
Experiences of Work from Home in Pakistan during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has restricted a large population of the workforce to conventional work owing to mitigate the spread of the virus. This restriction resulted in the adaptation of remote work setting all around the globe. Work from home presents unique challenges especially to Pakistan being a developing country where online work requisites are not yet established, this new work arrangement needs to be explained and explored. Most of the workers in the country are experiencing work from home shift. This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The findings of the study show that employees perceive work from home as challenging as they do otherwise with a lower risk of getting infected. Set of challenges of remote working include a lack of coordination, rapport building, communication, and a clear understanding of expectations related to each task completed. For coordination among employees, a frequently used tool is messaging applications such as WhatsApp rather than professional video applications.

Keywords: COVID 19, corona, work from home, remote working, perceptions, experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 virus has emerged as the global outbreak of an infectious disease with an absolute and abrupt impact on every walk of life. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the virus as a pandemic since its inception worldwide with contagious infection and spiking death rates. As the world is devastated by its unending waves, people are pushed to stay at home to curb the transmission of the pathogen.

Pakistan is also continued to get affected by this contagious virus. The country has reported the initial cases of COVID-19 on 26th February 2020. Ever since Pakistan has experienced several waves of virus spread with each wave severely spreading and growing than the

previous one. The situation is also exacerbated due to the geographical location of the country since the largest outbreak was witnessed in countries (China and Iran) are in the neighborhood. Pakistan was ranked among the top 5 infected Asian countries with 284,660 cases, in August 2020. With this high infection rate, the virus continues to impose imminent health and socioeconomic risk on the lives of people of all ages and walks of life.

In March 2020, Pakistan's government imposed a complete lockdown in the country with strict monitoring of recommended SOPs. With the incidence of the lockdown, approximately 216.6 million inhabitants were asked to stay at home. Shopping for essential commodities (food and medicine) supplies was allowed. Industries, organizations, businesses and workplaces were closed temporarily aiming to reopen after a lift in the lockdown. In May 2020, the government began to relax lockdown restrictions allowing the businesses and markets to reopen (ICG, 2020). For institutes and offices, the government instructed a 50% physical attendance while for the rest, Work-from-Home (WFH) practice was introduced. As there is a great deal of financial cost involved in businesses and industries for complete closure. This new protocol compelled the organization as well as their employees to rethink their working models. The use of current technological tools was inevitable and constructive in this shift.

However, despite the beneficial use of technological tools in remote working, the existing literature pointed both positive and negative consequences of WFH (Miles and Hollenbeck, 2013). On one hand, the literature points to employees' positive outcomes in terms of experiencing increased satisfaction and better performance (Staples, 2011; Biron and Veldhoven, 2016). On the other hand, it highlights the negative connotation of employees' experiences including their professional isolation, fewer chances of promotion, poor professional relationships, and an increased chance of work-family conflict (Gurstein, 2001; Jackson, 2002; Hesketh & Cooper, 2019). Other than technological usage, the positive and negative consequences of remote working are also dependent on employee's behavior, nature of work, organization, and family setup (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2020). However, to effectively implement work from a home model, several technical platforms are being utilized to retain the efficiency of employees.

The fact that people are pushed to work remotely due to pandemics offers a unique opportunity to investigate their experiences of remote working and to know how digital technology is used in this ongoing outbreak and lastly how the working population is organizing remote working. For a developing country like Pakistan where digital technology is emerging, the sector still faces numerous challenges. Among these challenges, the most prominent ones are unavailability of the internet, inadequate capacity, lack of intellectual property protection, absence of a legal framework for e-commerce, and low innovative research and development (Ipsen *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, this challenging situation in the pandemic time presents a unique opportunity to investigate the questions about experiences of remote working for the Pakistani population. Thus, this study investigates employees' (Pakistan) experiences of work from home through an online survey conducted (ONLINE) Google Forms.

The rest of the paper is arranged as follows: Section 2 represents the review of existing literature related to remote working. Section 3 reports the methodology of the study. Section 4 discusses the findings of the study. The last section illustrates the findings and presents recommendations for future research and presents suggestions.

