



Challenges of employees in a work from home environment amidst pandemic: impact on productivity

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Abstract

This study focused on determining the challenges of Filipino employees who are on a work from home environment during the pandemic period and assessed how it impacts on their productivity. A total of 400 respondents from various industries in Metro Manila, currently on a work-from-home environment, participated on this study. Findings revealed that during work hours, employees talk less with their coworkers, which means there are fewer chances for social interaction with other people. A lack of supervision and communication with coworkers, a desire to work on-site, a lack of extracurricular activities, and reconnecting with coworkers through team building all have a moderate impact on their productivity.

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way the world lives and works. What started out as a global health crisis has rapidly snowballed into an economic crisis. As the pandemic continues to rage across the world with no real insight into when things would completely settle down, organizations must focus on practical actions to keep people safe, healthy, connected, and foster resilience among their employees (Dennerlein et al., 2020; Mokline & Abdallah, 2021). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a pandemic. Governments from across the world announced comprehensive lockdowns limiting all unnecessary travel and asked all non-essential employees to work from home where possible (Khanna et al., 2020; Saha & Dutta, 2020). It had affected the workplace by asking workers to “self-quarantine” and practice social-distance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers were advised to work from home (WFH) full time (Rangachari & Woods, 2020), which redefined the conventional concept of WFH that was typical only for certain types of work, on an occasional basis, or given unique employee circumstances. The abrupt shifts to WFH and other factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique context for exploring the relationship of WFH on physical and mental well-being (Xiao et al., 2021; Aidla, 2023) as well as on the employee productivity.

This study sought to know how employees rate the challenges that they most likely encounter as they engaged in a work from home environment; and how it impacts on their productivity as they engaged in the work from home set up in terms of social, environmental, financial, and emotional or mental aspects.

2. Literature review

2.1. Remote work affecting employee productivity

Due to remote work, employees usually communicate less with their colleagues, which decreases the social interactions during the day (Lal et al., 2023). Likewise, from the study conducted by Maarleveld et al. (2009), managers prefer to emphasize opportunities for interaction, the facility manager must remain aware that such factors as workplace functionality and comfort, opportunities for concentration and the indoor climate are of huge importance in creating a work environment that is perceived as encouraging labor productivity.

Lal et al. (2023) and Bhattacharya (2022) showed that work-from-home has disadvantages, such as lack of supervision, resulting in miscommunications. Other disadvantages include lack of physical separation between work and personal time, feeling of isolation, and the possibility of a boring work environment at home which may cause uncertainty leading to job dissatisfaction, which may lead to lower employee performance, as measured by the company's key performance indicators. Employee performance plays an important role in a company's success. On the contrary, the study from Indonesia revealed that working from home, employees experienced greater enjoyment, satisfaction and motivation thus enhancing job performance (Bick et al., 2023). Furthermore, data from 20 European countries also revealed advantages of work from home such as work-life balance, improved work efficiency and there is greater work control (Ipsen et al., 2021).

Authors who conducted studies on this matter stated that lack of social interaction causes more isolation and loneliness. Collaboration with co-workers is already hard enough face-to-face, but it is much harder when working from home. People normally rely on nonverbal communication. Communicating with co-workers is one of the biggest challenges when working from home. In addition, when transparency is compromised, team collaboration suffers. There is no teamwork, no face-to-face communication with peers, and no coffee-fueled brainstorming. All these communication blocks are taking a significant toll on employee engagement and morale. Understandably, a similar level of engagement is not easy now, and

the workflow is bound to get affected due to communication barriers (Fila & Eatough, 2020; Van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2022; Becker et al., 2022).

2.2. Challenges of employee in a work from home environment

Social isolation is one of the major challenges of remote work, and its prevalence has inevitably increased over time. People have been socially isolated (ie. missed out on social opportunities to meet up with friends or co-workers) because of the pandemic, leading to higher degrees of loneliness, which may be linked to decreased job satisfaction and performance, as well as increased stress levels and makes them feel isolated and lonely (Mohapatra et al., 2023).

Employees on a work from home set up experience mental/emotional exhaustion caused by long-term stress, usually as a result of excessive work or personal responsibilities (Sarwar et al., 2023; Shobhika & Joshi, 2023). Yanagihara and Koga (2023) suggested that flexible scheduling enables employees to have certain autonomy in planning their daily lives, including both employee and family activities according to their needs. Ipsen et al. (2021) claimed that some employees lack space at their home and if they have kids at home, it may come across as a challenge to find a quiet and suitable workspace for working parents. Moreover, Bodhe (2021) mentioned that a good living space where they reside has a significant role for their mental, physical and well-being and this includes “soothing color scheme, aesthetically appealing interiors, the amount of sunlight the comes in etc.” The workplace’s design counts a lot as it triggers creativity and assists employee to effectively perform his duty with higher productivity. On the other hand, Bloom (2014) stated that one-third of the productivity increase was due to having a quieter environment which makes it easier to process calls.

