



Impacts of Remote Working on Employees During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study investigates the impacts and influences of remote working on employees during the coronavirus pandemic, in terms of communication, job effectiveness, and employee engagement and productivity. Data were collected from participants from different sectors and industries in three regions in Saudi Arabia. The study's findings revealed that remote working significantly impacted communication, job effectiveness, and employee productivity. However, the impacts of remote working on employee engagement were insignificant which could be a result of neglecting activities that encourage employee engagement by the organization because of the nature of working remotely. This research presents two contributions. First, this article enhances the literature on remote working and employees during crises or pandemics. Second, it reveals that remote working could be applied to run daily operations when implementing the appropriate strategies and infrastructure.

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1 Introduction

Remote working (RW) is considered a new trend that has changed the concept of what is usually called traditional work. Due to the coronavirus disease pandemic (COVID-19) - an infectious disease that attacks an individual's respiratory system - discovered at the end of 2019, many businesses were closed or were run using the concept of remote working. The invasion of COVID-19 has changed and empowered the trend and phenomena of RW. Before the pandemic, some organizations ran their operations using RW. However, after the pandemic, organizations that did not have infrastructure capable of transforming from physical work to virtual or distance

work faced enormous challenges. Furthermore, organizations with RW infrastructure issues may face other obstacles concerning employee productivity or performance during RW. Working in an office or being physically able to complete tasks and finish projects has been the accepted way for most organizations. According to Hatch (2006), remote working is defined as completing the work or tasks in a place that is not physical. Furthermore, Di Martino and Wirth (1990) define RW as flexible work that allows employees to complete their tasks and responsibilities away from a physical location without direct contact with other employees. However, employees can still communicate with others using any technology means; RW means that work or tasks can be completed using online communication, including cloud, internet, or virtual. RW is considered a recent and ongoing trend to complete tasks and projects from home while achieving a work-life balance. RW could help individuals who cannot travel from home to a work location. Furthermore, it helps women who prefer to work from home, and may not want to work in a male/female environment. Khalifa and Davison (2000) indicated that RW was preferred and suitable for employees whose location was distanced from the organization and who were familiar with RW and able to work independently. Kossek and Lautsch (2018) emphasize that RW was widely used by organizations. Nield (2016) distinguished between employees working in an office and those working from a distance as the latter being happier and more productive. In addition, Anderson and Kelliher (2020) consider RW as a working method that enables employees to manage and control their organization's activities and personal tasks more than in traditional working conditions. According to Nilles (1994), completing tasks or job activities in a place other than a physical, standard office is considered remote working. Gajendran and Harrison (2007) classified remote working as distributed work, defined as the ability to share tasks among employees away from the normal worksite. In addition, they categorized distributed work as telecommuting work and telework or remote work. Ellison (2004) explained telecommuting as accomplishing work activities without traveling from home to work, meaning consuming less traveling time. Stable (2001) stated that telecommuting is considered a type of remote work where employees finish their job tasks from home. In addition, Madsen (2011) stated that if work and job tasks were performed using technology and communication to bring tasks to employees, this is considered telecommuting. Garrett and Danziger (2007) emphasized that telework occurs when the four dimensions exist: information, technology, time, and employment diversity. Nilles (1994) added that when employees communicate and complete tasks using some sort of technology and are away from the worksite, this is also referred to as telework. Fitzer (1997) explained that telework means using technology to help employees complete their tasks away from their usual physical work environment.

The concepts of telework, work from home, and telecommuting have been used interchangeably in research. For this paper, the author will use remote working (RW), also emphasized by Parris (2017) as the term most preferred by organizations.

2 Literature Review

The current literature review highlights RW as means of working from places other than the typical environment setting or running a business from home or virtually (Gajendran et al., 2014; Allen et al., 2015; Mana and Holdsworth 2003). Remote working which considers as an independent variable in this study involves different meanings, and researchers have used this term to mean telework, telecommuting, work from home, flexible work, and distance work. However, in this study, the use of RW will be based on the definition of US office Personal Management (2013) as conditions where the employee can work and operate at a location other than the corporation's physical worksite. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home or remotely was not widely considered by global organizations as a means of running a business and daily operations. In other words, organizations that depend on running their business using virtual methods were suddenly using remote working in their operations. After the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations were forced to transfer from a physical work environment to remote working to survive. For an alternative definition of RW, Olsan (1983) defines it as operating an organization's tasks and daily activities outside the normal setting. Furthermore, Bao et al. (2020) define RW as a method or way for a worker to complete their tasks, not in their usual place.

