twelve papers, directly reflecting our present study intent. Table 1 summarizes each study considered for the review, their population, techniques used in research findings, and

gaps. These studies were published between 2020 and 2022 and give us a qualitative assessment of our risks and biases.

Table 1. Summary table of studies that present systematic literature reviews and gaps

Study details	Study design	Population	Research findings	Research Gaps
Benveniste (2020)	Cross-sectional	n 3000	Most tech companies will never go back to the office, highlighted with data from those hi-tech firms.	The study didn't include non-tech service firms
Billa (2021)	Longitudinal cohort	n 5000	Consulting firms show positive employee satisfaction, financial stability, and flexibility.	The study is limited to one organization, and the sample size is limited to the USA.
Brynjolfsson et al. (2020)	Cross-sectional	n 100k	Research focuses mainly on pandemic-driven unemployment prediction and suggestions in the USA market.	Research is more on the response of the USA labour force and how they respond to this pandemic.
Yang et al. (2020)	Longitudinal cohort	n ~ 62k	Research focuses on a study conducted in Microsoft on remote work and dissects the data basis of that survey.	It looks like a single-dimensional study and is restricted to one organization only.
DeFilippis et al. (2020)	Cross-sectional	n 3.1million	Research focuses on the digital communication patterns of 16 large companies across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. And it emphasizes the working cultural change of these employees during the pandemic.	This study does not highlight the employer acceptability rate, innovation, or business financial returns. Instead, it just focuses on employee adaptability in a remote workspace.

#### 4. THE BIG RESET

A study conducted by Microsoft described the communication practices of 62,000 US employees from December 2019 to June 2020 before and after Microsoft's shift to firm-wide remote work. That study describes that there is a massive difference in the length of time spent in scheduled meetings, time spent in unscheduled video/audio calls, emails sent, and IMs sent, and the size of

their workweeks; and a monthly summary of their collaboration network [14]. The study highlights a great deal of deprivation in the quality of work from working from home employees before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The natural experiment came from the company-wide work from home mandate Microsoft enacted in response to COVID-19.

This kind of pandemic is one of its kind, and the modern digital world was not aware of this in detail. Many were not prepared to handle it, and others were cynical of how long it would make the world suffer. At the same time, organizations formally accept that the innovations are only possible from a lab or office environment but not from a home environment when the workers deal with family and surrounding issues. But the last 24 months have shown us that the notion is untrue, and it imploded many long-held business beliefs [3]. But as the world started more sufferings and it got clear that the situation would be unchanged for a long time, organizations began to respond and recover. The new "pandemic pace" strategy continues to evolve to focus on innovation and competitiveness. High demand forecasting, macro, and microeconomic pressure demand to innovate differently has put deliberate pressure on organizations to overcome the business orthodoxy to distinguish themselves in the post-pandemic marketplace [3].

The pandemic created a new pathway to spur global structural and process change. The new work from home (WFH) concepts evolved overnight to create a connected and collaborative digital work environment. The traditional work-life of "9-5 workday" collapsed, and the WFH with children around in virtual schools is in progress [8]. The office timings are innovated to "login from anywhere and anytime. " The orthodoxy of remote workers is less productive than onsite workers shattered by the WFH experiment by many employees, and a study by Deloitte shows that the efficiency and productivity enabled by remote workforce have changed over the pandemic by delivering services of the same or higher standards than before [3]. Remote work productivity is driving business or handling a crisis phenomenon and about trust, flexibility, strategy, and reshaping long-term growth prospective. Both employers' and employees' sentiment factors need to be considered when an organization changes policies to allow its workforce to work remotely [5]. Both remote and hybrid work culture needs to drive the new corporate footprint strategy. As per the PwC US remote work survey, the productivity of employees and the confidence of employers are showing a positive trend from June 2021 to December 2021. The detailed Visio analysis of the report is outlined below.

