Learning to work from home: experience of workers and organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic
AIM

This study aims to contribute to this knowledge gap by identifying positives and negative aspects of WFH from the organization and workers’ perspective, including human, organizational and environmental considerations.

METHODS

- One survey for Australian knowledge workers
- One survey for Australian organizations
- Closed and open-ended questions
- Surveys cover different aspects of WFH arrangements such as productivity, mental and physical health, sense of trust and value, autonomy, social aspects, and overall challenges
KEY FINDINGS

Organizations stated productivity losses, maintaining culture and workplace health and safety concerns with WFH setup, while employees were more concerned about being isolated from colleagues, internet connectivity, and increased workload.
More than half of the surveyed employees (55%) felt completely trusted by their organizations, with 51% indicating a very strong or strong sense of value. Several open-ended comments from the organizations clearly highlighted the level of trust albeit the previous perception among organizations that staff are not productive while not at the office.

The findings also showed that the aspects of WFH related to work performance, trust and ownership have not suffered much, however, social aspects of this new work arrangement such as the sense of connection, team cohesion and knowledge sharing have been suffering with around 30-40% of the respondents finding them challenging.
KEY FINDINGS

WHY RETURNING TO OFFICE?

Socializing and human connection are the two most important reasons that people would like to return to the office for. Seeing my team in person, face to face meetings and human connection were the top three reasons for returning to the office from employees. Open-ended comments also indicated that respondents mainly missed the social aspects of their workspace.
With organizations shifting from a hierarchical structure to a networked and team-based structure, the idea of decentralized offices with a central headquarters sounds feasible. A probable future is an increasingly digital workforce consolidating the idea of the web of space or network of spaces which will include working from many different spaces: home office, office, co-working space or any other locations like a local library or a café. If this “satellite workforce” can perform their focused task at home, and their meeting at home or at co-working spaces, the new office will be a place to bring people together mainly to collaborate and connect.
Whatever the short, mid, and long-term solutions to evolving workplaces post COVID-19 are, a holistic approach considering various aspects is needed. A realistic approach includes three different levers of a gradual change: organizational, individual, and environmental.

Whatever the future brings for us, with or without a vaccine, the workspaces will need to embrace a hybrid reality, one in which we are a satellite workforce gradually trained for working anywhere and anytime, and design of new physical workspace configurations to suits our needs. The future workspace will need to be enhanced in strategic ways, incorporating new technologies, new protocols and new ways of working. Can this pandemic be a trigger to a revolution in information technology, no one knows, but it seems like a probable future.
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