According to Mulen et al. (2012), there are different types of destructive factors, such as decision to engage in other activities during the working hours, unexpected visitors, smartphone use, social media and urgent family issues. The working atmosphere is not as expected and the atmosphere of the house is not like an office, distracted by social media and other entertainment, and so on (Purwanto et al., 2020; Ipsen et al., 2021). Decreased overall physical and mental well-being after WFH were associated with physical exercise, food intake, communication with coworkers, children at home, distractions while working, adjusted work hours, workstation set-up and satisfaction with workspace indoor environmental factors (Xiao et al., 2021; Bodhe et al., 2021).

2.3. Communication as a problem in a work from home set-up

WFH is not sustainable in the Philippines because of poor telecommunication connectivity as a top problem (Seva et al., 2021). Moreover, many employees owing high-quality gadgets impacts on their productivity (Atianashie & Adaobi, 2022). Accordingly, the largest shift for new remote workers is how they interact and communicate with their coworkers (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). The biggest change is their location.

2.4. Employee mismatch between job industries

In addition, a mismatch between different job industries and employee's capabilities, resources, or needs can result to work-related stress that can have an impact on their productivity. There were employees that are at ease at collaborating and producing online, while those in industries that agreements are normally done with handshakes in a conference room might not feel the same (Ehsan & Ali, 2019; Tamunomiebi & Mezeh, 2021).

2.5. Finance as a factor in a work from home set-up

The survey conducted by business.org in 2021 as reported by Agar (2022) showed that “56% of newly WFH respondents spend more on their electricity bills than before. It doesn’t stop with keeping the lights on, though.” It points out that many employees are worrying about

having high electricity bills that have a high impact on their productivity. In addition, the study conducted by Crosbie and Moore (2004) showed that working for long hours among traditional and professional homeworkers reflects the difference in their incomes, and that many of those in the traditional home working occupations revealed that they had to spend very long hours of work due to their low pay rate rates. Michael and Smith (2015) mentioned that when organizations do not have clear policies and limitations for those purchases such as technology devices which are provided to their employees, this may be an additional expense to them, however this gives high impact on the employee's productivity.

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive study approach to attain the purpose of the researchers to discover challenges faced by the employees who are working from home and its impact on their productivity. There were 400 randomly selected respondents in Metro Manila who are currently under the work from home environment protocol of their jobs. Their insights and testimonies served as evidence and source in analyzing the productivity rate of the employees under the work from home environment.

3.1. Theoretical framework

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model is an occupational stress model that asserts that strain occurred due to an imbalance between the individual's demands and the resources available to meet those demands. According to the current version of this model, increased job demands result in strain and health impairment (the health impairment process), while increased resources result in increased motivation and productivity (the motivational process). The JD-R model can manage human resources in organizations because it can be applied to various occupations to improve employee well-being and job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The JD-R Model assumes two processes: the energetic process in which the individual is worn out by high job demands, and the motivational process whereby the lack of resources results to mental withdrawal or disengagement (Bakker et al., 2004).

