

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A STUDY ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WORKING FROM HOME DURING COVID 19 PANDEMIC: A LONG TERM SOLUTION IN THE NEW NORMAL

T.D. Samarasinghe^{*1} and W.N. Sellahewa²

¹Sabaragamuwa University, Sri Lanka

²Uva Wellassa University, Sri Lanka

*researchassisttds@gmail.com

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Abstract

A significant portion of the country's workforce is unable to engage in per diem work place activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting the economic growth of Sri Lanka. Therefore organizations, in particular, tended to look for alternatives to solve this disruption. As a result of seeking solutions many employees started working from home (WFH). Policies should be developed to govern WFH, taking into account the practicality of employers and employees. The objective of this research is to discover whether WFH can be utilized only on exceptional occasions or as a long-term solution for working in the new normal. The researchers initially distributed a questionnaire within 50 employees from various public and private organizations while 5 employers were interviewed through virtual meetings to gather data. This leads to a critical analysis of future policy decisions as well as the formulation of appropriate proposals to enhance WFH structure.

Keywords: Work from home, work life balance, COVID-19

1. Introduction

The Corona virus (COVID-19), a global pandemic, has put society under unprecedented testing (Bai et al., 2020). The pandemic has affected the entire economy of Sri Lanka and as a result has destabilized many economic sectors. Just as society is not mentally prepared for this situation, we are still left with no approximation of the magnitude and solution of this pandemic. COVID-19 is a new coronavirus that has been circulating in society since December 2019, creating mutation virus strains. COVID-19 has been declared a worldwide health emergency due to the rapid spread of the virus. Dilatation of the respiratory tract by close contact with other people is the most common mode of transmission currently recognized. Proper use of masks, social distancing and adherence to basic hygiene techniques are the only ways to prevent the spread of the virus ("WHO", 2021). By May 2021, there were 181 million reported cases of COVID-19 globally, resulting in more than 3.92 million deaths and on 1st of May there were 1716 New cases resulting 109862 total cases in Sri Lanka ("COVID-19 – World Health Organization", 2021). Most countries, including Sri Lanka has shut down many non-essential enterprises. Therefore many employers has advised their employees to remain indoors and adhere to social distancing while reducing vis-à-vis contact. The World Health

Organization has published a risk assessment tool in determining to protect the public from harm ("WHO mass gathering COVID-19 risk assessment tool", 2021). This tool includes Risk assessment, risk mitigation, and risk communication. Organizations should also conduct a risk assessment of their workplace based on the WHO risk assessment and determine the safety of their employees. As office premises have been identified as the highest point for COVID-19 infection, the results of risk assessments should be communicated openly and transparently with their employees (Putri & Amran, 2021).

According to the traditional workplace system, the staff present physically to carry out office work. But in modern times, however, this pandemic has forced WFH methodological experiments in every field pausing physical attendance in the workplace (Mehta, 2021). There for this is the first time that many people in Sri Lanka have worked remotely. The potential of WFH as a future work model is very important. As a result, this study will help us to improve our understanding of the WFH, explore the factors influencing the WFH, the practicality and effectiveness of this methodology, flexibility, work motivation and the potential implications for employees (Judith et al., 2021).

Many countries have used various tactics to combat and protect against the COVID-19 pandemic (Tomar et al., 2020). The situation in Sri Lanka is no different. Sri Lanka has suffered three waves of virus attack, the third of which is the worst. The country has enforced a complete lockdown from time to time. A series of measures have been put in place, including travel restrictions, public meeting restrictions, suspended schools, special programs including WFH. Initially, it seemed possible to control the spread of the disease and keep the number of infections at a comparatively low level. Preceding the third wave of contagion, only a few number of infected patients and a few deaths were reported. Schools were gradually reopened, and limited social distances were gradually restored praising for being successful in controlling the propagation of COVID-19 crisis. However, with the third wave, COVID-19 patient's cases began to escalate resulting 215 deaths per day by 1st September 2021. As the situation deteriorated, drastic measures had to be taken to regulate the spread of the virus ("WHO", 2021). New rules were introduced to wear masks in all public places. Violators of these rules were subject to severe disciplinary action.

2. Methodology

Data for this survey was collected by a Google survey and virtual meetings. The Google survey was distributed among 60 employees. This Google survey included 26 open and close ended questions. The survey was distributed via email and social media sites such as Messenger, Viber and WhatsApp. The survey is designed to allow respondents to respond as quickly and easily as possible. Convenience sampling technique was used to facilitate sample selection. 50 satisfiable responses were collected. 5 employers were interviewed using zoom virtual meeting application.

