Remote Work: Prospects and Challenges

[1]Silky Madan, [2]Dr. Geeta Sharma

[1]Assistant Professor, Jagan Institute of Management Studies
silky@jimsindia.org
[2]Associate Professor, Jagan Institute of Management Studies
geeta.sharma@jimsindia.org

Abstract

For most of the employees across the globe, the COVID -19's impact has been dependent on answering one question i.e. Can I continue with my current job in the work from home mode or am I bound to my workplace only? The corona virus has broken all cultural and technological barriers that prevented remote work as an option in the past. Lockdown, quarantines, self- isolation etc. has forced millions of employees and companies to experiment and adopt work from home scenarios.

The likelihood of adopting a work from home mode largely depends on the extent of physical, spatial and interpersonal requirements associated with the job. Even though many jobs related to gathering and analysis of data and information, finance, insurance, teaching, counselling etc. can be done remotely. But there are many jobs that require physical presence and use of fixed equipment like in case of CT-scans, production of finished goods, processing customer transactions in retail stores, physiotherapy, surgery etc. Such jobs can't be performed remotely.

It has been found that the potential for remote work is highly concentrated among highly skilled and highly qualified workforce in limited industries and occupations. More than half of the workforce that belongs to low paid jobs has little or no opportunity for remote work. It is also to be noted that even though India is renowned for its high-tech and financial services but its vast majority of its workforce is employed in retail and agriculture related occupations that cannot be done remotely.

Keeping the above aspects in consideration this paper tries to shed some light on the evolution of the concept of work from home and examine the applicability and future of work from home in different industries. The paper also attempts to study how the concept of WFH came as a rescue for organizations after COVID-19 outbreak and examine the pros and cons of remote working by documenting and focusing on the basic facts and figures about working from home.

Introduction

The covid-19 has upended many industries including media industry,healthcare industry,education industry,etc. and scathed the overall economy. The production,sales,profit of organization has slumped as employees are returning to their hometown because of health concern so there is paucity of workers to continue the production activity and many organizations have temporarily shut down because of this situation. Therefore,the organizations have to find a solution to resume the work so they resort to the concept of work from home.The idea of working from home or remote work gave many industries a big flip in continuing their business successfully.But this concept is not new but has become a new normal in today scenario for maintaining social or physical distancing to assuage the spread of virus. The idea of remote work buoyed many industries in continuing their work activity after the pandemic outbreak.

Many organizations are new to this experience but they are rapidly shifting to working from home to remain safe and to follow the guidelines of the government.Employees now have to follow different code of conduct to meet the organization objective while working online. Although working from home has helped the industries tremendously but they also faced lot of challenges while adapting this concept. The organizations where it is impossible to perform the job from home have to shut down their operation and thus many employees have lost their jobs during this pandemic. In this research paper we will illustrate some facts and findings about how working from home has supported industry after corona virus outbreak, the pros and cons of remote work, its origin and future.

Review of literature

Varied comprehensive researches have been executed by many researchers which will give us a detailed insight into the concept of working from home has been summarized:

In Alexander Brick, Adam and Karel(2020) research, an online survey (Real-Time Population Survey)has been conducted to find out how many US workers has shifted to remote work after corona virus pandemic on nearly 5,000 working age adults. The main findings of the research are "The percentage of workforce that work from home in February was 8.2 that upsurge to 35.2 in May 2020" and "Of all workers commuting daily in February, only 43.7 percent continued doing so in May, while 28.6 percent report working from home at least once per week and 27.7 percent were no longer employed in May". They concluded that the impact of covid-19 in relation to remote work varied among different socio-economic groups and low-education and low-income groups are more likely to be unemployed or forced to be inactive because of physical-distancing.

According to another research done by Fernando Saltiel (2020), who "examine the feasibility of remote work in developing countries" based on the Skill towards Employability and Productivity (STEP) survey. He observed which workers are less likely to work from home and find out characteristics like educational attainment, gender, age and an asset index affect the ability to work from home and point out the cross-country differences in percentage of people working from home evident by the number of workers using laptop at work is "58% in Macedonia compared to just 14% of their counterparts in Laos" and likely there is variation in percentage of individual of working from home in Yunnan and Ghana which is 23% and 5.5% respectively

According to study of Lena Waizenegger, Brad, Wenjie and Taino (2020), Covid-19 has posed serious issues and unpredictable challenges on knowledge workers which forced them to stay at home and to shift from on-site to virtual collaborations. Theyinterviewed 29 knowledge workers about their experience and introduced the term "enforced work from home". They discussed about how knowledge workers deal with technological challenges and discover new affordances of technology or redesign existing technologies in new and creative ways to achieve their team collaboration goals. Some of benefits from working from home to knowledge workers is increased job satisfaction, increased work autonomy and the negative impacts are that "Information and communication technologies make it difficult to knowledge workers to switch off and results in work intensification as well as distractions from home environment", threat from cybercriminals, communications and duty arrangement problems.

