

Research Article

A Study on Impact of COVID – 19 on An Employee’s Work Culture

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Abstract

Pandemic refers to an epidemic that has spread over several countries or continents, affecting a large number of people. The global threat of COVID - 19 outbreak has instigated a paradigm shift in the work culture at an organizational level. However, despite this threat, employers have managed to incorporate the use of modern technology to engage employees and making it possible to work, from the comfort of their own premises. This paper aims to report the employee behaviour and performance while working from home. It will highlight the perspective of employees working in Mumbai city and their overall experience.

Keywords: Employee Performance, Employee behaviour, Technology, Employer expectation, Pandemic, Work from home, COVID - 19 Human Resources.

Objectives:

- 1) To identify the challenges faced by employee working from home due to the COVID - 19 pandemic.
- 2) To evaluate the impact of the COVID – 19 pandemic on the work behaviour of an employee
- 3) To identify the expectations of employee performance set by the employers

Introduction

December 2019, saw the rise of a pneumonia of unknown cause in the city of Wuhan, China. By March 11, 2020 the SARS-CoV-2 caused COVID – 19, was characterized as a pandemic, counting itself as the fifth documented pandemic alongside the likes of the 1918 Spanish Flu, 1957 Asian Flu, 1968 Hong Kong Flu, and the 2018 Pandemic Flu (Liu, Kuo, & Shih, 2020).

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The rapid spread of the virus caused the world to come to a virtual standstill, affecting the markets severely such that the Dow Jones had its largest single – day fall of close to 3000 points on March 16, 2020 (Statista Research Department, 2020).

With several countries coming under national lock-down and international travel banned, work too had taken a drastic hit (Nowrasteh, 2020). The International Labour Organization (ILO), predicted that apart from the rising health concerns of the workforce, the economic shocks would impact the quantity of jobs, quality of work and would have an effect on specific groups vulnerable to adverse labour market outcomes (International Labour Organization, 2020). It was also indicated, through several estimates, that there would be a substantial rise in global unemployment; giving a comparison of the global financial crisis of 2008-09 by 22 million (International Labour Organization, 2020).

In India, the nationwide 21 – day lockdown abruptly took effect on 24 March, 2020, leaving several scrambling without a plan for the 21 days (Baba, 2020). The lockdown was further extended till 31st May 2020. This included several sectors like industrial sector, service sector as well as the education sector left without a proper plan to continue work during the lockdown.

Several companies tried to stay ahead of the curve and initiated the Work From Home policy on a trial basis during the initial phase of the lockdown. Once “India Inc.” saw no end to the lockdown or the cure/vaccine for the virus along the horizon, the Work From Home format was considered more seriously and was put into full effect, wherever applicable, and even found some success in its implementation (Economic Times Contributors, 2020).

Conceptual Understanding

A component that has been brought into the spotlight regularly during the lockdown has been the effect of lockdown on mental health and subsequently on work performance (Roy, et al., 2020). Per a survey conducted on 1871 respondents, it was found that as high as 40.5% of the participants had either anxiety or depression brought on by the lockdown lifestyle and the news updates of the pandemic (S, et al., 2020). The addition of working from home did not help deter the rise in mental health problems.

To have a better understanding of this, we need to consider the Job Demands – Resources Model. This model, developed by Arnold Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti, states that “when job demands are high and job resources/positives are low, stress and burnout increase. Conversely, a high number of job positives can offset the effects of high job demands.”. In addition to this model, let us also consider the findings of (Pandey, 2020), (Ismail, et al., 2015), (Nabirye, K.C., Pryor, & Maples, 2011), (Kazi & Haslam, 2013) and (Vijayan, 2018), where they confirm that stress, job type, work load, and pay, have an effect on job performance.

With this in mind, a survey was conducted with a sample of 145 respondents in the Mumbai region, to understand the impact of the pandemic on the now changed/adapted working culture prevailing in the country. This paper aims to delve into the perspective of the employees working from home in Mumbai.

Findings & Interpretations

1.

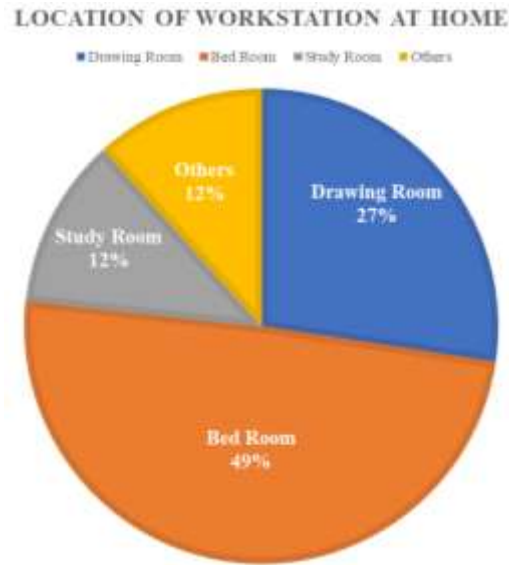


Figure 1

The majority of the respondents (49%) have selected their bedroom as their workstation. This would imply that the selection is with the intention of maintaining privacy and quiet while working. The selection of a quiet location would also go to show that the respondent has the intention to focus on their work and give their best performance.