3. Results/Analysis and Discussion

WFH, flexible workplace, and remote work are the foundations of this study. This research objects to examine if this program can be utilized only on exceptional occasions or as a long-term solution for working in the pandemic. Secondly this study examines how work and life have been influenced by WFH and how to improve WFH's link with work and life aspects. The features of the study are illustrated in Figure 01. When working from home, individuals should take three key aspects into account. Those are "organizational factors" "family factors" and "individual factors".

"Organizational factors" have been proven to be extremely significant for WFH provisioning. Organizations help employees with work-from-home requests supplying WFH-related facilities, technological training, organizational communication elements, employee welfare, and organizational Information Technology (IT) assistance. According to studies, WFH requires an organizational culture of trust, as well as an atmosphere in which colleagues and managers can have confidence.

WFH is also impacted by “individual factors”. These factors include self-discipline, self-motivation, and capacity to work independently, perseverance, self-organization, self-confidence, time management abilities, and computer literacy expertise. Furthermore, WFH is influenced by “family factors” such as residential location, the number of members of the family and the employer’s children’s age. The myriad of alternative workstations in the house and the figure of people who work at home also interfere with the employee’s WFH experience. From the Respondents 30% of the sample agreed

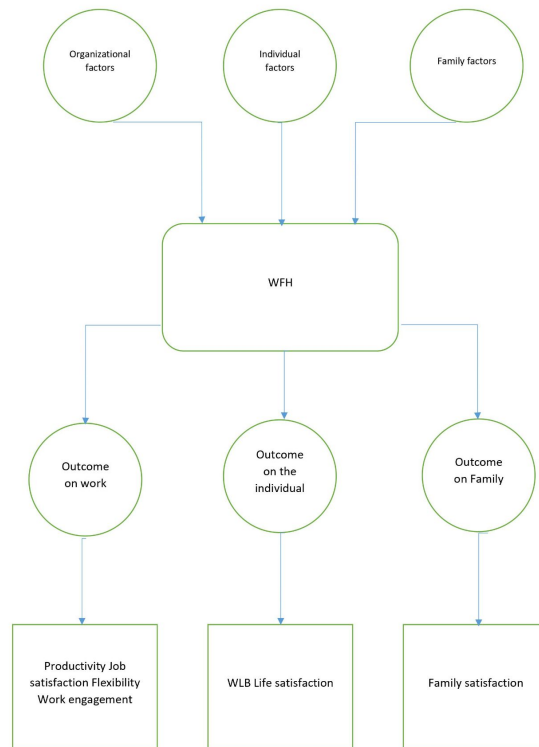


Figure 1. Factors affecting work from home

on the fact that mostly private sector companies have given them flexible time and count on the amount of work done rather than the time worked. Some of the participants stated that they have compressed working hours (17% from the sample) and longer rest periods (10% agree), As per the gathered data, 15% agreed that they have less work-related stress and 40% stated that they have seen an improvement in WLB. Moreover, 45% of respondents agreed that employers provide adequate support for the implementation of an effective WFH environment. The WFH domain, on the other hand, is not without its detractors. WFH-related expenses paying electricity and internet bills, for example, might lead WFH staff to lose enthusiasm at work. The number of working days and the amount of time spent on WFH can impact work-family conflicts. Employees find it difficult to distinguish between working and non-working hours, and as a result, they frequently work extra. The lines between work and family life are blurred, which might lead to overwork and shortened WLB (Judith et al., 2021).

The opinion of the majority 69% of employees is that they are comfortable with WFH if the right policies are implemented as WFH has many gaps in the current structure and dissatisfaction roots the lack of policies for effective WFH. The majority of 55% respondents stated they are not currently satisfied with WFH conditions, including lack of hardware, family barriers, and poor peer to peer communication. The study highlighted dissatisfaction with internal infrastructure, such as having limited access to resources and office documents. The majority’s common voice was that

these drawbacks will lead to dissatisfaction of Work and life and eventually the unbalance between Work and life. Isolation has led most unmarried employees to serious medical and emotional problems including depression and sleep disorders (Hassan, 2021).

3.1 SWOT Analysis

This study has investigated employers’ and employees’ ongoing experiences with an SWOT analysis which aids in gaining a deeper grasp of the true situation of WFH. This SWOT analysis is purely successful with the employee and employer feedback gathered by the preliminary data collection to compare strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of work from office (WFO) and WFH according to the respondents’ point of view. SWOT will aid organizations to enhance the experience of WFO within employees by implementing strengths opportunities and eliminating weaknesses and threats.