On the other hand, Marissa G. Baker, in his research emphasize that the workers who are employed in the occupation which includes(healthcare, manufacturing, retail and food services, etc.) where working from home is not possible "are not only exposed to getting infectious disease, but also to job disruption, job insecurity and job displacement" during covid-19 and 75% of workforce in U.S. was employed in this sector and only about a quarter are in occupations which can be done from home.He utilized O*NET database to measure the workers who are doing their job at home, "using metrics characterizing the importance of interacting 94 with the public at work, and importance of computer use at work".

Abi-Adams, Teodora, Marta, Christopher(2020), in their research highlighted the variation in workers ability to work from home within and across different occupation and industry because of different background characteristics like gender or occupation by conducting 6 surveys in UK and US. They study the heterogeneity in share of task that can be done from home like some can do 100% task from their home while other cannot do any task from home like a waiter. This research will help in doing proper investment to facilitate workers to work from home.

Another study by Sahu Gayatri (2020) focuses on how work from home strategy during pandemic has supported many organizations to deal with this situation in a defensive way and the impact of remote work on performance of firms in different sector.

Adding to this, another research by Eric Brynjolfsson, John, Daniel, by conducted two waves of survey one in April another in May of US population concluded that only "over one third of workers have responded to the pandemic by shifting to remote work, while another 10% have been laid-off" and there is variation across states in the share of people who are shifting to remote work and those who still continue to commute.

Dobric Savic, (2020) in his research pointed out the importance of digital transformation because of radical shift to work from home due to the outbreak of Covid-19.

Another research by Eliza Forsythe, Lisa, Fabian and David (2020), examine the impact of Covid-19 on the labor market by collecting data of job vacancies, unemployment insurance initial claims and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

Research Objectives

Following are the main objectives of this research:

➢   To understand the evolution of the concept of work from home.
➢   To examine the applicability of work from home in different industries.
➢   To studyhow the concept of WFH came as a rescue for organizations after COVID-19 outbreak.
➢   To probe the pros and cons of remote working.
➢   To document basic facts and figures about working from home
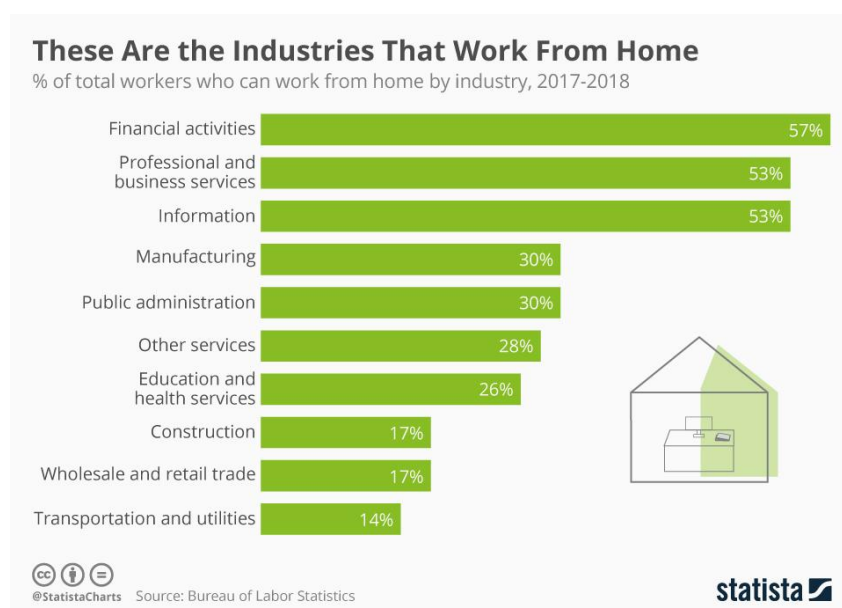➢   To explore the future of work from home

Discussion

1. To understand the evolution of the concept of work from home.

The work from home is not a new concept, it has been practiced from past few years but now it is becoming a new trend because of technological advancement and outbreak of Covid-19. It is also called telecommuting. "It has much longer past than history of working in offices". Before the industrial revolution, carpenters, potters, leather workers, crafters, blacksmiths, bakers, etc. all work in their dwelling, some set up shops to conduct business. Before the advent of technology and internet, many families work together cooperatively from their home combining work and living space making use of their family resources and supporting the family. But after industrial revolution people have witnessed profound changes and started shifting towork far from their home at factories and offices.

