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EMPLOYEES' PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS FROM "WORK FROM HOME" DURING COVID-19

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Abstract:

COVID-19 is a pandemic with profound public health consequences both in terms of morbidity and mortality and hence demands urgent action for people's health, also an unprecedented challenge for our economy. Predominantly the consequences of the pandemic for industrial and corporate sectors are unpredictable. Economists are convinced that we are heading for a significant economic downturn; adapting prompt measures to sustain the economy, and ultimately our nation. One such measure Covid-19 pandemic has enforced on us is the 'Work from Home' (WFH) model. This has become officially mandatory and strictly enforced rule in the post covid-19 era, which is emerging from all sectors, viz., from Information Technology to teaching sectors. WFH concept is new to majority of the employees, as the COVID 19 has forced almost all the employees of all the sectors to work from home for the first time. Remote working conditions and adoption of digital channels have expanded the surface of industries, making any remote access possible with new techniques and technology. As the workforce is experiencing new environment, this paper attempts to address the benefits and drawbacks of the employees working from home when compared to Working in office. The study found that benefits of working from home is entirely dependent on relaxed space at home, presence of their loved ones at home, quiet ambience at home and uninterrupted internet connectivity. Most of the respondents are also of opinion that, they do prefer to "Work FromAnywhere".

1,Introduction:

As we all know, history is divided into two periods: Before the Common Era or BCE and Common Era or CE. But our experience in the year 2020 can very well represent BCE for “Before Covid-19 Epidemic” and CE for the “Covid-19 Epidemic”. Our lives have been turned upside down during this catastrophe, Covid-19 and its aftermath can be viewed both as a long pause on the economic growth or as an opportunity to reset, recalibrate and rethink on new normalcy. The CE situation has made many organizations to allow certain employees to telecommunicate or “work from home” the contemporary phrase often heard frequently nowadays. This “work-from-home” concept got a big push from the current global corona virus pandemic and the underlying primary principle behind this is to avoid spread of the epidemic. Even before COVID-19 became a factor, increasing numbers of people have been saying goodbye to their tedious commute to work. Appreciating the ever-evolving technologies like Skype, Slack, Zoom, Google Hangouts, authenticator apps, and cloud computing which gave a new definition that “it's no longer necessary to be in an office full-time to be a productive member of the team”. In fact, many types of jobs can be executed just as effectively from a home based office.

WFH is considered to be ideal for those employees of BPOs, teaching sector and generally who do not face their customers/clientele. The employer is expected to benefit from leverage of office space and reducing the concurrent expenses incurred and eventually expects increased productivity from this model. The employees benefit by avoiding time lost in traffic; instead can spend that time engaging in productivity. Companies with work-from-anywhere procedure can boost employee productivity and reduce turnover, thus lower organizational costs. According to recent research carried out by Harvard Business School, “Telecommuting workers with multifaceted jobs with less collaboration or social support can perform far better than their office-based counterparts”. According to another study, “there are also some potential disadvantages along with job benefits, as some employees may be distracted, or perceived to be distracted in their home environment”. Other disadvantages may include myth of productivity, myth of saving, reduced sense of team cohesion as “work from home” employees feel less connected with their fellow workers, and there is a perception on reducing annual appraisals and finally, absence of ideas and innovations that comes through meeting people on job.

This article will assess select secondary research, as well as high-level primary research, in order to measure the effectiveness of “working from home” as a job benefit.

This article looks to conduct a pulse-check on working from home as a job benefit for select employees, and to provide some thoughts on whether this benefit is perceived to add value to the employee and the employer. Focus of this article is only on the employees working for organizations, and not self-employed individuals.

This research has a working hypothesis that both categories of employees and employers find working from home an attractive job benefit; however, specific insight may challenge adoption to new normal.

