Assessing Employee's Mental Wellbeing during Telecommuting

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Abstract

Telecommuting has become the new norm because of COVID-19 pandemic which led to a national lockdown. Getting acquainted to the telecommuting took reasonable time for the employees as well as the employers. While nearly 90 percent of the employees worked from home, their wellbeing stood up as a concern for the employers. Maintaining the mental health of the employees has been a priority as only when the employees' mental health is good, they will be able to contribute their best to the organisation even when they work from home. Accordingly, when employees are mentally healthy, they become engaged to their job and ultimately it enhances their job satisfaction. In congruence to this concern, this research aims to do an in-depth literature review on the impact of work from home or telecommuting on the mental wellbeing of employees. The study has been done using existing research articles retrieved from Google Scholar, Elsevier, and Academia. Due to the dearth of the studies made on COVID-19 and mental health, the recent studies made on this pandemic have been reviewed. The results indicate that telecommuting or work from home had a negative effect on the mental health of the employees. This research has also suggested a few ways to improve mental health of the employees during work from home.

Keywords: COVID-19, Employees' mental health, Telecommuting, Wellbeing.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has entirely changed the routine that people used to live and work all over the world (1). The global lockdown due to the worldwide pandemic caused by the Coronavirus disease has shown a serious effect on the health as well as the economy of the whole world (2). The COVID-19 has become a major reason for the death of many people around the world and also for the collapse of the world market (3). With the fear of disease and

mandated lockdown imposed by the country's government, there was a shift in the work environment for the employees (4). The employees were made to work from home with the help of technology. Work from home helps to alleviate the health consequences which is caused by the Coronavirus disease. Information and Communication Technology has been a major device to cope up with the pandemic. So, Information and Communication Technology facilities has helped the countries to defend their economy level and at the same time safeguard their employees' health. Advances in Technology and communication helped the employees in working from home effectively and efficiently.

Business around India are adapting themselves to the lockdown led by the pandemic since they cannot stop serving their customers (5). During the nationwide lockdown, many Indian companies have enforced their employees to work from home. In India, COVID-19 pandemic has caused huge number of employees to stay at home and work (6). Compared to work from office, work from home was an easier option for the employees as there was no travel time involved, provides flexible working hours and also helps the employees to improve their work and life balance at the same time, however the risk of deteriorating mental health also comes along with work from home. Work from home also facilitated flexible work arrangements for the employees that helped the employees to juggle between work and life commitments (7).

Employees are the main assets of any organisation. Maintaining the physical as well as mental health of the employees has become one essential and urgent concern for the management. A suitable workplace plays a vital role in the contribution to the mental health of the employees (8). Work from home has an effect on one's mental health if followed for a longer duration as there is no clear boundaries that define the work from home timings. Work from home was so much of a sudden and hence, it was stressful for most of the employees. But as days passed by, the work from home became comfortable and improved productivity. In the early days of work from home, the employees felt lonely as they were deprived of any immediate support that they would receive in the workplace. Employees became vulnerable to financial and physical problems which indirectly led to the deterioration of their mental health during the Coronavirus disease pandemic (3). As a consequence of COVID-19, the employees felt unable to contribute quality time with their family and friends (9), whereas almost all employees felt that work from home has made their life easier because there was no travel which saves their time and money (10).

All over the world, surveys say that the employees' sleep patterns are disturbed due to working from home, and they experience low mental health. Since mental health is a major concern for the employees, nearly 80 percent of the employees are ready to quit their job if they feel that the job is ruining their mental health. In another survey made at national level, nearly 37 percent of the employees are suffering from issues related to mental health and wellbeing.