However, with the birth of Internet, invention of Wi-fi, technology and computer advancement modern remote work concept developed that allows employees to work outside the organization through smartphone, laptop, etc. and many people are still doing some jobs from home without using these devices like doing laundry for outside customers, providing food and baked goods to factory workers, sewing, etc. Jack Nilles is regarded as the father of remote work who worked remotely on a NASA communication system and coined the term "telecommuting". So, this concept was developed a while ago and has been practiced by different organizations.But incursion of corona virus exacted all workers and employees to work from home in the sector where it is possible and organization are devising new and innovative ways to makes it is easier for employees to work from home. Therefore, remote work is getting popularized and becoming a new normal nowadays.

2.To examine the applicability of work from home in different industries.

Based on the data of Bureau of Labor Statistics, percentage of total workers who can work from home by industry has been shown.

These Are the Industries That Work From Home
% of total workers who can work from home by industry, 2017-2018

Industry	%
Financial activities	57%
Professional and business services	53%
Information	53%
Manufacturing	30%
Public administration	30%
Other services	28%
Education and health services	26%
Construction	17%
Wholesale and retail trade	17%
Transportation and utilities	14%

@StatistaCharts   Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

statista

This figure shows the industries where work from home is possible, in financial sector 57% people can do their job from home and it is almost half in professional, information and business services. In other industries it is not easier to

complete task from home like in education and health services, construction, wholesale and retail trade yet they are doing it because they are not able to finish their work at offices.

The prevalence of telework or remote work is higher in knowledge and Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-intensive industries because they have high skilled, knowledge and wisdom workers who do most of their work from laptops. The share of teleworkers is low in industries which require heavy equipment and machinery to produce goods like manufacturing industry and physical presence like in health services it is impossible for a doctor to treat their patient virtually.

But after the Covid-19 outbreak, the scenario changed and working from home become imperative for organizations to keep their employees safe and to continue the services. In technology industry 90% of the workforce continue to work from home in India and some of the initiatives taken by organization are: Capgemini has provided additional laptops; Tech Mahindra has relaxed the work from home policies for its associates, FMCG major ITC has also advised offices in some locations to put in place and execute "contingency plans" at the earliest including work-from-home arrangement". On the other hand industries like transport, retail and manufacturing where implementation of this concept is difficult faced job losses to a great extent.

Some other jobs which can be done from home are virtual job centers, writing and editing, Insurance, art and design, etc. Another figure which depicts the jobs where work from home can be done is shown below.

Which Jobs Work from Home the Most?

Occupation	Mainly Work from Home	Have Ever Worked from Home
Chief Executives and Senior Officials	8.9%	69.2%
Media Professionals	20.5%	58.1%
Artistic, Literary and Media Occupations	23.7%	57.8%
Teaching and Educational Professionals	3.8%	57.8%
Health and Social Services Managers and Directors	2.5%	57.0%
Functional Managers and Directors	13.2%	56.1%
Legal Professionals	5.4%	55.7%
IT and Telecommunications Professionals	11.4%	55.0%
Business, Research and Administrative Professionals	8.0%	54.8%
Research and Development Managers	2.7%	54.8%

3. To study how the concept of WFH came as a rescue for organizations after COVID-19 outbreak.

Work from home becomes a pillar for manyorganizations to survive and sustain in the Covid-19 pandemic. It assuages the situation to a great extent when people have to maintain social distancing and evacuate for their safety. When organizations have reached nadir, remote work concept emanate as morale boosters and a fundamental requirement for themto continue their activities and task. It became imperative for organizations to consider the resources and skills required by employees when working from home. Therefore, "a remote work survey is designed to help organizations survey their workforce and gauge essential parameters, such as the availability of resources, organizational support, clarity from their managers on their role and work, etc." This survey helps HR manager to know whether employees are satisfied with company practices, to improve culture and devise methods to satisfy the employees' needs. Top companies like Google and Microsoft have arranged for enhanced teleconferencing tools to make work from home more comfortable. The work from home policies aregetting modified according to the company requirement. New tools and platforms are provided to enhance the productivity of workers. The tech services industry can now allow its employees to shift from work from office to work from anywhere permanently.