1. Objective of the Study

To analyze, understand the following objectives:

1. To know the opinion of respondents (employees and employers) towards “work from home”
2. To assess the benefits and drawbacks of “work from home” concept

3. Hypothesis of the study

H1: Employees’ willing to “work from home” is dependent on gender

H2: Employees’ willing to “work from home” is dependent on presence of their family and loved ones at home.

4. Literature Review:

4.1 Development Surge– post Covid-19

Looking at the overall market in India, more employers are allowing employees to work from home on a regular basis. Indeed, after five months into the experiment, some organizations have identified the pros and cons, which comprise reduced scope for innovation. They appear keen on getting offices throbbing with people again, once the pandemic is under control. This group includes giant and the minute companies, cutting across technology services, manufacturing and food companies.

Infosys Ltd., India’s second-largest IT exporter has over 95% of its workers working remotely at the moment. Depending on when the covid-19 caseloads ebb, the company plans to get employees back to offices in a phased manner. Richard Lobo, Executive Vice President at Infosys says that in any work, there are individual components and places where employees need to collaborate. The societal capital is compromised when working from home over a long period.

Krishna Raghavan, HR manager at Flipkart says, in many ways, making hybrid systems work will begin with instituting the right culture. Remote working has always been part of the e-commerce firm’s working culture well before the pandemic and now, this is the default option till end of 2020. “We are non-hierarchical, very bottom up driven in terms of innovation. Therefore, we were able to respond in a very resilient manner to the crisis,” Flipkart also evaluates performance in terms of outcome or what an employee delivers.

The Mint-Bain India CEO survey June 2020, records that 105 CEOs were polled on the economy and business scenarios, underlined the temporary nature of remote working. Less than one-third of the CEOs saw over 25% their workforce continue to work from home, post covid-19. In short, remote work is the present, not the permanent future. The long-term outlook is work-from-office or a combined model where a minority works out of home.

Srikumar Misra, Founder of the “Milk Mantra Dairy Pvt Ltd.,” a dairy products company based in Odishastates that, “Our operations are even more intensive than FMCG manufacturing. We are exploring WFH for a couple days every two weeks, maybe. Otherwise, we want people to be back at work,” is the future plan.

Real estate advisory Knight Frank (India) Pvt Ltd. surveyed 1,600 technology professionals in India and found that 30% of them reported deterioration in productivity and work performance while working from home. A PwC study in the United States suggested that productivity during the pandemic was shored up by super achievers that masked a fall among the rest who struggled with a combination of physical and emotional issues while working from home

4.2 Expertise and Equipment

Technology has proved to be a strong factor enabling WFH concept benefit more for organizations, as improved broadband access for residences enabling many categories of employees to work effortlessly from their homes. Technology tools such as email, video conferencing, screen sharing, file sharing, VPN (Virtual Private Network), and many more tools help to enable an option to work from home.

Nasscom' (Software Company) President Debjani Ghosh' shares his views to Economic Time, "This is one of those game-changing moments, it is going to be a strategic inflection point for the industry and will significantly boost India's competitive advantage. It will boost India's position as a strategic IT hub for the world, bringing in more investments. It will benefit companies across the board- anyone who has to use company network for remote working, IT services, BPO, MNCs."

Wipro chairman Rishad Premji' stand on WHF, "This is truly long term, progressive thinking by the Government which will make our technology industry much more competitive. Working from anywhere has become the new reality".

At the same time, Tech Mahindra CEO CP Gurnani called it a much-needed reform for the IT industry.

WNS CEO Keshav Murugesh said this would catapult Indian IT and BPM to the next level of growth and lead to job creation and development of small towns and cities in tier 3 and 4 locations. Genpact CEO Tiger Tyagarajan said the focus on making India a tech hub is incredibly timely and will benefit the country.

While the government had earlier relaxed work from home guidelines till the end of the year 2020, the new announcement will tremendously reduce the compliance burden of the BPM industry. The registration requirement for OSPs has been done away with altogether. The BPM industry engaged in data-related work have been completely taken out of the ambit of the definition of an OSP. Besides, requirements such as deposit of bank guarantees, frequent reporting obligations, penal provisions among others have also been done away with.