This article aims to study the association between mental health of the employees and the work from home setting. As mental health is the pivotal point for an employee's proper functioning, this study aims to do an in-depth literature survey on the impact of working from home on the mental health and further intends to extend the branch of knowledge on this topic.
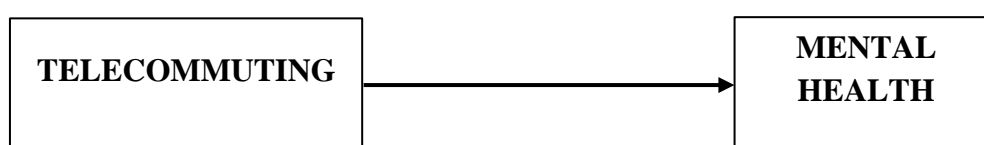
1. Conceptual Framework

Fig. 2.1: Conceptual framework of the study

Figure 2.1 provides the simple conceptual framework of the study which finds the relationship between telecommuting and mental health of the employees.

2. Objectives

➔ To do an in-depth literature survey assessing the mental health of the employees during the pandemic-imposed work from home.

➔ To assess the effect of working from home on the mental health of the employees.

3. Review of Literature

According to ([11]), the employees who work from home, suffered from social isolation. This social isolation was seen at peak during this lockdown imposed by the pandemic. In the organisational point of view, employees were said to be affected to a higher extent as the organisations ([3]). In a study conducted by ([12]), the researchers found out that in the beginning, employees were more prone to mental and physical health deterioration such as stress and burnout which eventually decreased overtime. The researcher also specified that when the organisations understand the negative impacts of work from home, they can establish better strategies to minimise the negative impacts. According to ([13]), work from home enhanced the mental wellbeing of the employees as there was technology that helped

employees to communicate so that it can alleviate the lonely feeling and the feel of being isolated from others. Research ([14]) stated that work from home will be effective and less impactful on the mental health if both the employers and the employees understand the method of working.

According to ([15]), the employers should permit employees to work flexibly during work from home, keeping in mind their working conditions and their feedback about the home working experiences. Work from home stress was mainly caused due to extended working hours than the specified working hours. During work from home, there was no fixed work schedules which was a reason for extending the work hours which caused stress that eventually had an impact on the mental health of the employees ([16]). In a cross-sectional study conducted by ([17]), work from home caused by the pandemic that resulted in reduction in salary for the employees gave rise to the increased stress levels especially for employees in private companies. As the employees were unable to bear the financial burdens during the pandemic, and salary reductions caused to be the major stress element. Study ([18]) identified that if the management quality was poor, that caused a decrease in the mental health of the employees and the managers hold a vital point in lessening the mental health impact by providing the employees with the needed information at the needed time.

In study ([19]), it was stated that employees' inner wellbeing of females is much finer than males during work from home, as women feel that there is more balanced social life for them and also, they feel less lonely than men. When the employees faced the need to adapt to a different work situation, it caused a stressful feeling in them, that decreased their mental wellbeing as stated by ([20]). In a study by ([22]), the researcher found that when employees worked from home, the sleeping time of the employees become longer which contributed positively to their mental health as well as physical health.

Working from home employees need more psycho social support, support from the community and also support from the organisation to keep up the employees' emotional as well as physical wellbeing as revealed in a study made by ([23]). Work ([24]) found out that stress during the pandemic was not only caused by the work-related factors, but by factors such as threat to health, being isolated, disturbed homework balance and also not enough physical activity to reduce stress. Authors of ([25]) stated that managers had the major responsibility of making sure that employees wellbeing is enhanced as the employee's wellbeing contributes majorly to the organisational productivity. Evidences from the study by ([26]) is that, gender

impacted the mental and physical health of the employees. Article ([27]) explored the mental and physical health and wellbeing of employees during work from home. There was mental stress, burnout and even job insecurity, but all these decreased over time. Employees became comfortable while working from home for a prolonged period. Study ([21]) has done a phenomenological investigation into the mental health of employees during work from home. The researchers found that five factors related to work from home namely technical, work related, other than work related, communication and productivity factors impacted the mental health during COVID-19.

In assessment of the mental health of workers during work from home, ([28]) found that employees feel that work from home offers better flexibility in their work and so their work performance was higher with comparatively less impact on their mental health. During the initial days of work from home imposed because of the pandemic, the mental health of the employees dropped to a greater extent. The employees were depressed and anxious ([29]). Built in environment of the house or the room in which the employees sit and work, also plays a role as the contributor to the mental health of the employees. If the setting is poor, the employees exhibit severe depression symptoms and also their work performance tends to worsen due to the physical work setting as stated by ([30]). Study ([31]) reported that workers overall reported a decline in their mental as well as physical health as work from home induced a decrease in physical activity, higher intake of junk food, lacking communication with colleagues and also more distractions other than work issues.