"Companies like WNS, which caters to the likes of Virgin Atlantic Airways Ltd., Tesco Plc and Avon Products Inc., are envisioning a hybrid office and home model, satellite offices in small cities and a mix of full-time employees and gig workers". Gig worker is the person who works temporary jobs. OMD, a media company asked everyone to work from home and temporarily closed its office.NTT, a Japanese system integration company, encouraged 200,000 employees to work from home to stop the spread of virus.

Federal and state governments have offered grants and loans to businesses needing to upgrade their remote-work technology, according to the Rockefeller Institute of Government, the public policy research arm of the State University of New York.

E-commerce and other virtual transactions are increasing and upsurge from two to five times faster than before the pandemic.

According to 2019 National Compensation Survey (NCS), in U.S. only 7% of workers or roughly 9.8 million people had the option to work from home such as executives, IT managers, financial analysts and accountants. In June 2020, this percentage has shifted to 42% who are working full-time from home.

4.To probe the pros and cons of remote working concept.

Some of the benefits of the work from home are:

- Improved productivity- Work from home improves the productivity of employees because they enjoy more autonomy and have less pressure.
- Eliminated the need for office space
- Reduced costs- Employees don't have to spend money when commuting to work and employers saves money too as they don't need to spend on rents, electricity bills, etc. Lowered personal costs for transportation, parking, food, and wardrobe
- Improvement in the quality of work life and morale
- A better balance between work and family demands- Employees can give more time to their families
- Reduces employee turnover rate- Remote work reduces absenteeism as employees enjoy greater comfort and flexibility and they don't have to deal with ruckus, uncomfortable working environment in the offices.
- Eco- friendly – Working from home is good for environment because people don't have to travel which reduce air pollution and that further help in reducing global warming.
- Helps in reducing congestion in cities and causing ruckus.

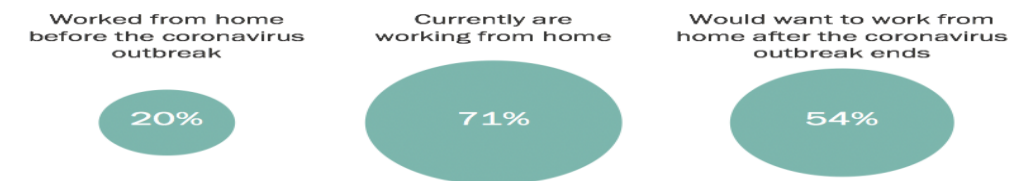There are some impediments that people come across while working at home:

- Distractions are a bigger problem for employees working at home because they have to take care of their child, get disrupted by background noises and reminder of chores which makes it difficult to manage time and concentrate.
- There is a blurred line between personal and professional life.
- Communication Gap- It is lot harder to communicate over calls, messages and video conferences to clarify the doubts and discuss something. Employer face problem in conveying the task and responsibilities to employees.
- Difficult to Stay Motivated- Sometimes it becomes difficult for employees to stay motivated because of lack of supervision and direction.
- Social Isolation- Employees like to work and interact with their colleagues while performing task but while working at home they feel isolated.
- Security Concern- While doing task through laptops, smartphones there is threat of having data stolen so they have to ensure data is secured. Cyber criminals are usingnew tactics in Covid-19 to steal personal data of employees and there is inadequate cyber and data security.
- Poor technological infrastructure and networks in some remote areas.
- Challenging for employers to measure performance and coordinate.
- Lack of technical knowledge- Some employees face challenges who are not tech-savvy.

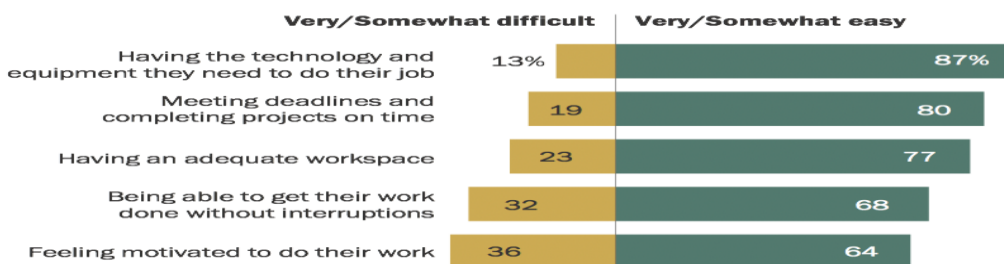### 5. Working from home: Some facts

In a survey conducted in U.S (2020), a significant shift has been noticed in percentage of workers who were working at home before the coronavirus outbreak and after the coronavirus outbreak from 20% to 71% because of closure of workplaces and offices and 54% of the workers want to continue work from home after the coronavirus outbreak. The shift to telecommute has been easy for many employees; they feel motivated to work from home and complete their tasks and jobs without any disruptions. Most of the employees havetechnology, equipment and adequate workspace to do their jobs from home.

