

WORK FROM HOME AND THE YOUNG WORKFORCE OF INDIA IN TIMES OF COVID-19- A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The year 2020 has witnessed one of the biggest crises of mankind, with the Coronavirus disease affecting more than a tenth of the world population. As the spread of this virus increased, countries resorted to various safety precautions such as home quarantining, social distance etc. With these cautionary measures in place the social life of individuals and the work-life of employees faced a massive instability. Organizations started to shut down on a temporary basis, leading to the work from home norm which slowly became the 'new normal'. The study attempts to explore the same in context with the Indian youth. This work is basically a window as to how employees in different sectors of the country are managing to cope up with this new normal of working from home. 50 respondents spread across different sectors were interviewed on their job roles, technological intervention in such a situation, psychological impact and their views on the economy of the country. From struggling to transition between personal and professional domain in a closed quarter, to allotting different time lines to manage both home and work fronts, the study throws light on multiple aspects of this new work environment.

Keywords: Covid-19; Work from home; Corona virus; Young workforce.

Introduction

The year 2020 has seen the advent of one of the biggest crises of humankind. The Coronavirus disease, also known as Covid-19 has affected almost a tenth of the population of the world. As chaos continues to increase in different parts of the world, economic and social instability too has spiked up. In absence of any vaccine yet, the world has mostly relied on a combination of social distancing and masks to mitigate the virus' spread. Although such a pandemic is not the first to be encountered by mankind, the COVID 19 pandemic has caused unprecedented levels of economic slowdown of individual countries.

Policies, proposed by the World Health Organization and respective Governments, such as social distancing and home quarantining has managed to slow down the spread of the virus to some extent. The precautions taken regardless, the economic impact has been severe all across.

Aligning with the current scenario, organizations have undergone major structural changes. The current situation has forced employees to stay at home, to avoid risking exposure to the virus. This has led to the practice of working from home or tele-working. Establishments across India have majorly resorted to enabling a work from home

environment for most of its employees. The intent here is to minimise the losses from a possible reduction in business and also to optimise the productivity of the employees through deployment of technology. Although work-from-home is not new to organization culture, its practice is being seen in the larger context of a pandemic.

The study attempts to dive into the history and culture of tele-working or work-from-home, its advantages and disadvantages and its impact on the young Indian workforce in the present day.

History of COVID – 19

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID 19) is understood to have originally emanated from Wuhan, China in December 2019. Late January onwards, the transmission of virus assumed global proportions with Europe becoming the new epicentre of the virus by March. As of mid November 2020, COVID 19 accounted for around 55 million infections and around 1.3 million deaths. In the national context, India continues to grapple with the pandemic with around 8.7 million infections and 131 thousand deaths.

With a pandemic of such huge proportions reigning all over and that too without a vaccine available immediately, governments across the

globe have resorted to first encourage and then enforce social distancing. The enforcement part has led to lockdowns of different countries with varying severity. India too was under a complete lockdown from 24th March, 2020 to 20th April, 2020. Lockdown thereafter has been extended with limited permits to resume economic activities. (Gettleman & Schultz, 2020) (Times of India, 2020)

What is teleworking

Teleworking in simple terms can be described as an arrangement wherein individuals perform their job roles at a non-office workspace. Working from home is not a new concept in organizations, and before the Industrial Revolution it was a common practice in employment. Although there is lack of a specific universal definition of teleworking, (Brocklehurst, 2001) few definitions laid down by various sources over the years are discussed below-

In 1976, (Nilles, Carlson, Gray, & Hanneman, 1976) explained that in ordinary terms, the word 'commuting' is referred to employees going to work, and 'telecommunication' is bringing the work home. Adding both terms we get 'telecommuting' which in general can be understood as working from home.

Years later, in 1989 Olson defined telecommuters as "full-time employees of organizations who stay at home and work rather than commuting to the office and their needs for work assignment and delivery are met through computer and communications technology" (Olson, 1989)

Another definition of 'telework' is given by Fitzer in 1997 as a "work arrangement in which employees perform their regular work at a site other than the ordinary workplace, supported by technological connections" (Fitzer, 1997). In the recent past (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007) forwarded a definition of telecommuting which is believed to have combined past studies and reviews. Here Telecommuting is defined as "an alternative work arrangement in which employees perform tasks elsewhere that are normally done in a primary or central workplace, for at least some portion of their work schedule, using electronic

media to interact with others inside and outside the organization."