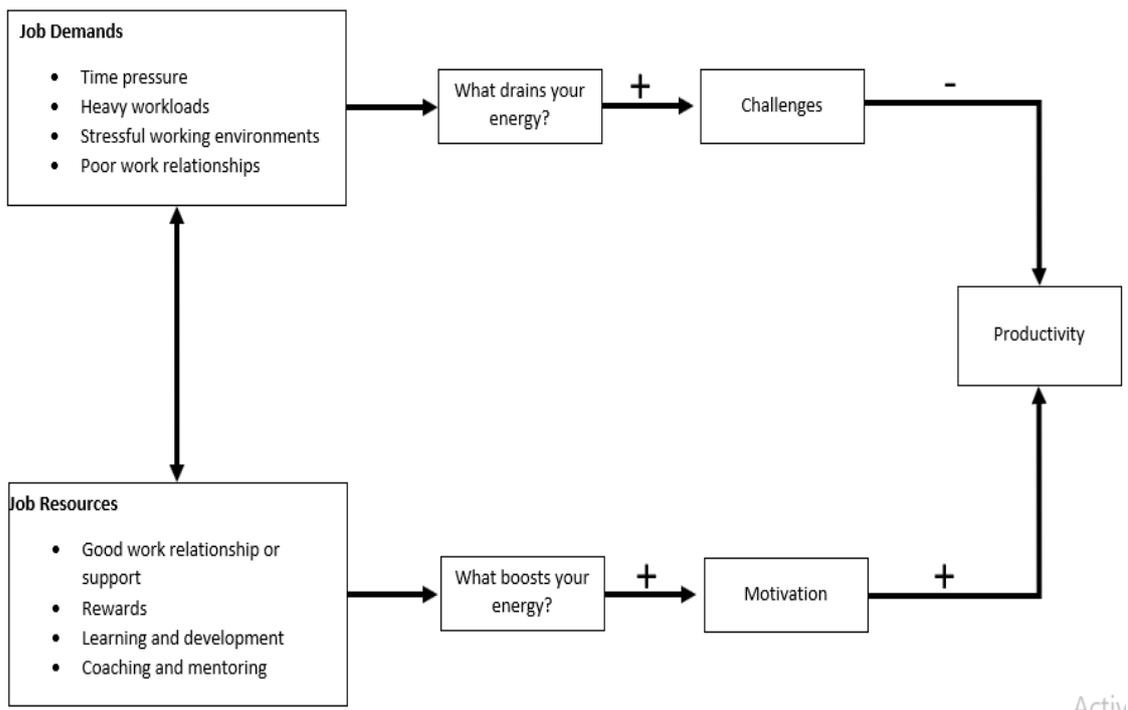
3.2. Conceptual framework

This conceptual framework is a contribution to advance the cognizance of the work from home environment influences productivity. Figure 1 showed that there are two main variables, job demands and job resources, that classify an employees' working condition. Job demands are the physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of a job that require physical and/or psychological effort from an individual. They are associated with a physical and/or psychological cost and can include time pressures, heavy workloads, stressful working environments, role ambiguity and poor work relationships. On the other hand, job resources are the physical, psychological, social or organization factors that enable an individual to achieve goals and reduce stress.

The model asserts that employee well-being can be negatively impacted when job demands are high, and job resources are low, resulting in high strain and low motivation. Alternatively, when job demands are high and job resources are high, engagement and performance is improved, as illustrated in Figure 1.

3.3. Instrumentation

A researcher-made instrument was used to generate information from the respondents which was subjected for reliability and validity shown in Table 1. Findings revealed that all (33) items used in the study generated an acceptable value both for Composite Reliability test and Cronbach's Alpha which should be $\geq .6$. Composite reliability test and Cronbach's alpha are used to measure the instrument's internal consistency in scale items. This means that all items in the survey instrument are reliable and valid to be used for the current study.



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Figure 1. Research paradigm: job demand-job resources model
(based from Bakker & Demerouti, 2017)

Table 1. Instrument’s validity and reliability test

Variables	Cronbach’s alpha	Composite reliability
Emotional aspect	0.811	0.889
Social aspect	0.694	0.804
Environmental aspect	0.838	0.883
Financial aspect	0.703	0.821
Emotional aspect	0.807	0.881
Environmental aspect	0.605	0.771
Financial aspect	0.807	0.887
Social aspect	0.858	0.914

4. Results and discussions

As shown in Table 2, the emotional aspect such as job burnout, anxiety and social isolation are very challenging for employees ($\bar{x}=3.62$); environmental aspects which include employees’ workplace setting, social features and physical condition to perform their job at their home are challenging ($\bar{x}= 3.33$). On the financial aspect, remote work on employees' financial situation, monthly bills, owning equipment, and unexpected expenses, are perceived to be challenging for the respondents to engage in work from home ($\bar{x}=3.24$). Lastly, the social aspect where employees tend to communicate less with their coworkers decreases the social interactions during working hours and lack of time with family are also challenging ($\bar{x}=3.36$).

Table 2. Respondents' challenges in engaging work-from-home environment

Challenges	HC	VC	C	FC	SC	Total	\bar{x}	Verbal interpretation
	5	4	3	2	1			
<i>f</i>								
1. Emotional/Mental aspect								
a. Social isolation	110	113	82	60	35	400	3.51	Very challenging
b. Anxiety	109	116	95	58	22	400	3.58	Very challenging
c. Job burnout	151	103	77	46	23	400	3.90	Very challenging
Overall weighted mean							3.62	Very challenging
2. Environmental aspect								
a. Too many distractions (e.g. social media, environmental noise)	169	111	63	35	22	400	3.92	Very challenging
b. Childcare	87	52	54	47	160	400	2.65	Challenging
c. Physical workspace	89	83	101	74	53	400	3.20	Challenging
d. Internet connectivity / signal	126	100	79	58	37	400	3.55	Very challenging
Overall weighted mean							3.33	Challenging
3. Financial aspect								
a. High-cost monthly bills	119	108	84	47	42	400	3.54	Very challenging
b. Providing of own office supplies	78	96	81	39	106	400	3.00	Challenging
c. Unexpected expenses (maintenance or repairs of equipment, emergencies)	101	86	75	54	84	400	3.16	Challenging
Overall weighted mean							3.24	Challenging
4. Social aspect								
a. Communication with other co-workers.	119	115	77	59	30	400	3.58	Very challenging
b. I do not have enough time for my family due to workload.	81	81	108	72	58	400	3.13	Challenging
c. It's hard for me to interact with my co-workers during online meetings.	101	103	85	57	54	400	3.35	Challenging
Overall weighted mean							3.36	Challenging
Legend:	5 -(HC) Highly challenging, 2 -(FC) Fairly challenging		4 -(VC) Very challenging, 1 - (SC) Somewhat challenging		3 -(C) Challenging,			