4.3 Apparent Benefits

A number of companies appear to have tilted towards a hybrid working model, already. RPG Enterprises is allowing all sales employees to work from home permanently. Flipkart, the Essar Group, and the Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) among other corporate are all contemplating the hybrid approach.

While those working in plants, warehouses, the supply-chain, and in the hotels will need to be physically present, professionals in corporate offices can afford to be working remotely, while the front-line staff will be risking their health.

In any case, there are many other questions around the workability of the hybrid model. On Quora, a social media platform, someone queried: "What does it feel like to work from home?" There were 89 responses discussing both the positives and the shortcomings in great detail

Vishal Mishra from Kolkata, one of the respondents, said he could save time spent on public transport. "I used to waste two hours to reach the office and then get back to my flat," he wrote. "You can save a lot of money," he went on. "I used to spend a lot on junk food throughout the day during my office hours and even after office. Now, I get homemade food." The time that it takes for an employee to travel from home to the office can be spent on being productive. An organization by the name of Telework approximates employees that work from home save an estimated 15-days of time, which would have been spent commuting (e.g. driving, buses, subways, etc...) (Rapoza, 2013).

Another responses, listed the cons. "I face a lot of connectivity issues while connecting to the office server, which takes a long time to get fixed", "I am not able to concentrate, that results in extended shift every day from 10–11 hours."

The lack of concentration worries executives. India Inc never had a culture of WFH and few Indian families can afford a study. WFH could be even more challenging if one is living in a joint family. In the short-term, work from home can give an impression that productivity has improved. However, productivity could come down because of the diversion and distractions at home.

AS Mehta, president and director, JK Paper Ltd., a paper manufacturer, said. "Most professionals live in a two-bedroom flat. They could be working on the dining table or on the bed. Besides family and Internet-related distractions, professionals also don't have ergonomic furniture at home. The spouse, children, maid all work in the same areas. How will you concentrate?" is an unsolved query.

Mehta said that about 70% of the employees are coming into the office; the rest could return when they are comfortable. Best Buy's average productivity had increased 35% through its flexible work program.

British Telecom estimates productivity increased 20% through telecommuting.

Alpine Access, one of the nation's largest all-virtual employers, attributes a 30% increase in sales and 90% reduction in customer complaints to its home-based agents.

American Express teleworkers handled 26% more calls and produced 43% more business than their office-based counterparts..." (Rapoza, 2013)

4.4 Distinguished Challenges

For any kind of benefit there is a range of insight, which includes several possible challenges. It is keen to notice that some of these are perceptual based challenges that may not meet the facts.

1) Employers perception. The Microsoft whitepaper “Work without Walls” indicated one of the greatest challenges associated to employees working from home is the perception from a company’s management. Many managers are more comfortable when they are able to witness their employees’ work first-hand. “Business leaders assume employees who work remotely and take advantage of the policy are not really working. This is because of the loss of control. Employers lose direct oversight and cannot witness productivity firsthand” (Kruse, 2012). Managers who set specific, measurable goals for all employees are more likely to have increased trust for any employees they select to work from home (Kruse, 2012).

2) Self-discipline. Not all employees are a perfectly fit for “work from home” model. Work from home does require self-discipline, and must avoid distractions at home. As with any benefit there are employees that will not use the benefit properly and set a bad example (Russell, 2013).

3) Face-to-face contact. Employees that “work from home” will often feel that they are missing out on face-to-face contact, including teamwork. There are several technology applications that can help counter-balance this aspect. Additionally, employees that work from home may find it helpful to make occasional trips to the office in order to engage in collaboration or networking opportunities (Russell, 2013).

4) Visibility. The situation implies that employees well suited for working from home work longer hours than their counter-parts that are in the office, however, it can be more difficult for that work to be visible (Russell, 2013). Employees can improve their visibility by increasing their precision around communication (Healy, 2013).