2.



Figure 2

Considering that the respondents have now converted their homes to office spaces, their immediate surroundings and people in the immediate vicinity play a major role in their

job performance. With a majority of the respondents (22% and above) having 3 or more members in their household, there is a high chance of being distracted during work, whether it is household work or an unplanned break from work.

3.

SETTING OF KRA BY EMPLOYERS

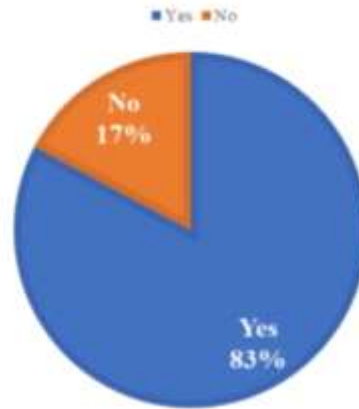


Figure 3

With the Key Responsibilities Areas (KRAs) being allotted to majority (83%) of the respondents, it makes it easier for the employees to follow a structured workflow, and allows employers to appraise their performance. However, in the case of respondents who are distracted by their household chores/responsibilities or family members, the KRAs would add to existing pressure and stress, which would in turn reduce the quality of work and thus have an impact on the performance appraisal.

4.

FREQUENCY OF VIRTUAL MEETINGS

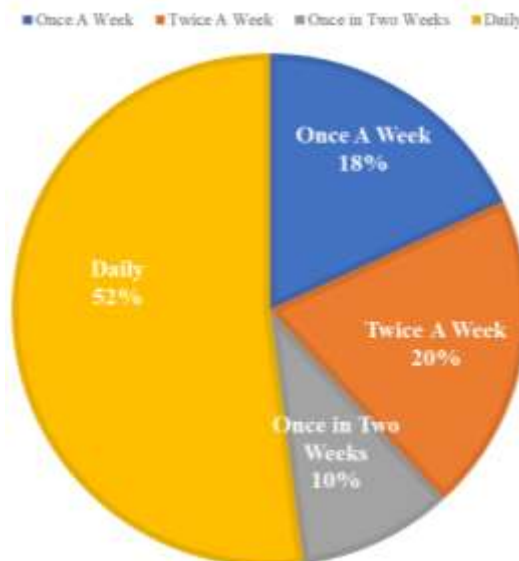


Figure 4

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52% of the respondents have a virtual meeting everyday with their employers and colleagues. This could add to the digital fatigue that could impact work performance. It must also be taken into consideration that, those with regular distractions in the household, will find an added pressure to complete set KRAs before the meetings, while also handling household chores and familial responsibilities.

5.

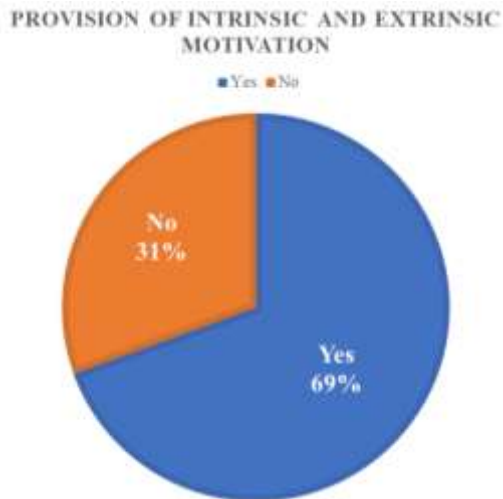


Figure 5

69% of the respondents are provided with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. This will help maintain motivation during the lockdown, as job security and financial stability will help alleviate the anxiety caused by the lockdown, and will also boost job performance.

6.

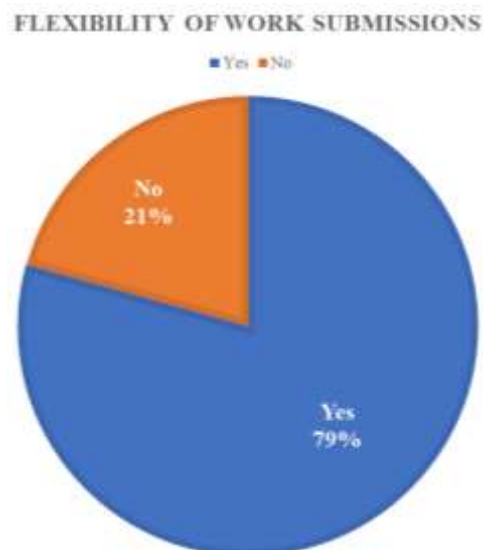


Figure 6

The flexibility of submission provided to the 79% of respondents, allows room to breathe as employees can work under less pressure. However, in the long run this may prove to be a burden to the employers as delay in work submissions could, in turn, delay formulation of future strategies and implementation of future actions.

7.