Table 3. Summary-respondents' impact on productivity in terms of the different aspects

Aspects impacting productivity	HI	VMI	MI	FI	NI	Total	\bar{x}	VI
	5	4	3	2	1			
<i>f</i>								
A. Social aspect								
I am communicating with my co-worker less	88	89	125	67	31	400	3.34	Moderate impact
B. Environmental aspect								
I get easily distracted by noise and social media	141	99	62	48	50	400	3.58	Very much impact
C. Financial aspect								
I am worried about having a high electricity bill	117	96	97	55	33	400	3.53	Very much impact
D. Emotional or Mental aspect								
I am experiencing mental/emotional exhaustion caused by long-term stress, usually as a result of excessive work and/or personal responsibilities	163	67	110	32	28	400	3.87	Very much impact
Overall weighted mean							3.58	Very much impact
Legend:	5 -(HI) High impact	4 -(VMI) Very much impact	3 -(MI) Moderate impact					
	2 -(FI) Fair impact	1 -(NI) No impact at all						

Table 4. ANOVA testing on the significant difference of the respondents' rating of the challenges they encountered in a WFH environment and its impact to their job productivity when grouped according to profile

Demographics	WFH challenges	f-value	p-value	Decision	Remarks
Age	Challenges	1.850	0.088	Failed to reject Ho	Not significant
	Impact on job productivity	1.453	0.193	Failed to reject Ho	Not significant
Gender	Challenges	0.21	0.979	Failed to reject Ho	Not significant
	Impact on job productivity	1.236	0.292	Failed to reject Ho	Not significant
Job position	Challenges	0.59	0.981	Failed to reject Ho	Not significant
	Impact on job productivity	1.644	0.179	Failed to reject Ho	Not significant
Job industry	Challenges	1.897	0.038	Reject Ho	Significant
	Impact on job productivity	1.911	0.037	Reject Ho	Significant

Table 3 presented the summary of the respondents' perceived impact of the work-from-home mode in terms of social, environmental, financial, and emotional or mental aspects. Statement for each aspect which got the highest mean was also shown which generated an overall weighted mean of 3.58 and verbally interpreted as with very much impact.

On the social aspect, in which employees talk less with coworkers moderately impacts their productivity. The environmental aspect encompasses the employees' work environment, social characteristics, and physical ability to conduct their job at home had a very much impact on their productivity. Likewise, on the financial aspect, monthly expenses and utility costs have a very much impact on their productivity. Lastly, the emotional aspect revealed that isolation,

emotional weariness, and a lack of social opportunities all have a very much impact on their productivity.

As shown in Table 4, age got an <0.088 p-value on the challenges while <0.193 on the impact on job productivity; gender got <0.979 p-value on the challenges and <0.292 in the impact on job productivity; job position got a <0.981 p-value in the challenges and <0.179 on the impact on job productivity. All these three (3) aspects in both challenges and impact of productivity got a p-value higher than 0.05 level of significance which means that there is no significant difference on the respondents' rating on the challenges that they encountered in a work from home environment and shows no difference on the impact to their job productivity. On the other hand, job industry generated a p-value of <0.037 and <0.038 in challenges and on the impact on job productivity respectively which means that both rejected the hypothesis and shows significant difference. It can be assumed that more employees working remotely in different industries experienced challenges that, if not addressed, can have a negative influence on productivity.

5. Conclusion

It can be assumed that socio-demographic variable such as age reveals that younger generations are more productive and can stand out for their technology use since they grew up with modernized technology and have an expectation for virtual tools to be readily available at the workplace. By connecting the four aspects of how all gathered employees view the challenges of working at home and their impact on their productivity, it can also be concluded that if the company where the employees work was not well-managed and unobserved onto how they cope with stress in dealing working at home, the challenges of working at home would have an impact on their productivity. Despite the fact that many employees have evolved on their coping mechanisms for stress in the workplace, dealing with the stress of the job at home is a completely different situation. As a result of working from home, employees have been anxious, stressed, and psychologically drained because they are unable to interact with their coworkers or friends, which led to be very impactful to their productivity. Furthermore, even after the pandemic, it is likely that many organizations will continue to provide a hybrid work-from-home option, emphasizing the significance of developing more successful WFH policies. Companies can take numerous steps to mitigate the negative consequences of remote working both during and after the epidemic, including developing hybrid WFH policies, investing in novel technologies, offering daycare services, defining concrete work hours, and addressing mental health.

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