According to the United Kingdom's Labour Force Survey (LFS), telework can be defined as "A form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employers premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis." (Telework in the United Kingdom, 2008)

As much as the practice of telecommuting or working from home is increasing globally, there is yet to be a concrete definition for the same.

Positive impact of tele-working

Studies have shown teleworking to have a positive influence on employees, the work culture and their personal and family well-being. Telecommuting is associated with an individual's psychological mediators such as perceived autonomy, work-family conflict, relationship between supervisor and co-worker, organizational politics, information exchange and many more. These mediators in turn lead to employee outcomes such as Job satisfaction, Performance, Turnover, Lower Stress, Perceived Career prospects (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007) (Pinsonneault, Johnson, & Boisvert, 2001) (Fonner & Roloff, 2010). Benefits such as employee productivity and positive work-life balance are among the most commonly cited (Siha & Monroe, 2006) (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). In addition, practice of tele-working encourages transparency between work and home domains (Standen, Daniels, & Lamond, 1999) and as such individual employees prefer the same for - Need for flexibility; Desire for autonomy; Commuting hassles; Limited alternative work options; Lifestyle demands (Olson, 1982)

From the perspective of the organization or employer some of the benefits associated with the practice are - increase in productivity, increase in loyalty, reduced accommodation costs, lower absenteeism, improved customer services, attraction and retention of employees, organisational development, reduction of costs and overheads (Jackson & Wielen, 1998)

(Olson, 1989) (Fitzer, 1997) (Pratt, 1984) (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997) (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997) (Chesbrough & Teece, 2002). Part-time teleworking is considered to produce constructive outcomes for both employees and employers (Baruch, 2001).

Negative impact of tele-working

As much as the practice of teleworking is found to have a positive impact on employees and employers, it too has its fair share of critics.

At the onset of teleworking, difficulties such as parenting demands, social isolation, reduced organisational loyalty and issues of monitoring were identified (Metzger & Von Glinow, 1988). It is believed that frequent communication with colleagues and supervisors can lead to an increased sense of connection and satisfaction in employees, face to face interactions enable positive work outcomes, psychological and social closeness. (Alexander, Helms, & Curran, 1987) (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Therefore the shift in work and home domains is likely to generate stress and conflict since not all employees can manage to balance both work and family life (Tietze & Musson, 2002). Such stress can cause distraction to the job and generate anxiety, family–work conflict and also sense of isolation (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001) (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006) (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997) (Kurland & Cooper, 2002).

Considering both positive and negative aspects, it is to be ensured that both employee and employer should be subject to the benefits of tele-working before committing to the practice. Both the parties should be able to obtain the optimum positive outcome provided by the practice of working from home.

Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to determine the impact of tele-working or ‘work from home’ concept among the young

workforce of India, employed in different sectors of the country.

Research Methodology

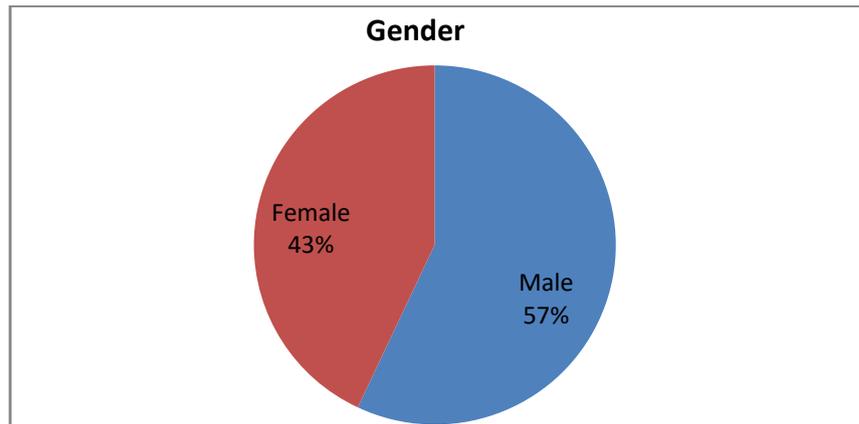
50 individuals from different sectors in India were identified to participate in the study. Sampling method adopted was snowball sampling. In Snowball Sampling one sample is selected following judgment procedure and then other samples are selected on the basis of reference and recommendation of earlier sample. This process follows till the desired number of samples is achieved. Care is taken to include respondents pertaining to all the categories of demographic variables. The study is qualitative in nature and responses of the respondents have been summarised and presented. The variables taken for discussion were identified from literature review and are as follows:

1. Work and family
2. Marking the transition
3. Work hours
4. Psychological Impact.

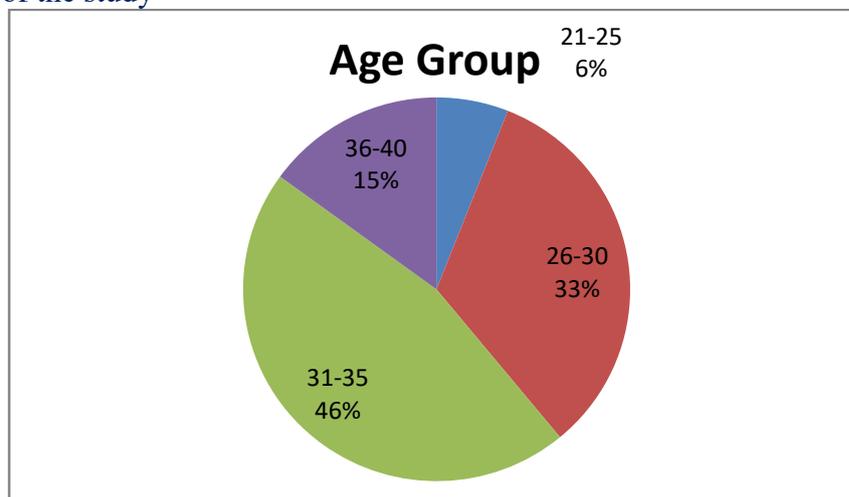
The scales for the above mentioned variables are mentioned against individual item. Additionally, the respondents were asked to express their views on the economic impact of the ‘new normal’ in India. The participants were interviewed for about an hour and the session was recorded. Analysis of each interview recording was done and their inputs are presented here.

Demographic variables in a study provide a representative sample of the population. The major demographic variables considered for the study are – gender, age and marital status. In addition the respondents have also provided the name of their organization which has been kept confidential while analysing the data. The demographic profiles of the respondents are given in the Figures I, II and III.

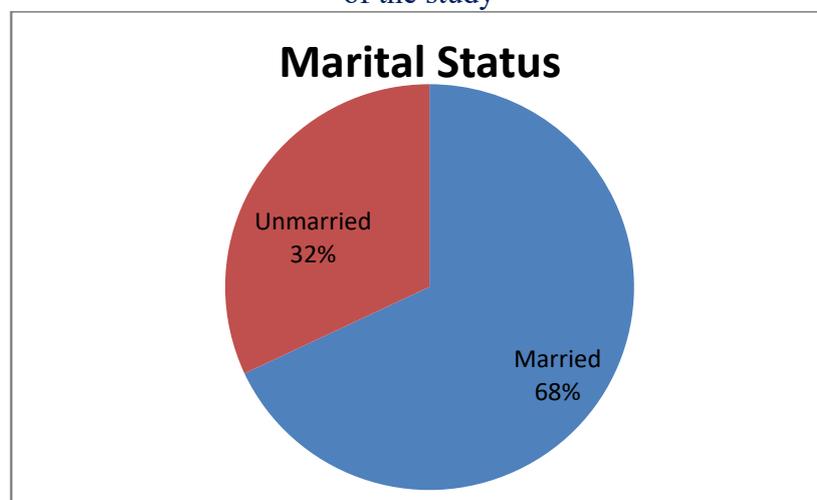
1. **Fig I:** Figure showing the graphical representation of the male and female respondents of the study



2. **Fig II:** Figure showing the graphical representation of the different age groups of respondents of the study



3. **Fig III:** Figure showing the graphical representation of the marital status of the respondents of the study



Work and family

In these uncertain times, the greatest challenge is the balance between personal and professional life of an individual. For people who are not used to the process of teleworking, it can be a difficult task to maintain personal and professional life in close quarters for a long time. As the saying goes 'necessity is the mother of invention', new situations call for new means. Interviewing the participants it was seen that the young Indian workforce has substantially adapted to the new normal of 'Work from home'. Be it hiring professional help for household chores or allocating specific time for specific duties, they have started to compartmentalise personal and professional life.