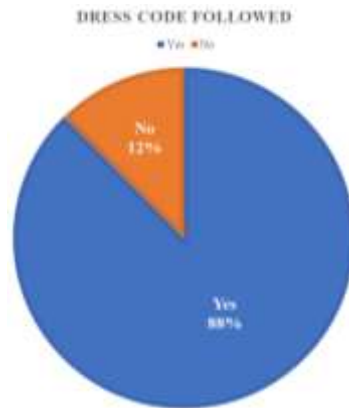


Figure 7

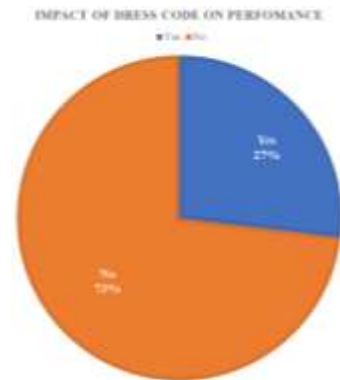


Figure 8

The 88% of the respondents who do not follow a set dress code will feel comparatively more comfortable to work from home than the 12% who follow a dress code. However, as per the enclosed cognition theory, higher performance is gained when dressed appropriately for the job.

8.

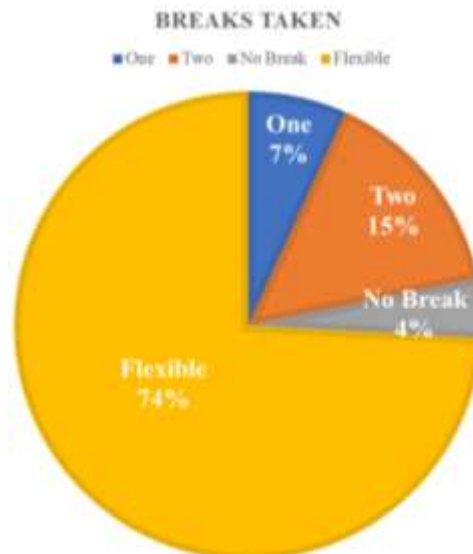


Figure 9

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It is crucial to note that 74% of the respondents take their breaks flexibly (whenever possible/needed). Even though it may seem as a positive superficially, this would drastically impact the work flow, and thus work performance, due to the lack of a proper work structure.

Analysis

With the above findings, it is clear that there are instances of the work performance being affected by the change in work environment. Though leeway is given, employees are not performing as per expectations due to distractions like social media, familial responsibilities, children at home, and household chores.

With 46% of the respondents being female, the survey would not be able to conclusively maintain that there is a scenario where there exists a defined boundary for house work and office work for the female respondents. Despite the fact that 72% maintain that the household chores are equally distributed and that 90.3% get support from their family.

As mentioned with the JD-R model a lack of resources provided to the respondents would affect their workflow as it would not be easy to complete set KRAs without said resources. With the stress caused by this, digital fatigue and the surrounding distractions, there would be a definitive impact on the work performance of the employee.

The fact that several of the respondents resort to flexible breaks, starting their official work after finishing their personal work (62.1%), and not following a set dress code, may highlight the issue that the employees may become lax in their working behavior over time.

Suggestions

Considering that the work from home culture will now be an active part of the Indian work culture, it is suggested that based on this research a more extensive research be conducted. Several aspects of the research indicate that what may be perceived as an intrinsic motivating factor, may only be a short-term remedy (flexibility of submission, flexible of break times). It is recommended that a clearly defined work structure be maintained keeping in mind the now amalgamated work-home environment that the employees have to get accustomed to.

Considering the margin of freedom to be provided to the employees, it is crucial for the employers to understand the need of the hour is to balance employee mental health and their work performance, in order to get better returns in the long run. Cutting down virtual meetings to a “as needed” basis, may ensure proper tracking of performance along with sufficient breathing room for the employee to complete set tasks (KRAs). The Enclothed Cognition Theory (Hajo & Adam D., 2012), will be helpful to instill among the employees to importance to maintain an official, albeit casual, work attire during the working hours.

It is highly recommended that Organizational Human Resource Policies now include policies pertaining to work from home, even in organizations that do not generally entertain the practice of working from home.

Conclusion

Working from home is now a part of the Indian work culture. With this in mind, it is also crucial to note that no amount of forecasting could have prepared organizations for what the pandemic has thrown at them. Involving a pandemic into disaster management plans of companies would be the new norm, and the work from home policy would be a definitive addition to the plan. With certain tweaks, something that can be fixed with further research, the work from home aspect of official work post the pandemic, may be welcome to many employees. If anything, the pandemic has shown several variations of working remotely which will positively impact a company's bottom-line and opened up avenues to develop new skills and technology (The Hindu, 2020). However, if not handled carefully, employees may suffer from "WFH fatigue" thus affecting their productivity (India Today, 2020).

Therefore, the Working From Home policy should be considered as a golden goose that needs to be carefully nurtured to obtain golden eggs in the form of peak performance and high returns in the long run.

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