5) Work / Life Balance. Although working from home can help many employees achieve a better work / life balance, it can also make it more stringent to do so. “Working from employees” can complicate their process by no longer providing a physical separation between work and home. Employees who work from home may neglect to take breaks, or are not as structured on what time to end their work day (Russell, 2013).

5. Primary Research

5.1 Research Methodology

Research Design: Primary research was conducted through online survey. Secondary research was conducted via business related periodicals, newspapers, journals and articles, website references. The primary research was conducted through anonymous descriptive online survey by disbursing a structured questionnaire through Google Forms.

Research Tools: Results were exported to spreadsheets, reviewed and analyzed. Rating related questions were tallied and analyzed, including the average score based on the respondent size, deriving the percentage of the total response per question. Open-ended questions were analyzed for key words and consistent themes.

Sample Design:

Total of 55 responses was received, out which 5 responses were incomplete and thus not included in the study. A total of **42** survey responses were received for employees who do “work from home” on behalf of an employer. Respondents reflected in this survey were employees of Education & Training industry, Information technology, BPO & KPO, real estate projects, sales, marketing and insurance.

Our study includes 31 respondents are from teaching industry, 3 Software IT employees, 3 Civil Engineers and 5 belong to other sectors - employed as administrator, Managers, coverage executive and senior executive.

The study includes 48 percent of males and 52 percent of females. 28 percent of the respondents belong to the age group of 20 to 25 years; 38 percent of the respondents are belong to the age group of 26 to 30 years; 14 percent belongs to the age group of 31 to 35 years; 10 percent belongs to 35 to 40 years; 6 percent belongs to 41 to 45 years and 4 percent belongs to 46 to 50 years.

Employers were asked to self-select if they have employees working from home in their organization. A total of **8** survey responses received from employers who supervise their employees that work from home. Respondents reflected in this survey were employees of information technology, BPO & KPO, real estate projects, sales, marketing, insurance, and Education & Training industry.

Specific questions for both the employees and employers surveys can be found in the Appendix A.

5.2 Results – Employees that work from home

The below results reflect that respondents seem to have very positive perceptions on “work from home” concept. All results reflected average response which is greater than ‘3’, exceeding the neutral state. Respondents have a self-perception that they lose social-interactions with their fellow employees, which aligns to the secondary research that working from home does require more self-driven components. It is interesting to note that the lowest ranking score is to be seen around “Reducing Annual Appraisals”. The results for this question have also been summarized in Figure 4 to highlight the distribution of workforce among the respondents. This observation aligns with the secondary research that employeewho “work from home” feels that their work is hardly notable, or that their visibility is zero when compared to those employees in the office, resulting in reduction of their annual appraisal benefits.

Over half of the employees (21 out of 42 respondents, or 54.76%) indicated that their employer should also work-from-home. The comment analyses that those respondents suggest a trend that employee feels more comfortable working from home when his or her employer “works from home” as well. The open-ended comment analysis indicated that the location of an employer had no impact on the employees’ perception of job satisfaction.