2.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of RW

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, working remotely was a way for small businesses and organizations depending on RW to complete day-to-day activities to operate effectively. It was not considered for many organizations as a strategy that a company should shift to or depend on. However, after the onset of COVID-19, the perception shifted almost entirely for some organizations to adapt or even implement different strategies or policies for RW as an essential element for the organization to continue running and managing its business or even to survive. A review of the literature illustrates some of the benefits or advantages of using RW. Gajendran et al. (2014) stated that one of the most obvious advantages is flexibility. Mann and Holdsworth (2003) conclude that managing employees' tasks and time at their own pace makes flexibility an important advantage of RW. Furthermore, Khalifa and Davison (2000) stated that RW could reduce organization costs in maintaining the organization's work environment and the urge to improve the company location. Another advantage of RW, as stated by Hunton and Norman (2010), is that employee commitment to the organization tends to be higher among remote workers than employees who work at a physical location. Gajendran et al. (2014), added that RW provides employees with a better opportunity to practice autonomy.

2.2 Disadvantages of RW

Regardless of the many benefits of RW, there are some drawbacks. Knowledge is one of the most critical assets for an organization. Sharing knowledge and information face to face when working in a normal environment might be easy. However, using and transferring knowledge might be at risk (Taskin and Bridoux 2010). Furthermore, transferring knowledge among employees

virtually might affect the overall organization's performance (Cascio and Aguinis 2008). Another disadvantage of RW is isolation. A normal working environment setting increases the friendship and social interaction between employees, which might increase the organization's overall performance. In contrast, RW increases social isolation practices (Feldman and Gainey 1997); individuals prefer a normal working setting to decrease social isolation and promote friendships (Sias et al. 2012). Another disadvantage of RW is the status quo or social statuses such as managers, chief executive officers (CEO) or department heads or other senior job statuses might be less noticeable when utilizing RW compared to a normal work setting where an employee has a physical office. In addition, RW increases professional isolation as an employee becomes less noticeable in their career (Bailey and Kurland 2002). Another significant disadvantage of RW that might have been very noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic is the separation between job tasks and family life. Employees might find it difficult to focus on completing and attending meetings while working remotely and at the same time facing the pressure from the family to finish and respond to its needs and demands. Furthermore, Hill et al. (1998) emphasize that since an employee is working remotely, they are always available, which in turn increases working hours. Finally, Bailey and Kurland (2002) explain that working in a physical environment allows employers to notice and evaluate employee performance; however, when an employee is working remotely, the performance of that employee might be hard to notice, and tasks and activities might be completed with the least amount of effort.

3 Dependent Variables

3.1 Employee Productivity

Employee productivity has been an ongoing issue for organizations in a normal work environment. However, issues with employee productivity may increase during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the dependability or transformation of the daily business operation. In addition, employee productivity depends on the organization's work environment; when employees are comfortable and motivated, their productivity increases (Oloke et al., 2017). In other words, an unproductive employee could affect the organization's overall performance. In addition, Rahmawati (2013) stated that to sustain employee productivity, the organization must pay close attention to its compensation policies, strategies, and work environment. Productivity is observed in a typical work setting. However, with the appearance of COVID-19 and the events that followed, such as an enforced curfew and mandatory stay-at-home policy, organizations were forced to run their business remotely and, in some cases, change or adapt the current infrastructure to survive. Therefore, the productivity issue became critical to managing with coronavirus still prevalent and health issues being updated frequently. According to Hong et al. (1995), productivity means utilizing an organization's material to produce value. Productivity is the indicator of an employee's functions, roles, and performance in the organization. Brinkerhoff and Dressler (1990) explained that productivity contains input, output, results, and process. In addition, Brochner (2017) clarifies

that productivity nowadays is difficult for employers, employees, and organizations to maintain a regular work setting. Eversole et al. (2012) describe the difference between an employee working in a physical office compared to an employee working remotely; they stated that employees working virtually could be more productive and motivated to work because they can work when they feel more productive using a flexible schedule. Sauermann (2016) described that an organization can measure an employee's productivity using the employee's performance, which means that the organization should design an appropriate work schedule to improve productivity. RW allows the employee to work when they feel comfortable and as a result, they could be more productive. However, this will depend on the organization's policies and strategies when it comes to utilizing RW. Based on the explanation, this study has the hypothesis,