To analyse the factors of the first variable 'Work and Family', items are referred from (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001) (Harris, 2003) (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006).

The first question referred from the work of (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001) was: **How is the allocation of household responsibility done between you and your partner/ family members/ roommate?**

In families of more than one working individuals, combined effort is required to manage individual office and house work. One of the participants in a similar situation, tells us:

"Working from home saves a lot of time, such as time taken to travel to and from the work place and the working hours. I stay with my family of five and when we divide the household chores, it become very efficient. My siblings have different work hours and therefore we manage the household work accordingly."

It was seen that coming up with a system to handle the crisis was not that difficult. One of our participants in the corporate sector tells us about the work load distribution between herself and her roommate:

"I stay with my best friend and both of us are working from home. We devote about 30 mins for breakfast, and 45 mins each for lunch and dinner, 5 mins thrice a day for dishes, 30 mins every alternate days for sweeping and mopping the house and 30 mins twice a week for laundry."

Not only is the young Indian crowd starting to balance personal and professional life, they are embracing the new working culture. One of the participants working in the banking sector appreciates the same and goes on to say:

"WFH has actually kept me very busy these days as I have been running and switching from personal to professional mode as and when required and it doesn't have a fixed timeline. It has also helped me in my multitasking routine."

It is but natural that a personal issue may arise at the time of work. Participants were asked if they choose to keep their respective lives separated or integrated. Most of the individuals said that they gauged the urgency of the issue and accordingly dealt with it. While some told that under no circumstances do they allow to be diverted from their work, the rest of the individuals explained that they try to integrate both. Regarding the same, the second question of this section in reference to the works of (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006) was: **Do you try to keep work and personal roles separated or integrated?**

Since work from home does not follow a strict routine with regard to time, most of the time employees decide when to do a particular work. One of the participants goes on to say:

"With WFH culture being adopted across the world, people are not restricted to the 9am-6pm fixed time frame. So if something comes up, I tend to shift the pending work to later part of the day."

Continuing with the trend of multitasking, one response was as follows:

"With WFH it's not possible to keep a balance of both and on the same note both can't be kept separated too. I have had times wherein I am conducting meetings and also chopping vegetables simultaneously."

With the sudden surge in work from home, employees are found to have difficulty in organizing work setups at home. Majority of the respondents replied that they had to arrange a makeshift set up.

In this regard, the final question for this factor was: **How is your workspace set up at home? Is it an exclusive work space?**

Responses such as the following give us a sense of the lack of proper arrangement by the employees in such a circumstance.

“I don’t have a dedicated set up because it entirely depends on which spot gives me a favourable Internet connectivity.”

“I don’t have a designated place for work and could not create one. I pull a chair and use the laptop; sometimes I use the bed, table, sofa or the kitchen slab.”

In a news article from June 2020, it was seen that the demand of study tables saw a boost since work from home was announced by different companies (Desikan & Sarkar, 2020). The same goes for internet connectivity (Lohchab, 2020). Although working in different sectors, the respondents feels that laptop, a study desk and the internet connection is the topmost priority of employees working from home.

Marking the transition

Factors which facilitate the process of transition in the personal and professional domains are time and space. In most cases teleworkers use time to create specific activities and behavioural patterns which allow them to perform office tasks and negotiate both personal and professional domains. Some of these activities include- shutting down the computer/ laptop, logging on or off from the office network, announcing to family members the start of the office time, closing the door for the work space. Similarly, workspace in homes are identified and used to segment the office–home boundary to avoid external interference (Myrie & Daly, 2009) (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). The process of transition in employees cannot be generalized across gender. Studies found that men have lesser interest in domestic work after transitioning into the office space, whereas women manage to fulfil both the roles at a more balanced pace. Men have the tendency to be involved in mobile work arrangements and therefore find it difficult to adjust to a confined work space. On the other hand, women prefer fixed site work, which makes it easier for them to transition into the office space at home (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001) (Garrett & Danziger, 2007). Segmenting personal and professional space can help in the process of transition of employees between the two role domains. Although in the process, employees often fail to differentiate the boundaries between the two domains which

can result in complex transitioning between personal and professional roles (Tietze & Musson, 2002) (Fonner & Stache, 2012) (Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). Another important factor in determining the transition between home and work domains is the use of technology and information systems (Nansen, Arnold, Gibbs, & Davis, 2010) (Hamilton, 1987). Advances in technology have helped employees in a smooth transition process which has resulted in the increase in the practice of working from home. With respect to the transitioning process, the items for the second variable are referred from (Fonner & Stache, 2012) and (Harris, 2003)