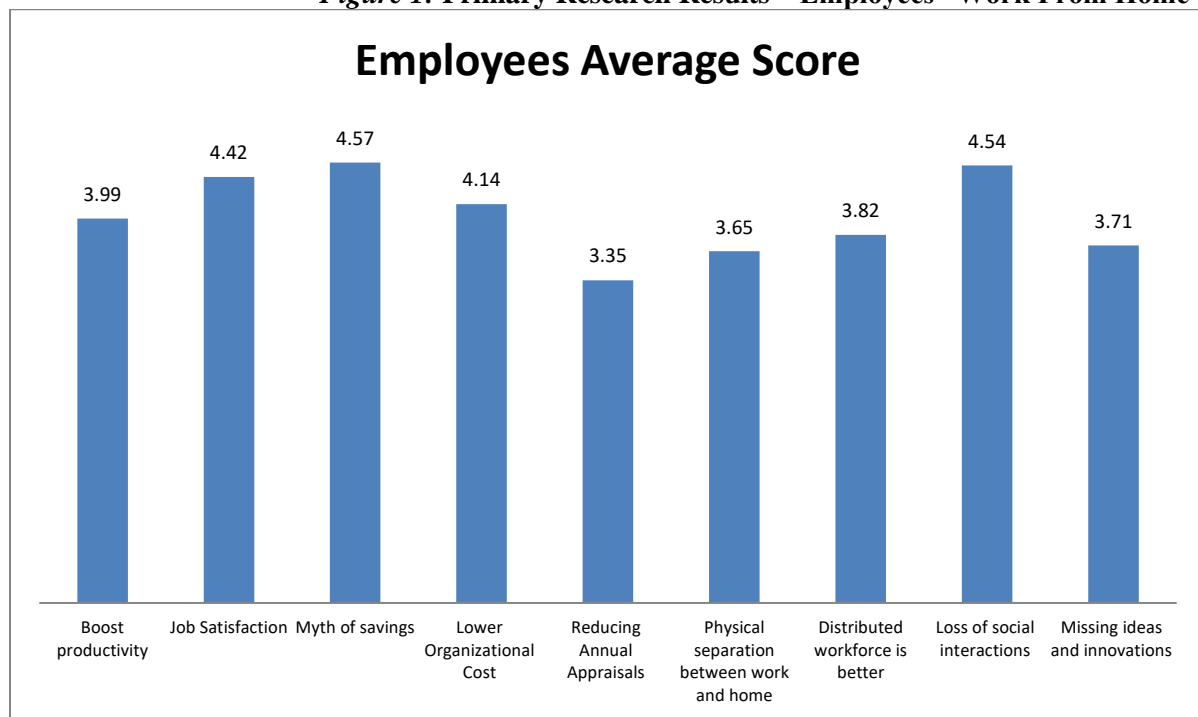
A huge majority of the employees felt that they are much disciplined to initiate their work on time; however, many felt that working from home, compels them to work for longer hours compared to their regular office timing. This does support the secondary research that suggests working from home will increase productivity, which will likely see a projection due to these compulsory increased working hours.

Table 1: Primary Research Results – Employees “Work From Home”

	Average	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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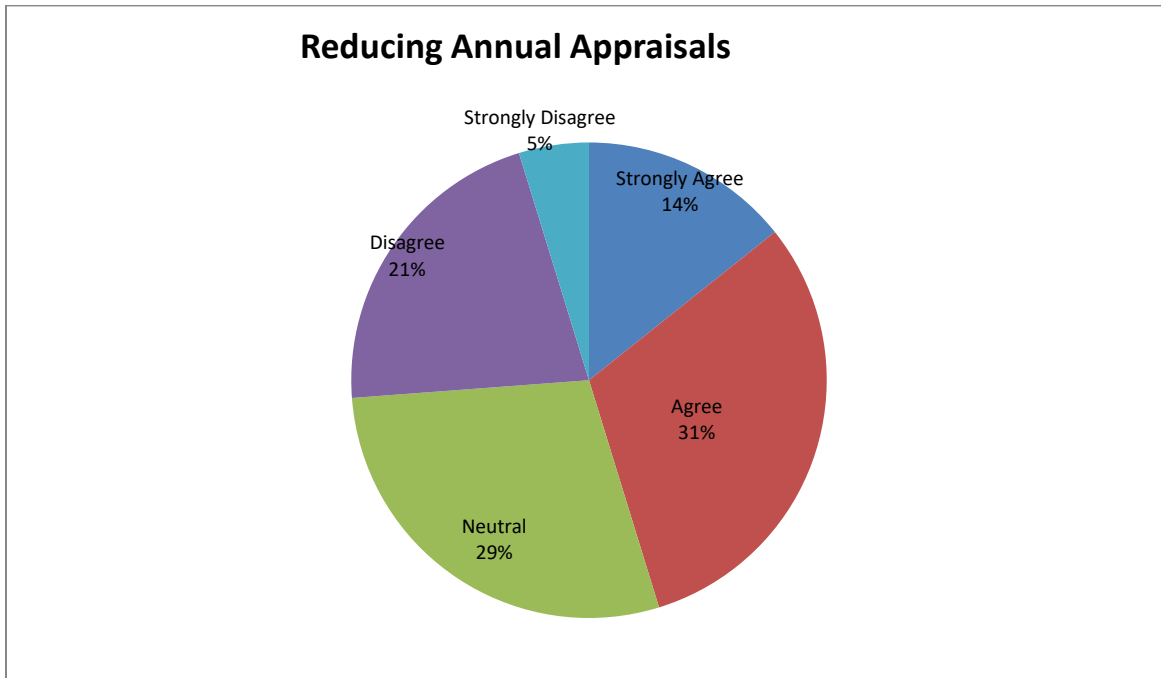
Myth of Productivity	3.99	16	13	8	5	0
Job Satisfaction	4.42	24	12	4	1	1
Myth of savings	4.57	28	11	2	1	0
Lower Organizational Cost	4.14	21	11	6	4	0
Reducing Annual Appraisals	3.35	6	13	12	9	2
Physical separation between work and home	3.65	14	12	4	9	3
Distributed workforce is better	3.82	12	17	6	6	1
Loss of social support	4.54	25	14	2	1	0
Missing ideas and innovations	3.71	8	17	11	6	0