Literature Review

There are three dimensions (time, geography, and culture) of remote working (Fisher and Fisher 2000). However, this study primarily focuses on time and geographic dimensions in analyzing remote working. Distance work can be done from any location. For instance, it can be from home and referred to as telework (Kurand and Bailey, 1999) and can be hosted at customers' place called inter-organization work (Cropper *et al.*, 2008; Verburg *et al.*, 2013). Distance work usually requires good communication skills, high trust (Scannell *et al.*, 2012), and excellent interpersonal skills (Cooper *et al.*, 2001).

Remote working is mostly done by knowledge workers (Alvesson, 2004). The knowledge workers usually work part-time (Parent-Thirion *et al.*, 2017). It is generally observed that working from home across time or geography does not ensure employee wellbeing and performance. However, a study by Poulsen and Ipsen (2017) advocated that employers can support and motivate workers when working in the setting of inter-organization thereby can increase efficiency and productivity.

The existing literature on the use of technology in remote working is linked to the performance aspect of the job. According to Carroll and Conboy (2020), remote working requires technological change. This technological shift demands employees' training since the staff usually have limited or no resources and hence they look up to their employers for training on how to work with those technologies in use. In the situation of no formal technological training, pressure on employees inadvertently increases since they have limited knowledge on how to operate technology/software for work collaboration in the remote working environment. Whereas, giving training to the workers enforces efficiency and confidence in them and it is usually planned and provided to the employee when introducing remote working in ordinary working conditions (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2020).

Another study by Hessels *et al.* (2017) advocated that the poor use of technology causes stress among employees. In addition, studies by Tarafdar *et al.* (2014) also reported similar findings. These authors label technological stress as technostress and reported that inefficient use of technology in facilitating remote work creates fatigue and anxiety among the workers. However, La Torre *et al.* (2019) pointed information overload and the lack of constant support in the form of availability and reachability is the major source of technostress among remote working employees. Furthermore, the productivity of distant working employees often does not match with job expectations due to difficulties in the accessibility of higher management.

Recent researches on the use of technology in remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic are currently explored extensively all over the world. For instance, a study by Molino *et al.* (2020) has investigated technostress during the pandemic emergency for the Italian working population. The authors reported that there is a positive association among workload, technology and behavioural stress in working from the home strategy for the Italian working class during the time of the pandemic. Another study by Davies (2020) on technological support in remote working for rural economies concluded that Information and Communications technology (ICT) is seen to be useful in remote working arrangements. However, the rural-urban digital disparity acts as a barrier in ICT reinforcing working from home. Davies (2020) proposes that this supported arrangement will help create diversified employment opportunities in the future. On the role of digital

transformation of the workforce, a study by Savic (2020) also provides useful insight. The author advocated that the sudden shift to work from home is driving the digital transformation of the workforce at a great speed. The most crucial change businesses have faced is the adoption of telecommuting. Furthermore, an improved adaptation of another way of long-distance collaboration is need for the hour for successful business in the crucial times of pandemic.

Based on the above literature, smart lockdowns forcing people to work from home for a country like Pakistan where technology is still in its infancy, this serves as a driving force for the present study. This study aims to explore the well-being and performance of the Pakistani working population during COVID-19 along with analyzing the distance management practices of remote workers.

1. Materials and Methods

1.1 Participants and Procedure

The data was collected during April and May 2021 from 200 Pakistani employees. The responses were collected online using Google forms at one point in time. There were a total of 18 questions in the questionnaire and took almost 5-6 min to be filled. The target respondents were above 18 years of age and the working population. Data collection with a convenience sampling technique was adopted mainly from the population working remote due to COVID-19. The questionnaire used in this survey is partially adapted from the study of Ipsen *et al.* (2020). A few questions were dropped out and a few were re-structured owing to been confusing and double-barreled. The voluntary and anonymous participation of respondents was made sure in the questionnaire. In addition, a privacy protection statement is also provided at the start of the survey. Most of the respondents of our survey mainly belonged to the age group between 21-31(61%). Whereas other respondents' ages are shown in Table 1 in detail. Further, the analysis revealed that 74% were male and 26% were female respondents. While education profile of respondents shows that most of the respondents held a bachelor's degree (49%), followed by master's degree holders (23%). Most respondents were students (25%) and were self-employed (14%), a few respondents were planning to get a job (12%) and so on i.e., management, administrative work, teachers, details are given in appendix 1. Statistics show that 57% of respondents owned 5 or more children and no of young children were less than age group 15 and presented 4.4 percent.