To understand the process of the above mentioned transition among the young Indian workforce, the first interview question was: **When you are working from home, how do you mark the transition between when you are “at office” and “at home”?**

(Are there clear markers that help you make the transition from one role to the other on a daily basis?)

While most of the respondents did not have any particular transitions, majority of them have listed few changes that go into the transitioning phase of personal to professional work, such as, communicating to the family members about beginning of office time, logging in the office laptop, closing the door etc. One of the participants has also mentioned that changing into semi-casual outfits have helped in the process of transitioning.

Due to the sudden imposition of the ‘work-from-home’ culture, many individuals failed to transition completely into the state of mind required for their work. One of the respondents has explained such difficulties:

“At times, I do tend to get distracted due to the homely comfort with no one around or the urge to relax or take a nap post lunch. I use the liberty of being at home to play some music in the background that could help me in staying focused while I am working on the laptop.”

With the ongoing pandemic, limited access to house help has also created some difficulties with working couples who have similar work timings. House and kitchen work along with their respective jobs have been a challenge. Nevertheless, the new normal has also

compelled employees for new adjustments and routines.

Work hours

Respondents were selected from various industries and work fields. The researcher attempted to find out the work schedule of the participants and if they varied according to their specific job roles. From the works of the first question to analyse this factor was **“How is your normal work schedule in a week?”**

Majority of the respondents have replied that although the working hours are officially the same, time spent on the job has increased to a certain extent. Some of the experiences of employees in different sectors are as follows:

FMCG- *“The schedule is pretty much the same. The time where I used to travel earlier is now being used in household chores to ease the amount of work due to the absence of maid.”*

“Pretty hectic.”

“10 to 7 with 45 minutes lunch break”

Education- *“Daily routine is subject to change and every week question papers need to be submitted. So approximately 15-18 hrs work a week if I include team meetings, mentor review, classes everything.”*

“Per day 3 classes, 1 hour each.”

Finance and Wealth Advisory- *“The basic requirement is being available on the phone all the time and keeping access to Laptop handy. Some days will pass with bare minimum work while others will be endless hours on the system or phone. Even on holidays, need to be available on the phone”*

“Clients will call whenever they deem fit.”

“Working period daily is between 09:30 am to 06:30 pm, lunch break at 2pm and small breaks at 11:30am and 05:00 pm.”

Others (Banking sector, Research and Development, Information Technology etc) - *“10-11am Wake-up, Morning Tea settle for work; 11am-3pm Work, Meetings; 3-4pm Prepare Lunch; 4-5pm Work; 5-6pm Meal and Freshen up; 6-8pm Work; 9-11pm Work-out, Dinner, Personal Projects;”*

“I usually login at 9:15 since trainings are scheduled from 9:30a.m. The first session goes on till 11:30. Second session resumes by 12. It continues till 2. Work continues till 6:30p.m and that is when I log out.”

“20 hours a week”

“My normal work schedule would be from 8.30 AM to 5 PM Central European Time.”

“From 10 am to 5 pm pure work life.”

“10 hours”

“I sometimes work on weekends as well mostly because of inefficiency due to working from home.”

“Usually work all day a week with no specific schedule”

The work schedules of respondents cannot be generalized based on the sector. This analysis is basically a window to see how professionals from different industries are coping with the present situation.

Technology has played a major role in this transition from offline to online work modules. Since most of the employees have to use a computer/laptop for work, the next set of questions was asked regarding the same. **Roughly, about how many hours a day would you say you use a computer at your home for work purposes? What were your normal working hours in office?**

Some of the significant responses are as follows-

“If we consider an 8-9 hours of standard working hours in a day, screen time consumed in a laptop would be 3-4 hours during normal office and 4-6 hours on and off during WFH.”

“I would say I spend 7-8hours a day in front of my laptop for work purposes. My working hours before was anywhere between 8-12 hours.”