Figure 1: Primary Research Results – Employees “Work From Home”



Source: Primary Data

Figure 2: Primary Research Results – Reducing Annual appraisal for Employees “Work From Home”



Source: Primary Data

The above Figure 2 infers that majority of the employees working from home agree that chances for reducing their annual appraisals remain strong from their perception.

5.3 Results – Employers who have employees working from home in their organization

Although the number of Employers is roughly 20% in this research compared to the respondent employees, only notable observation is that the average responses are lower across all questions. In this survey the lowest ranking question is actually around the employees’ “distributed workforce is better” while working from home. The employers commented that employees have the necessary discipline and adapting to the new-normal “work from home”; on the other hand, there is an emphasis that such WFH procedures will best-fit to specific type of senior executive level employees only.

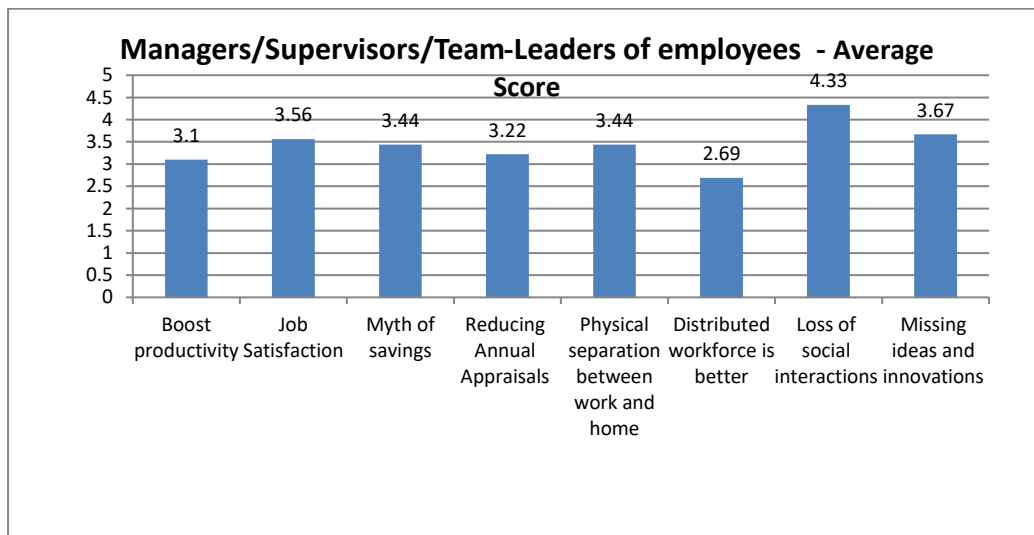
Employers were probed on implication on how organizations can improvise and better structure to ensure accomplishment when assigning specific employees to “work from home”. The comments were genuine that WFH option should be made available to that specific set of employees who have proven track records of skills in their service. Organizations must have clear expectations and stick to their vision and mission, such that they administer based on results. Proper planning and coordination in distributing the workforce will enhance better performances and increase productivity in WHF.