Table 1: Respondents Profile

Gender	Female	47	25.8
	Male	135	74.2
Age	10-20 years	13	7.1
	21-30 years	112	61.5
	31-40 years	18	9.9
	41-50 years	29	15.9
	51-60 years	9	4.9
	Above 60 years	1	0.5
Education	Associate degree	3	1.6
	Associate of Certified Chartered Accountant(ACCA)	1	0.5
	Bachelor's degree	87	47.8
	CMA	1	0.5
	Doctorate degree	2	1.1
	M.Phil.	3	1.6
	Master's degree	42	23.1

No schooling completed	1	0.5
Primary education	5	2.7
Secondary education	35	19.2
Vocational training	2	1.1
Total	182	100

The Questionnaire

A survey was adapted from Ipsen and Kirchner (2020) study and employed to explore the well-being and performance of the Pakistani working population during COVID-19. Section 1 of the study asks about respondents' demographic information i.e. age, gender, work, highest education, and number of people present during the time of remote working. The questions about the current work situation were asked in two sections: section 2 and 3. Section 2 aims to achieve a deeper insight into what work conditions respondents have. This section included questions about respondents' remote work experience (if any) before the pandemic. Whereas, in section 3 Q12 and Q13 ask about multiple items on a 5-point Likert scale indicating respondents' level of agreement to the asked statements. Similarly, a 5-point Likert scaling in section 4 and section 5 was used to seek information on the advantages and disadvantages of working from home respectively. Lastly, section 6 included questions regarding the overall experience of working from home.

Data Analysis

Data collected in this study comprised of different kinds of questions. The survey was based on quantitative questions. Whereas information was needed that could only be done through the inclusion of qualitative (open-ended and close-ended) questions. All the responses were analyzed by applying different statistics using the SPSS. For demographic questions, descriptive statistics were used. The advantage and disadvantage of work from home was examined utilizing the different statements measured on a five-point Likert scale. Whereas, open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis through the use of SPSS and google analytics.

Result and Discussion

In this study, the word telework denotes the work that uses ICTs in working remotely from the main office of operations (Gurstein, 2001). To investigate the questions about experiences of remote working for the Pakistani population; this study investigates Pakistani employee's experiences of work from home through an online survey conducted on (ONLINE) Google Forms. Analysis was conducted using both the SPSS by applying the descriptive statistics and content analysis. Results reveal that after the pandemic mostly respondents work from home (58%), whereas, 45% work from home and 16% never worked from home. The highest percentage of respondents working remotely after the incidence of the pandemic indicates that the WFH is a new and uncommon working strategy in Pakistan. This indication can be made in comparison with WFH experiences survey by Ipsen *et al.* (2020) conducted in European countries. The study reported 81% of respondents to have experience of WFH at least for a day even before the pandemic crisis.

Our findings further reveal that most respondents started working from home since March 2020 i.e. (45%) and 36% did not mention the month but also started working from home since last year (36%). These statistics show that the implementation of WFH strategy in Pakistan is the result of lockdown restrictions in Pakistan. The authorities have imposed lockdown restrictions throughout the country in early March 2020. Therefore, largely

office working mode got shifted from in-person working to remote working since March, 2020. This shift is also evident from the findings of our study as the majority of respondents started WFH in 2020 while a very few of them have started working from home in 2021. Further, it is obvious from the data that most respondents started working from home due to COVID-19. Before, COVID-19 very less percentage worked from home before COVID only for a day in a week's i.e., 13% as contrary to 81% of international workers who had the experience of WFH at least a day (Ipsen *et al.*, 2020)