H#1: RW significantly impacts the productivity of the employee during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2 Employee Engagement

One of the most important concepts for an employee to feel connected to the organization is engagement. Mone and London (2018) emphasize that there are several elements an employee should have to be considered as an engaged employee. These characteristics are involvement, empowerment, passion, and commitment. Further, Lockwood (2007) considers that a company's success and accomplishment of its goals and objectives is when the employees are engaged. Equally important, Vance (2006) illustrated that part of employee engagement is how the organization implements human resource management practices such as benefits, training, job design, recruitment, and selection. Bates (2004) added that employee engagement predicts worker outcome and organization achievement. Another aspect of employee engagement during crises or changes faced is to inform employees about the phase of changing processes so they feel responsible and part of the change (Whyte 2015). Bate (2004) finds that employee engagement is decreasing in organizations. Anand (2020) explained that there are four methods to apply for employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic: perception, appreciation, understanding employee needs, and effective communication. Moreover, Talukdar (2020) added flexible working hours, virtual online teams, and community. Vickers (2019) emphasizes that employee engagement should be utilized in both positive and difficult times. Deal et al. (2010) added that employers should consider providing employees with benefits and a well-paid salary during rough times to keep employees engaged and committed to the organization. The clarification produces the second hypothesis,

H#2: RW significantly impacts employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3 Communication

Communication can be described as one of the most important aspects of two people talking to understand each other or one person explaining something to another person. However, it becomes a crucial issue when it comes to effective communication or employee communication in an organization (Holtzhausen 2002). In 1992, Grunig stated that employee communication must be

well practiced for an organization to be successful. In addition, the lockdown of businesses and countries all over the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic increased the use of technology platforms. As Miller (2009) emphasized, employee communication has increased due to the increase of new technology and as a result increased the organization's overall communication adaptation. Equally important, Macey and Schneider (2006) extrapolated that employee performance and productivity can increase by using suitable communication when introducing or applying new processes or policies. Effective communication within an organization depends on the selection of communication tools and methods (Kalla, 2005). Face-to-face communication is considered widespread in a traditional work setting and allows the individual to understand verbal and non-verbal messages. Begley (2004) added that face-to-face communication is considered a powerful tool when communication takes place among individuals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of communication shifted from face-to-face to online communication. Jonassen and Kwon (2001) state that online communication can help solve problems and complete job activities when applied correctly. Online communication includes email, video conference, and virtual-based work settings (Adams and Calanes 2009). Given the above explanation, the third hypothesis is:

H#3: RW significantly impacts communication among employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 Job Effectiveness

There are different definitions of job effectiveness. According to Jex (1998) job effectiveness explains the degree of the employee's work performance and involves completing tasks on time. Job effectiveness deals with procedures that provide results as anticipated on time. Butler, Aasheim, and Williams (2007) emphasized the benefits of job effectiveness on employees and employers when focusing on remote working to complete tasks and activities. In addition, Kanter (1979) emphasized the importance of the work environment on job effectiveness. The work environment and infrastructure can affect the job effectiveness of working in a physical setting location as opposed to a virtual setting. In addition, Van der Meulen (2017) asserted that job effectiveness can be increased when utilizing remote working strategies when at home or places other than the office, which has a suitable environment and less distraction. Baruch (2002) stated that job effectiveness might be obtained by using a combination of self-confidence, communication skills, and self-motivation. These three elements might be necessary when working remotely. Furthermore, Grant, Wallace, and Spurgeon (2013) articulate that employees who work virtually should obtain specific soft and hard skills that help in achieving organization goals for completing tasks as required. The fourth hypothesis is

H#4: RW significantly impacts job effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4 Methodology

The study aims to examine the impact of RW on employees when it comes to employee productivity, employee engagement, communication, and job effectiveness. The data was collected using a questionnaire designed and distributed using Google Docs tools through cell phone

applications, from April to mid-May 2021. Most of the data came from three regions in Saudi Arabia: the central, western, and eastern regions. Participants were selected randomly. The questionnaire contained three sections; the first section focused on demographic data. The second section was about the independent variable (RW) and the third section contained questions about the four dependent variables (employee productivity, employee engagement, communication, and job effectiveness). The purpose of the content validity test is to verify that the measure used in the research consists of an appropriate and descriptive set of elements that focused on the perception of the research. Thus, the questionnaire was assessed by a group of professors in the field. After that, the questionnaire was revised, and each of the independent and dependent variables had seven questions. A five-point Likert scale was utilized as followed: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither disagree nor agree), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree). A total of 57 surveys were returned.