Table 2: Primary Research Results: Employers of employees that work from home

	Average	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly

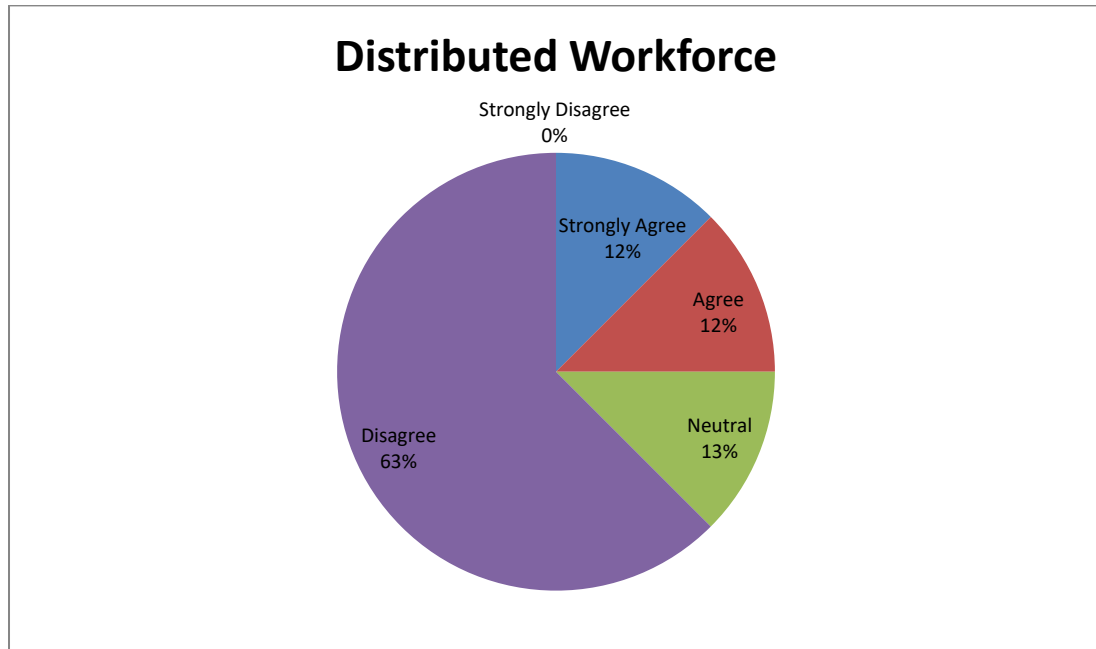
							Disagree
Boost productivity	3.1	0	4	1	3	0	0
Job Satisfaction	3.56	1	3	3	1	0	0
Myth of savings	3.44	1	3	2	2	0	0
Reducing Annual Appraisals	3.22	1	3	2	1	1	1
Physical separation between work and home	3.44	1	3	2	2	0	0
Distributed workforce is better	2.69	1	1	1	5	0	0
Loss of social interactions	4.33	3	5	0	0	0	0
Missing ideas and innovations	3.67	1	4	2	1	0	0

Figure 3: Primary Research Results: Employers of employees that work from home



Source: Primary Data

Figure 4: Primary Research Results: Employers opinion on Distributed Work-Force



Source: Primary Data

The above Figure 3 infers that majority of the Employers of employees WFH disagree to the opinion that WFH policy will best-fit to senior executive employees only and not the regular employees.