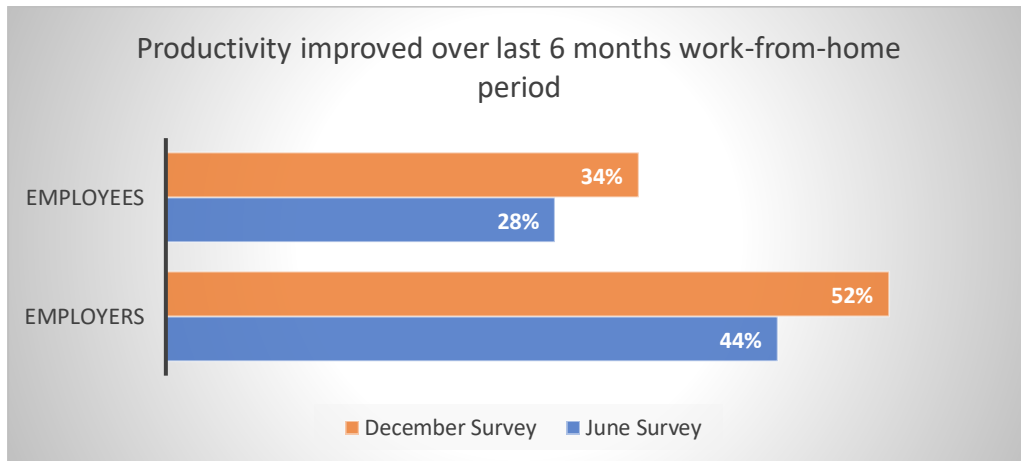


Figure 1. Productivity improved chart over last six months work-from-home period

Note: Adapted from *It's time to reimagine where and how work will get done.*, by D., Caglar, et al., 2021, Life & Health Advisor. Copyright 2021 by pwc.com.

## **Cultural Mindset of C-Suite Executives**

Today many employees want the flexibility to work remotely or on a hybrid basis than spending full day time in the office. This will be a significant reshaping of digital work culture and reshaping of employee satisfaction. It is a value that will be added to our new work-life balance and break the long-held business beliefs [8]. But the biggest question that remains here is: are the C-suite or managerial team is ready to accept and approve this culture? Is there a traditional cultural mindset prepared to make this change for a future global digital talent marketplace? Still, there is no confirmative answer to this question as this varies from company to company. But everyone needs to understand that beyond our structure and process, the innovative employees, and a need to innovate the work configuration is the actual task of this hour. Retaining competitive employees in the organization and giving the best of our ethics and values are critical to remaining competitive in this global bazaar.

The working-from-home economy is likely to continue post-pandemic. The COVID-19 related shutdowns across the globe are the emerging new reality, which will effluence labour economics, management practices, and uncertainty. C-suite executives need to understand that the remote work model is economically essential and a critical weapon to defeat COVID-19 and future pandemics [13]. A survey on work from home on different work setups have reported that only 51% workforce in the USA – mostly software professional, managers, and financial workers can carry their job effectively in remote work setup. The remote work challenge remains for the employees who work in retail, healthcare, transport, agriculture business services, etc. Also, the study by Nicholas Bloom, an economist, reveals that 35% of employers have poor Information Technology (IT) infrastructure that prevents effective telecommunicating and virtual working [13].

The above comparisons and infrastructure differences are creating a time bomb for inequality. The more educated and software-based employees are more suitable to work from home than the other category of skilled employees but not in computers. The loss of their physical presence creates a more significant challenge to their means of support, and they are being left behind. In this situation, the employers are in a dilemma on how to succeed with the process when only 20% of their total employee base are skilled to work remotely using computers [12]. With rapid automation and innovation, the trends may reverse in the future, but this is a big challenge for employers considering the global economic activity.

## **5. SUMMARY AND SUGGESTION FOR FUTURE WORK**

This paper provides a large-scale analysis of how digital communication and remote collaboration patterns have changed during this pandemic. It is essential to understand that the new work structure and high demand for services have changed during this pandemic. It influences better communication and support from all levels of organizational leadership [8]. Though this study doesn't have enough data to analyse whether the new move to remote work affected specific subsets of the population differently, this study has seen a positive vibe associated across the organizations regarding the nature of work in a post-lockdown period.

Whether the current organizational changes are virtuous or wicked will remain debatable for many years. But as employees have a different approach to time and attention to corporate work now when WFH, this pandemic is a catalyst to rethink and reshape the business almost every element of it. As all organizations are responding to revive themselves from this pandemic, the world sees a thriving growth rate across the industry types as the uncertainties persist [3]. This is when the innovation that seems to be the disruption will distinguish companies in the post-

pandemic marketplace. At this pandemic stage, the C-level executives need to be more supportive and lead the organizations with an innovative culture across configuration, offerings, and experience where remote workers play a critical role. The future study may focus more on the sustainability of this change in process or structure. Still, the study has proven that any business that trusts their employees, whether remote, hybrid, or onsite, always gets maximum returns with innovative thriving business culture. Organizations need to rework strategies that help meet their goals while addressing employees' safety, flexibility, and expectations.

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