Table2: General Questions

	Statement	Frequency	Percent
Work from Home	No	29	15.93407
	Yes, I only work from home	46	25.27473
	Yes, I sometimes work from home	107	58.79121
	Total	182	100
Started Work from Home	3 months ago.	1	0.549451
	April, 2020	6	3.296703
	Feb, 2020	2	1.098901
	Feb, 2021	2	1.098901
	January ,2021	1	0.549451
	june 2020	1	0.549451
	March ,2020	82	45.05495
	March 2021	1	0.549451
	N/A	17	9.340659
	Recently	2	1.098901
	Since 3 months	1	0.549451
	Since last year	66	36.26374
	Total	182	100
Work from Home before COVID	Five days	24	13.18681
	Four days	6	3.296703
	I have never worked from home before	79	43.40659
	Less than one day	24	13.18681
	One day	8	4.395604
	Seven days	7	3.846154
	Six days	5	2.747253
	Three days	11	6.043956
	Two days	18	9.89011
	Total	182	100

Respondents were asked few statements to agree or not agree according to their current situation of work from home. All these statements were measured on a five point-Likert scale.

Table3: Working Frequency

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Agree Strongly
During these times, I'm working more hours than normally	21(11.5%)	49(26.9%)	58(31.9%)	30(16.5%)	24 (13.2%)

During these times, I'm getting less work done than normally	34(18.7%)	57(31.3%)	48(26.4%)	33(18.1%)	10(5.5%)
During these times, my work is more demanding than normally.	23(12.6%)	26(14.3%)	72(39.6%)	43(23.6%)	18(9.9%)
The information that I have gotten from my work or education makes me feel well prepared for working at home	20(11%)	32(17.6%)	52(28.6%)	58(31.9%)	20(11%)
I can keep a good relationship with my colleagues or co-students when I'm working from home	26(14.3%)	41(22.5%)	39(21%)	53(29.1%)	23(12.6%)

A very few respondents reported that their working hours are greater than normal while working from home i.e., 16% agree and 26% disagree and 58% were neutral or undecided. Whereas 18% concluded that their workload is lighter while working from home than usual while 31% disagreed, 19% strongly disagreed and 48% remained neutral to this premise. Similarly, 24% of respondents' highlighted working from home is more demanding than usual while 10% strongly agreed to this, 14% did not agree and almost 40% were neutral about it. In addition, 40% of respondents confirmed that they get streamlined work instructions that help them work from home while 18% disagreed and 28% remained undecided about it. The study showed that working from home poses communication barriers and offers unique challenges in terms of maintaining a good work rapport. 22% disagreed that work from home enables to maintain good work rapport, while 14% strongly disagreed, and 29% showed a positive response towards the statement whereas 21% stayed neutral.

How often do you use the computer system these days? Please answer the question for all mentioned systems?

Respondents were requested to state the frequently used medium during work from home. Results revealed that workers essentially depended on WhatsApp/messaging app (52.7). While others frequently used medium email (3.77), SOND (31.3%), Social media apps (31.9%). A rarely used medium is a short message service or a text message. Surprisingly, a greater percentage of respondents do not use Facebook and Teams while they worked from home.

Table 4 : Mostly Used Medium

		Always	Never	Often	Rarely	Sometimes
EMAIL	Frequency	65	12	34	30	41
	Percent	35.7%	6.6%	18.7%	16.5%	22.5%
SOND	Frequency	57	12	48	27	38
	Percent	31.3%	6.6%	26.4%	14.8%	20.9%
SM	Frequency	58	26	33	29	36
	Percent	31.9%	14.3%	18.1%	15.9%	19.8%
Facebook	Frequency	17	68	15	47	35
	Percent	9.3%	37.4%	8.2%	25.8%	19.2%
TEAMS	Frequency	39	62	20	33	28
	Percent	21.4%	34.1%	11%	18.1%	15.4%
Mes/WhatsApp	Frequency	96	9	24	22	31
	Percent	52.7%	4.9%	13.2%	12.1%	17%