5 Results

Table 1 showed that the number of employees from the public sector was 35 (61.4%) and the number from the private sector was 22 (38.6%). The number of male participants in the study was 33 (57.9%) compared to the number of female participants which was 24 (42.1%). Out of the 57 participants in this study, 22 (38.6%) were aged from 36-40 years. It also can be noted from Table 1 that 35 (61.4 %) participants work at an educational job and 20 (35.1%) worked at a managerial job.

Table 1: Characteristics of participants

No.	Characteristics	Frequency	%
Gender			
1	Male	33	57.9
2	Female	24	42.1
Job title			
1	Faculty member	30	52.6
2	Teacher	1	1.8
3	School Deputy	1	1.8
4	Manager	1	1.8
5	Employee	24	42
Age			
1	Under 30 years old	7	12.3
2	30 - 35 years old	11	19.3
3	36 - 40 years old	22	38.6
4	Above 40 years old	17	29.8
Job nature			
1	Educational	35	61.4
2	Managerial	20	35.1
3	Technical	2	3.5
Sector			
1	Public	35	61.4
2	Private	22	38.6

5.1 Model Estimation

A partial least squares (PLS) approach has been employed to analyze the data and test the hypothesis (Ringle et al., 2014). The major reasons for using the PLS approach are the latent nature of this study's constructs as well as the small sample size and the ability to use one independent variable and multiple dependent variables (Hair et al., 2014). Hair et al. (2005) clarified that a

sample size between 50-400 respondents is considered adequate and acceptable. The latest guideline proposed by (Hair et al. 2019) was considered for the assessment of measurement and structural models.

5.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model assessment is based on the confirmation of reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair et al. 2019). The reliability of the items was tested by examining the outer loadings of the items, i.e., the correlations between each item and the constructs (Hair et al. 2018). The internal consistency reliability values predicted by Cronbach’s alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) were used to assess the degree to which items were free from random error and, therefore, allowed to yield consistent results. The CA values ranged from 0.66-0.88 (Table 2), fitting within the acceptable range for the CA. The CR of the five constructs was found to range from 0.79-0.90, which also meets the threshold. Table 2 thus demonstrates that the CA and CR values are acceptable.

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity Results

Variables	Cronbach’s Alpha	Rho_A	CR	AVE
Communication	0.66	0.74	0.79	0.50
Job Effectives	0.80	0.82	0.86	0.51
Employees Engagement	0.88	0.89	0.90	0.57
Employees Productivity	0.76	0.86	0.85	0.58
Remote Working	0.69	0.71	0.81	0.52

AVE: Average variance extracted; CR: Composite reliability

The average variance extracted (AVE) is used to evaluate convergent validity. Convergent validity assesses the consistency across multiple constructs. In Table 2, all values were within the recommended threshold of 0.5 and thus had convergent validity according to Hair et al. (2014).

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT).

	Communication	Job Effectiveness	Employee Engagement	Employee Productivity	Remote Working
Communication					
Job Effectiveness	0.65				
Employee Engagement	0.44	0.38			
Employee Productivity	0.59	0.49	0.88		
Remote Working	0.90	0.68	0.61	0.76	

For testing discriminant validity, which examines the extent to which different constructs diverge from one another, the study used the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) (Hair et al., 2019). An HTMT value that exceeds 0.9 indicates an issue of discriminant validity. As shown in Table 3, all HTMT values of the constructs were 0.9 and below, which means that the discriminant validity has been established.

5.3 Structural Model Assessment

Once the reliability and validity of the variables are established in a structural model, the next step is the assessment of the structural or inner model. As suggested by Hair et al, (2019), to analyze the structural model, R^2 values, the path coefficients' statistical significance, and the effect sizes f^2 should be considered. First, R^2 result checks for the degree of variance explained by the independent variable (RW) as shown in Table 4. Based on the R^2 results, the RW explained 42% of the variance in communication. For the job effectiveness, the RW explains 30% of the variance. The employee engagement variance was explained by 54% and 34% of the variance in employee productivity was explained by RW. In fact, according to Hair et al., (2019), values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 indicate substantial, moderate, and weak explanations of variance, respectively. Therefore, as shown in Table 4, the variance in the dependent variables explained by RW gathered around the moderate range.