The data analysis revealed that 67% of the respondents stated that networking and face to face interaction with peers is a strength in the WFO environment and it will prevent miscommunication. More than half of the respondents (58%) agreed that WFO conditions can lead to greater supervision. Majority of the respondents (89%) stated that WFO can provide greater access to tech and low risk of information leak. In an open ended question we gave the opportunity to the respondents to express the weaknesses of a WFO environment. Many have stated that WFO environments lack flexibility and have a sedentary lifestyle.

They have expressed that workplace conflicts such as noise and irrelevant side chats disturbs and delay them from achieving the daily objectives. They have stated that WFO has less work force diversity but provides many opportunities for career development. According to the gathered data, 32% of the sample stated that WFH provides Flexible working arrangements and 43% stated that they don’t have office distractions. Further, 29% agreed that WFH is a time and money saving strategy. Most importantly 40% have observed WLB in their life. In an open ended question we asked from the respondents about the weaknesses of WFH and they stated that Distractions can occur from family members and household chores. Lack of supervision can lead to doing unnecessary tasks and time consuming activities. Communication barriers may occur due to lack of internet facilities on the island. As an opportunity the respondents have stated that recruiting talent has broken geographical boundaries. As threats, respondents have elaborated on having poor WFH policies.

Table 1. Comparison SWOT Analysis of WFH and WFO

SWOT	Work from office (WFO)	Work from Home (WFH)
Strength	Networking with peers and face to face - interaction. Able to prevent miscommunication. Supervision can be done effectively. Work and life can be separated. Greater access to tech and low risk of information leak.	Flexible arrangements. No office -distractions Freedom. Familiar - environment. Money saving and time -saving, WLB, Absenteeism reduced
Weaknesses	Lack of flexibility. Sedentary lifestyle. Political influences and workplace conflicts such as noise and disturbances. Irrelevant side chats and meetings which consumes time. Unnecessary spending like social gatherings.	Distractions by family members and household chores. Lack of supervision. Communication barriers. Loneliness can occur due to lack of social interaction. Conflicts within work and life
Opportunities	Maintain proper professional career and build opportunities	Can recruit new talent from around the country as the distance is not a barrier any more
Threats	Less work force diversity married women and elderly cannot contribute much Traffic and related pollutions	Data thefts and misleads can occur. Poor work policies. Sometimes have to bear the extra electricity bill or internet bill. High competition

4. Conclusion and future work

Once expected, WFH has not proven to be the best option for the majority of the workforce. Interest in WFH still exists, but not in its current form. Better government guidelines and policies should be in place to properly regulate and activate the WFH. One of the elements of the policy that is essential for planning and implementation is the guidance on adapting to remote online work. Proper training is required if this is to be a viable option or a new generalization. The WFH has a lot of beneficial outcomes. WFH's favorable outcomes include flexibility, productivity, WLB and reduced absenteeism. To achieve these benefits the workforce must adhere to a common policy where they can work bearing the efficacy presented by the WFH.

The following recommendations include actions that both the government and the private sector can take to further strengthen WFH. Introducing a formal WFH guideline for employees and employers considering the COVID-19 risk assessment which WHO has introduced. Allowing more employees' expectations in the forming guidelines prescribing minimum requirements for technical training for virtual offices and technical facilities for WFH. We must retest the ability to work remotely to a new normal reviewing current labor laws and ensure expansion of labor insurance policies for housing. Encourage small and medium enterprises to take WFH initiatives by providing subsidies and other incentives. Strengthen the existing remote programs and further promote family friendly work practices. Employers must assign more group work rather than individual work. They must appoint a multidisciplinary team with IT persons, employee and customer service personnel and employees. Employers must encourage this team to constantly search for new best practices and technological innovations. Employers must give relevant internet packages to the employees in order to maximize productivity. Employees must provide necessary technical support to the employees who have less IT knowledge along with a rich training program in order to proceed work smoothly. Remote employment regulations should show how an employee's productivity is measured. Employers must introduce a goal setting plan to the employees.

As per the study, it is viable to conclude that employees are comfortable with WFH if the right policies and reliable risk management policies are implemented as WFH has many gaps in the current structure and dissatisfaction roots the lack of policies for effective WFH. Utilizing these recommendations will aid WFH to be the long-term solution for working in the new normal.

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