SMS	Frequency	40	20	27	48	47
	Percent	22%	11%	14.8%	26.4%	25.8%
T.CALLS	Frequency	62	10	39	30	41
	Percent	34.1%	5.5%	21.4%	16.5%	22.5%

Advantage of Work from home

Further, the respondents were asked to identify the advantages of work from home. The most well-appreciated advantages of work from home are:

- 1: Lowering the risk of disease (42.3%)
- 2: Save the transportation time (36.3%)
- 3: Can eat and drink (33.5%)

Detailed responses from respondents are listed in the table below. The most prominent advantage of work from home is it lowers the risk of getting the infection. This finding is in line with a study by Sun Life (2020) reporting WFH eases workers' concerns related to their health. The study highlighted that majority of workers feel mentally relaxed as WFH as it limits the probability of getting exposed to the virus. Furthermore, the findings of this study also discover other advantages of WFH as: saves time and cost of transportation, can enjoy a home meal, and can-do work more freely.

Table 5: Advantages of Work from Home

		Advantages of work from home				
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
lowering the risk of spreading Covid-19	Frequency	7	8	26	63	77
	Percent	3.8%	4.4%	14.3%	34.6%	42.3%
focus on my work without interruptions get a possibility to do some other work	Frequency	11	24	46	65	35
	Percent	6%	13.2%	25.3%	35.7%	19.2%
do not have to spend time on long meetings	Frequency	8	18	49	65	41
	Percent	4.4%	9.9%	26.9%	35.7%	22.5%
can take a break when I like to	Frequency	10	32	52	61	26
	Percent	5.5%	17.6%	28.6%	33.5%	14.3%
can be close to my family and friends	Frequency	11	20	45	68	37
	Percent	6%	11%	24.7%	37.4%	20.3%
	Frequency	9	24	29	69	50
	Percent	4.9%	13.2%	15.9%	37.9%	27.5%
	Frequency	17	27	52	53	32

like the atmosphere in my home	Percent	9.3%	14.8%	28.6%	29.1%	17.6%
can eat and drink my own food	Frequency	8	7	30	75	61
	Percent	4.4%	3.8%	16.5%	41.2%	33.5%
have no-one looking over me	Frequency	23	41	45	46	26
	Percent	12.6%	22.5%	24.7%	25.3%	14.3%
save the normal transportation time	Frequency	9	12	37	57	66
	Percent	4.9%	6.6%	20.3%	31.3%	36.3%
do not expose myself to the risk of getting a disease	Frequency	13	17	47	75	29
	Percent	7.1%	9.3%	25.8%	41.2%	15.9%
get a chance to break my old habits and change routines	Frequency	16	29	59	52	25
	Percent	8.8%	15.9%	32.4%	28.6%	13.7%
is easier to get in contact with people than normal	Frequency	16	35	37	78	16
	Percent	8.8%	19.2%	20.3%	42.9%	8.8%

Moreover, disadvantages of work from home are also discussed. The results of the present study are shown in the table below.

- I do not know what kind of work I should do (17%)
- It requires more effort which consumes time my time to do other things (16%).
- I do not get to see my colleagues (10%).
- Official documents needed (8.8%)
- Get disturbed by other people in the home (7.1%)

In the present study, the majority of respondents pointed to lack of direction and increased effort required in WFH as the major disadvantage of remote working in Pakistan. These findings are similar to the results reported by Ipsen and Kirchner (2020) for European workers. Related to interacting with colleagues, our finding is supported by JLL (2020). The author also pointed the lack of colleague interaction as one of the main challenges employees have experience in a new normal work strategy. The author finds that a huge percentage of the workers missed face-to-face interaction and a professional working environment which in return affect their productivity. Regarding the absence of access to official documents, our finding is supported through a report by HKSAR Government (2020j). The report pointed the inaccessibility to confidential official documents especially in civil services creates inconveniences to work from home. Our findings of getting disturbed by the family while working from home is also in line with the results of Baker *et al.* (2007) and Tsang (2020) who also pointed the same.