Figure 1
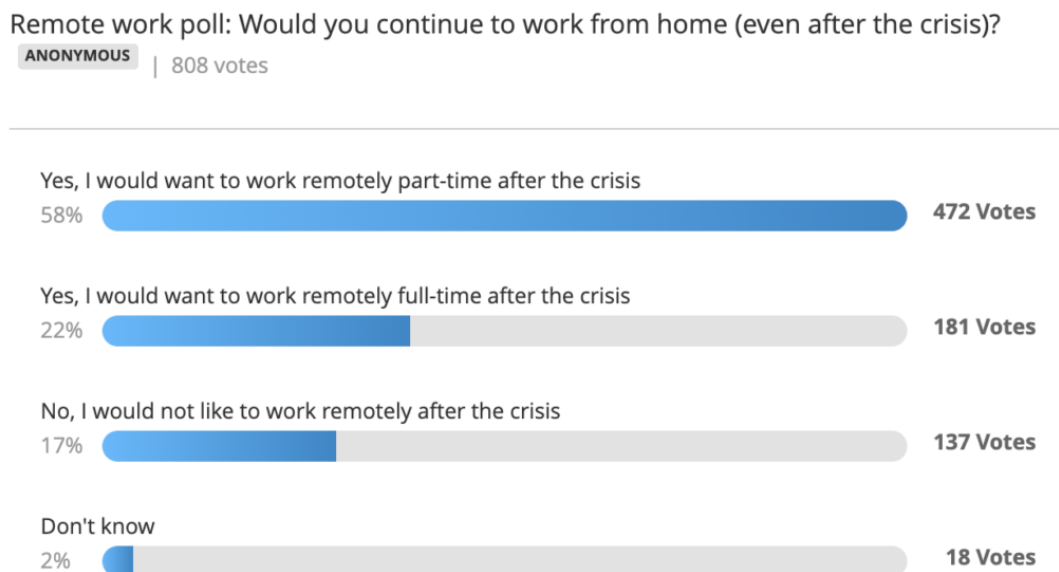

Figure 2

While another survey demonstrates that option of working from home is not equal for all workers. Low-income workers are more concerned about the threat from novel virus and say that job responsibilities cannot be done from home. On the other hand, most of the upper-income workers are doing their job from home and are satisfied with the protective measures taken at workplace.

6. The future of work from home

As many companies are rapidly shifting to work remotely, some companies are considering working remotely as future of work and to work from home permanently. Some companies who have shifted to long-term telecommuting are:Amazon, American Express, Capital One, Coinbase, Dropbox, Facebook, Hawke Media, Infosys, Lambda School, Micrsoft, Shopify, Skillshare, Twitter.

A remote work poll was conducted to find out how many organizations want to shift to flexible work arrangements permanently and the result showed that "more than 80% of technology professionals want to work from home at least for some time after corona virus crisis ends and desire among employees are strong to continue work from home as shown in figure below":

Remote work poll: Would you continue to work from home (even after the crisis)?
ANONYMOUS | 808 votes

Yes, I would want to work remotely part-time after the crisis
58% — 472 Votes

Yes, I would want to work remotely full-time after the crisis
22% — 181 Votes

No, I would not like to work remotely after the crisis
17% — 137 Votes

Don't know
2% — 18 Votes

Many workers are now comfortable to work from home as they have more flexibility, it increases productivity and foster better mental health. We can see that future of work has changed. Before this crisis organizations hesitates to work from home and allows only 10% or less than 10% workers to work remotely but now they are getting used to it and even in those organizations where work-from-home opportunities is not there are shifting to this like service industries. Considering the benefits of remote work and technological advancement some organizations are adopting this concept permanently.

Conclusion

Organizations faces plethora of challenges and complexities in earlier stages while adopting the concept of remote work but they shifted radically to work from home because working from home becomes the only viable option to resume their operation and to fight against Covid-19. So remote work is growing its popularity since before and many workers who are skilled and tech-savvy are taking advantage of online tools and platforms and finding working from home more comfortable and flexible and some of them want to continue working remotely after the pandemic also while lower-income workers are not satisfied and find it challenging. But work from home has become a panacea in this crisis, without it the economy would have been crumpled and slumped and organizations would have suffered huge losses.

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