“Nowadays it’s 10am - 9pm. In office it was 9am- 6pm.; 4 hours to 5hours of computer use at home for work purpose, in office it goes up to 7 hours”

“ I use my laptop daily 5 hours on average while working from home. Our daily office time starts from 10 am and ends at 7 pm depending upon work.”

Psychological Impact

The sudden changes in the work culture are bound to have physical and mental impact on employees. Adjustment stress, time management, technological knowledge and many other factors can influence individual psychology of employees. To understand the influence of the new ‘work from home’ policy

on the mental health of the young workforce of India, following items are considered.

The items in this section with regard to the factor analysing the psychological impact, were referred from (Hackman & Oldham, 1975) and (Caplan, Cobb, French, Jr., & Pinneau, 1980) and the first question asked was:

To what extent does your job permit you to decide on your own about how to go about doing the work? Do you have the autonomy to decide on your own about where and when the work is done?

From previous studies of Hackman and Oldham, autonomy is found to have a great influence on the mindset of individuals and it can affect the work behaviour of employees. Autonomy can help a person be more involved in his/her job and in a way affect their productivity. The abovementioned question was asked to analyse the level of freedom an employee experiences while teleworking. Majority of the participants acknowledged that some level of autonomy is provided to them while working from home. Few of the responses are-

“I have been given autonomy to decide when and where the work is done.”

“I handle the delivery of my projects single-handedly and have roughly about 85% control on my work flow.”

“I decide everything for my zone although instruction comes from the top management. As long as you hit the number, no issues.”

“To a great extent my job permits me to decide on my own about where and when the work is done. However, I prefer to complete it during my office hours.”

“Well, my job gives me ample amount of flexibility on the work and I do have the autonomy to decide on my own about where and when the work is to be done.”

The respondents expressed their freedom on autonomy of work during the lockdown period in India. This gives us a picture of decentralization of work and job roles in organizations which can be attributed to the fact that the executive/ administration body is also coping up to this new work schedule. Work-from-home has allowed employees to take control of their individual workloads over corporate formalities.

The next question of this section referred from the works of (Caplan, Cobb, French, Jr., & Pinneau, 1980) and has attempted to analyse the different moods of people experienced during the lockdown period.

How often have you experienced each of these during the lockdown period? : (an estimate in percentage will be appreciated)

“You felt good,”

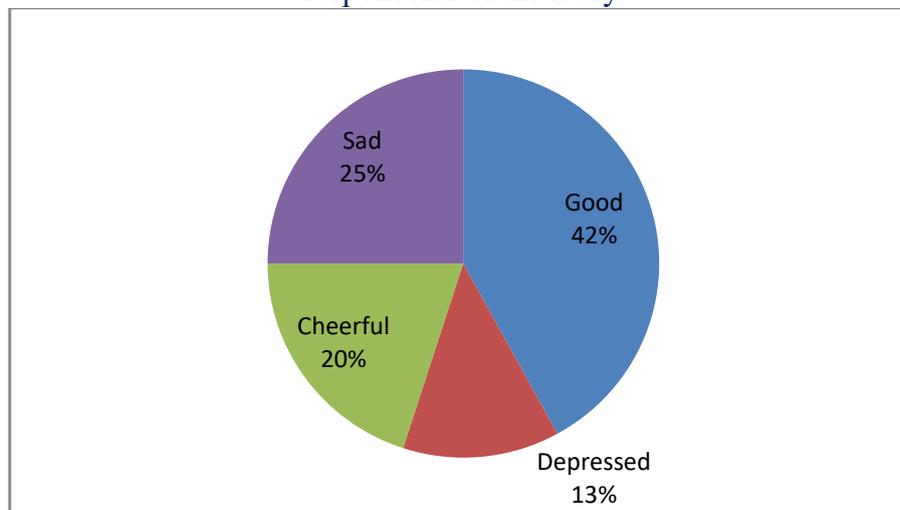
“You felt depressed,”

“You felt cheerful,”

“You felt sad.”

A graphical interpretation of all the responses collected is shown in Figure IV.