Table 4: R-squared result (R^2)

Variables	R^2
Communication	0.42
Job Effectiveness	0.30
Employee Engagement	0.54
Employee Productivity	0.34

Second, the significance levels of path coefficients indicate that at $p \leq 0.05$ RW significantly impacted communication, job effectiveness, and employee productivity. However, RW has insignificant impacts on employee engagement. Therefore, the hypothesis of communication, job effectiveness, and employee productivity were accepted. On the other hand, the employee engagement hypothesis was rejected as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Model Path Coefficients & Significance

Path	Original sample	Sample mean	SD	t	P-value	f^2
Remote working → Communication	0.51	0.53	0.13	4.01	0.00	0.30
Remote working → Job Effectiveness	0.49	0.50	0.16	3.01	0.00	0.22
Remote working → Employees Engagement	0.08	0.06	0.13	0.62	0.54	0.00
Remote working → Employee Productivity	0.58	0.59	0.08	7.70	0.00	0.51

Third, to examine the effect size, the study calculated Cohen's f^2 -values of the variables as shown in Table 5. The effect sizes of RW on communication, job effectiveness, and employee productivity were (0.30, 0.22, and 0.51 respectively) greater than the 0.02 threshold except for employee engagement (0.00) which was less than 0.02. The effect size of RW on employee productivity is a large effect (since it's higher than 0.35), the effect size of RW on communication and job effectiveness is considered as medium effect (since it's higher than 0.15 but lower than 0.35), and there is no effect size of RW on employee engagement since it is less than 0.02 (Cohen 1988). The hypotheses testing is summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses	Path Coefficients	t	Results
H#1: RW → Employee Productivity	0.58	7.70	Accepted
H#2: RW → Employee Engagement	0.08	0.62	Rejected
H#3: RW → Communication	0.51	4.01	Accepted
H#4: RW → Job Effectiveness	0.49	3.01	Accepted

6 Discussion

This study investigates the impact of RW on employee productivity, employee engagement, communication, and job effectiveness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study showed that RW had a statistically significant impact on three variables: employee productivity, communication, and job effectiveness. However, the influence of RW was insignificant when it comes to employee engagement. Working remotely made practicing employee engagement less significant since the employees were not engaged with co-workers and the practices of loyalty might have decreased when working remotely. Working physically in a normal environment might increase the chances of practicing the concept of employee engagement. On the other hand, employee productivity, communication, and job effectiveness were significant with RW. That means employee productivity, communication, and job effectiveness increased when working remotely or were not affected when working remotely and were significant. In this study, RW impacted employee productivity significantly supporting the finding of studies by (Butler et al 2007; Fujii, 2020). RW made it easy for employees to practice and complete their tasks and achieve corporate objectives. The study result revealed that RW impacted the job effectiveness significantly, supporting the finding of Van der Meulen (2017) who emphasized that job effectiveness using the concept of remote working could be increased when using the appropriate strategies and infrastructure. When it comes to communication, the study found that RW significantly impacted communication. This finding did not align with the finding of Ean (2010), which found that face-to-face communication is more effective than online communication. In addition, a study done by Flores (2019) found that communication is one of the most challenging factors when it comes to remote working. The most important finding of this study is that RW did not impact employee engagement and was not significant as employee engagement needs specific strategies and procedures to be utilized by the company. Talukdar (2020) provided methods to increase employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. These methods are strong communication channels, flexibility, virtual community, team activities, and instant appreciation. Anand (2020) added appreciation, acknowledgment of employees, and video conferencing.

7 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact or the influence of RW on employees when it comes to employee productivity, employee engagement, communication, and job effectiveness. The results of the study revealed that RW significantly impacted employee productivity, communication, and job effectiveness. This showed that RW increased the productivity of the employees and communication was not an issue when working remotely and the

effectiveness of the job increased using an RW concept. On the other hand, RW impacts on employee engagement were insignificant; RW decreased employee engagement and the organizations did not use methods to increase the practice and application of employee engagement. The article provides insight for the company when applying and designing RW strategies and objectives especially since the RW concept will be used more widely because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study provides several recommendations,

- 1- Organizations should consider designing work in a way that can be done remotely and provide the necessary technology, platform, and online security to complete the tasks and activities.
- 2- Organizations should implement the appropriate policies and procedures for the task to be easily assessed and completed so employee performance can be appraised accordingly.
- 3- Organizations should focus on utilizing strategies and policies to increase employee engagement.

8 Availability of Data and Material

All information is included in this study.

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