5.4 Testing the Hypothesis:

H1: The researchers try to find out whether an employee is willing to “work from home” is dependent on gender. Chi square test has been used in order to test this hypothesis.

On testing the hypothesis, p value obtained is 0.770, which is greater than 0.5 ($p > 0.5$), hence the alternative hypothesis is rejected and null hypothesis is accepted. The employees’ willingness to “work from home” is not dependent on gender. It is proven that gender of the respondent has not influenced the eagerness to “work from home”.

H2: The researchers tried to find out whether the employee is willing to work from home is dependent on having the presence of their family and loved ones at home. Chi square test has been used to test this hypothesis

It is found from the hypothesis testing that, p value obtained is 0.014, which is less than 0.5 ($p < 0.5$), hence the alternative hypothesis is accepted and null hypothesis is rejected. Hence the situation can be concluded as; the employee is willing to “work from home” is dependent on the presence of their family and loved ones at home. It is evident the most of employees having children (in particular) at home are not willing to work from home.

5.5 Respondents Statements extracted from questionnaire:

Opinions of respondent from various sectors: “Nature of the assigned work cannot be completed at home”. “Eye contact with the students is missing in WHF, which is essential understand the whether the student is listening”

Three respondents have stated that “Only Work-From-Office can give precise comprehensive results”, “unable to manage and balance work and personal life”, and finally “Work from home is very stressful”.

Majority of the respondents stated that, “Work from home need high speed and uninterrupted internet connectivity”.

6. Findings and Conclusion

6.1 Findings:

The primary research in this article follows the secondary research very well; proving the fact that many employees do have positive satisfaction associated with the flexibility to work from home.

Employers’ results seem equally relevant and at par with that of the employees’ responses. The primary research here also seems inline to secondary research that Employers’ will find difficulty in deciphering the effectiveness of employees who are not physically present in the same location. In general employer will find it beneficial to influence smart, measurable metrics to ensure their employees are up to the expectations of the organization.

It is derived from this analysis that Employers are finding it even more beneficial to use key performance indicators while dealing with WFH employees, in order to help increase confidence and visibility.

6.2 Conclusion:

Covid-19 world would be an opportunity for everyone to switch gears and make radical departure from the past to make economic growth ecologically sustainable. As organizations find themselves attempting to be more resourceful with their budgets, they may want to seriously evaluate on selecting skilled employees to work from home.

The employees must have designated functional workspace with the appropriate expertise; this includes the required latest technology, a dedicated workspace, ergonomic furniture and fixtures, high-speed internet connection, a workable schedule, and finally to connect with others after the day’s work. Employees have to sort out smart ways to deal with kids, pets, and other potential commotions.

Secret sauce added to this research: November 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that a series of measures aimed at furthering 'ease of doing business' and making India a tech hub. In line with this, the government of India simplified the Other Service Provider or OSP guidelines of the Telecom Department, a move that would reduce the compliance burdens of the IT companies. Leaders of the IT and BPO industry in India praised the government's move for relaxing guidelines in order to enable IT and BPO companies to adopt a “Permanent Work From Home

(WFH) and Work From Anywhere (WFA), calling it a game changer that could create millions of jobs in small towns and cities.

7. Limitations and further research

The source for primary research is not statistically representing all global employees and employers. Expanding this primary research would prolong to reveal additional facts and figures on the topic. Since the primary research is derived from the sample collected through online survey, authenticity of the data and related errors are inevitable.

Also the results of the present study provide several potential avenues of future research. It includes the differences in opinion of employees towards work from home across the Country. Due to COVID 19, employees of all the sectors are introduced to the concept of WFH home for the first time and hence comparative study of perception of employees towards WFH of different segments can be studied.

Further, performance evaluations of employees that work from home (full time) against those in the permanent office setting can be studied. The information on productivity data available in secondary research may help to highlight if employees are hardly notable, or that their visibility is zero when compared to those employees in the office

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