Fig IV: Figure showing the graphical representation of the different moods experienced by the respondents of the study



According to the analysis, majority of the respondents have expressed their happiness and cheerfulness over the period of lockdown, with regard to work-from-home schedule. Even though positive moods have dominated around 60% of the total mood changes, it cannot be ignored that the remaining 40% of their time, they were unhappy, sad or depressed owing to this sudden change. The interviews were conducted within the first three months of lockdown and therefore people were possibly happy for a somewhat 'extended holiday'. But the depression or sadness which combined the remaining period can be an actual threat to the mental health and well-being of employees.

Impact on economy

The impact of Covid-19 on the economy

The Covid 19 induced lockdown has had a sharp economic impact across the globe. With factories getting closed down, production was completely stalled and the top line too was virtually wiped out. Industries like aviation and tourism were the worst hit while FMCG saw a short term spike as people started hoarding up on essentials (Mukherjee & Sinha, 2020). The domestic story was no different; the impact was felt much more due to the population of the country and the low per capita income levels of the public. The lockdown was strict in nature thereby impacting those on the margins tremendously.

Towards the end of the interview, the respondents were asked to offer their view on the practice of working from home and its impact on the economy of the nation? Some of the responses are as follows-

“According to me an environment is always important for any job which pushes you to put in more effort. When effort is not 100 % it will eventually affect the work and when work is affected, economy is affected.”

“Companies can save a lot in WFH setups and ensuring only unavoidable work being carried out in offices. A lot of cost can be reduced by successful implementation of WFH.”

“The work from home can open the doors to a great deal of opportunities. People can get the work done from any place. People from outside the metros can work easily and

improve the employment crisis in the country.”

“It is productive and should be continued”

“Firstly, our monthly salary doesn't stop, which plays an indirect role in the economy as there will be demand for goods or services. Secondly, people with certain disabilities are not required to restrain themselves from work which reduces unemployment in an economy.”

The lockdown has ushered in a recession which has seen GDP growth rates plummet to new lows. The UN for example has trimmed India's projected growth rate to 1.2% in 2020. Moody's has projected a growth rate of 0% for the same time frame. The downward revision of GDP estimates have been fuelled mostly by the loss of productivity and output due to the Covid 19 induced lockdown (Business Standard, 2020) (Business Line, 2020).

Present situation

In the present times, companies have heavily relied on video conferencing software like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet etc to keep their teams together and complete projects. The mammoth IT industry sees work from home as the new normal as lakhs of its employees are set to continue working from home even post pandemic. Tata Consultancy Services for example has even announced that 75% of its employees will work from home permanently by 2025 (Khetarpal, 2020). Industries like FMCG have moved a significant portion of their sales through online channels thereby compensating the absence of brick and mortar stores. Parts of the Banking and Financial services were accessible to the public even in the pandemic as banking is declared as an essential service in India. Niche services like Wealth Management/Private banking have by and large moved online (Business Line, 2020).

The pandemic has resulted in a slew of regulatory upheavals so far as work from home is considered. The Department of Personnel and Training (DOPT) has come out with a draft SOP for facilitating a Work from Home policy for the central government employees. IT industry body NASSCOM has also approached the government with requests for changes in the labour laws (Agarwal, Mandavia, &

Sangani, 2020). Other compliance issues like maintenance of statutory records, data privacy, and overtime wage calculations too are on the anvil (Agrawal, 2020). Once these regulatory changes are through, the work from home infrastructure will be even more robust and productive, more so because firms will have a lot of cost savings associated with the reduction of physical infrastructure

Conclusion

The study attempted to explore the concept of tele-working in the time of the current pandemic, Covid-19. In the hour of crisis, the practice of working from home is seen as a growing trend and in all probability, it is here to stay. It is essential that organizations inform employees at the very onset and cater to their concerns before making the change. Organizations may explore guidelines and regulations tailored for their own needs and

requirements. Employees are expected to have individual coping strategies for the transition of an office-based work to a home-based work environment. In such cases, adequate support and cooperation is highly necessary in an employment relationship. One of the most essential issues in this present day 'new normal' is the mental well-being of individuals. Financial, technological and social crisis can hamper both personal and professional life of employees. Therefore it is essential that the human resource departments of organizations explore new strategies and solutions to combat the same. In conclusion, it can be said that the young working force of India is steadily adapting to the new changes in their work life. The study was carried out in the initial days of lockdown in India, in the months of June, July and August, 2020. It is essential that such a study is carried out again in the near future.

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