4. Approaches Followed in Assessing Employee's Mental Wellbeing

Asking many questions to employees about their working from home patterns and the various issues they face while working from home can be a good approach to assessing employee's mental health while working from home. Whether the employees have a proper work setting at home must be checked so that the physical health deterioration is not caused which will in turn cause mental health problems. Managers can build a good connection with employees so that whenever the employees work from home, they will freely share their issues or problems if they face anything.

5. Challenges Faced in Telecommuting

- Employees work alone at home or alone at a room which sometimes make them feel isolated and lonely, which will cause stress.

- Proper telecommuting policy should be framed by the organisation which pops up as a challenge during telecommuting.

- Employees perform careless behaviours while in work from home as they are not being supervised.

- Technical problems arise like IT glitches, hardware problems, application and software issues that hinder the working of employees during telecommuting.

- Telecommuting has a lot of distractions that come along; such as family, family problems, etc.

- Creating a clear boundary with the work and life becomes difficult for employees during telecommuting.

6. Discussions

This study aimed at exploring the effect that working from home has on the mental health and wellbeing of the employees. Employees mental health was at risk when the organisations announced that employees should work from home. During the initial stages of the pandemic-imposed work from home, stress and anxiety started proliferating slowly for the employees and put their mental health prone to jeopardy. Employees felt isolated, no proper communication was possible and prolonged hours of work which stood up as a cause of deterioration in mental health of the employees. In the present study, the results identified that mental health was negatively affected while working from home but as days passed by, the employees felt little comfortable with working from home and so it had no or little effect on their mental health. These findings were in consistence with ([27]) who has stated that employees were prone to deterioration of mental health in the initial days whereas over time, there was lesser negative impact on the mental health of the employees as compared to the starting stage of work from home.

The study also found out that main reason for negative effect on the mental health was the prolonged working hours. As employees are working at home, employers tend to take advantage of the employees and make them work for extended work hours that disturbs the mental health of the employees. The findings were in congruence with the research results explored by ([15]) in which the researcher has found that working more than the specified work hours causes stress among the employees. The other finding which was identified in the study was in accordance with the study made by ([31]) that revealed that as employees sat and work in the same place for a longer time, there was no physical activity, eating junk food and distractions other than work.

7. Findings

Table 1. Findings

AUTHORS AND YEAR	FINDINGS
Somasundaram et al., 2022	Employees were prone to deterioration of mental health in the initial days whereas over time, there was lesser negative impact on the mental health of the employees as compared to the starting stage of work from home
Michinov et al., 2022	Working more than the specified work hours causes stress among the employees
Xiao et al., 2021	Employees sat and work in the same place for a longer time, there was no physical activity, eating junk food and distractions other than work.

8. Suggestions

From the researcher point of view, few suggestions are provided that might help the organisation to enable their employees to save their mental health from being depreciation:

- The employees should not be made to work for extended work hours except in case of emergencies.
- The employees should be given the required time for their personal and family matters.
- The organisations should understand and support their employees' situation when they work from home.
- Employees should be provided assurance about their job so that they feel secure.
- Communications should be made clear and effective even when they are not physically present in office.

9. Conclusion

The main motive of the study is to assess the mental health of the employees when they work from home. The study results reveal that the employees' mental health was negatively impacted by work from home due to various factors like prolonged working hours, no physical activity, reduction in salary, no proper and immediate communication, and distractions in their home. But if the employers support their employees and both understand the proper method of working, the stress levels and depression will be reduced, and in turn that will not affect their mental health negatively. Employees are the main assets of the organisation; for their good

productivity, their mental health plays a pivotal role and hence, the management and the employer should ensure that the mental wellbeing of the employees is kept up so that it will benefit the organisation.

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