Table6: Dis-Advantages of Work from Home

Disadvantages of Work from Home						
Dis-Advantage		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
		I do not get to see my colleagues	Frequency	27	60	28
	Percent	14.8%	33%	15.4%	26.4%	10.4%
	Frequency	30	66	27	41	18

need physical equipment to do my work	Percent	16.5%	36.3%	14.8%	22.5%	9.9%
I need data or documents to do my work which I do not have	Frequency	38	62	34	32	16
I find it difficult to keep focused on work	Percent	20.9%	34.1%	18.7%	17.6%	8.8%
I don't know what kind of work I should do	Frequency	25	63	43	38	13
I get disturbed by other people in my home	Percent	13.7%	34.6%	23.6%	20.9%	7.1%
I miss getting out of my home	Frequency	17	33	52	49	31
work I do from home is not as interesting	Percent	9.3%	18.1%	28.6%	26.9%	17%
It requires more effort from me that I cannot use my normal routines	Frequency	31	48	47	43	13
	Percent	17%	26.4%	25.8%	23.6%	7.1%
	Frequency	39	60	36	36	11
	Percent	21.4%	33%	19.8%	19.8%	6%
	Frequency	23	51	40	52	16
	Percent	12.6%	28%	22%	28.6%	8.8%
	Frequency	28	35	50	40	29
	Percent	15.4%	19.2%	27.5%	22%	15.9%

Moreover, respondents were asked to rate their current overall situation as normal or more challenging. To answer this, 32% of respondents believed their work situation is “just as challenging as normal” 18% believed it to be very challenging, 19% believed it to be less challenging and 29% believed it a little more challenging than normal. A study by Teo (2020) reported that the majority of WFH workers find WFH normally as challenging as it increases stress among them. The author advocated that the new work environment affects both the work and personal spheres of the workers thereby produces mental stress and discomfort. Similarly, a report by Times of India (2020) also pointed WFH as challenging since it disturbs the personal sphere of WFH workers in the form of sleep deprivation.

Table 7: Overall Experience

All in all, considering your current work and life situation, how would you describe it?		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Just as challenging as normal	59	32.4%
	Much more challenging than normal	34	18.7%
	Somewhat less challenging than normal	35	19.2%
	Somewhat more challenging than normal	54	29.7%

All the results of the present study are based on respondents' views on work from home. A previous study conducted by Ipsen and Kirchner(2020) compared Denmark and German workers' responses towards work from home. The fallouts of contemporary study are fairly aligned with the present study however this fluctuates based on different social values and working conditions.

covered mainly by using WhatsApp. Concerning the advantages of working from home, respondents reported a lower probability of getting infected in this new shift in working. Further, saving transportation time and flexibility of eating and drinking are other significant positive effects of WFH. Related to drawbacks of remote working, respondents have advocated that in remote working, they are mostly feeling unsure about the kind of work they should do and consumes more effort and time. This study reported the overall mixed experiences of working from home among the Pakistani working population. However, the majority of the workers perceive working from home just as challenging as normal and somewhat more challenging than normal.

Therefore, this study recommends a few possible actions to be taken by the employers for making work for home experiences more pleasant for Pakistani workers. First, written work from home guidelines may be developed keeping in mind the pandemic effect on all walks of life. Second, the provision of technological services and training required in remote working may be necessarily provided by an employer. Third, the facilitation of interactive sessions between employer and employee may be made compulsory at least once a week to ensure smooth working from home and productivity.

This study contains some research limitations and purposes possible directions for future research. First, our study is restricted to a relatively small sample size because of online facilitation to respondents due to COVID-19. Therefore, future research may incorporate a large sample size for a more accurate exploration of the population's experiences. Second, this study did not segregate workers belonging to different sectors. Thus, future studies may disaggregate workers of different sectors so that the possibility of having distant experiences of working from home in different sectors can be explored.

Declarations

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