Virtual Workplace: A new normal for the organisations

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ABSTRACT- The current pandemic, COVID-19, has brought the whole life on earth at a standstill. Realising the urgency to change our attitude, the people even after 8 months are still struggling to adapt to this new normal. With all the economic activities coming to a complete stop, one idea which helped the companies to keep their work going was remote work or popularly known as work from home (WFH). Life changed in split of a second. The huge office buildings and expensive furniture stood futile while the old wooden table and the plastic chair became the place where the people are spending their majority of the day in this lockdown doing their office work on their system. The purpose of this research is to investigate the pros and cons of this not new idea. The research is also important for the literature because it is not from a single view point rather a detailed study considering all the possibilities and even accounting for the minute effects on the society as a whole. The research will touch upon dimensions like whether WFH is a good idea for the ecological balance or not. We have divided the stakeholders into two broad groups, primary stakeholders i.e., the employees, the facilitators, etc. and the secondary stakeholders i.e. other businesses that are indirectly dependent on these companies as everything in a city (where these companies are situated) is directly or indirectly linked. Also, whether or not execution of this idea is even possible in a country like India. While the idea looks very captivating, the implementations of the same is far from easy. The research will be based on secondary data analysis integrated with personal observation to determine the future of remote work in the long-term. This research acts as food for thought for the companies who are thinking to adopt the idea of remote work for all their employees. The research divides the various factors affecting the success of WFH into two broad categories. First, Internal Factors i.e. human psychology, the level of technical know-how, mental health, time management, etc. and second External factors i.e. India's lack of IT infrastructure, people's access to various resources required, the organisational environment of the employer company etc. This study ignites the curiosity by critically analysing the discussed concept showing how far India has to go to come at par with the world's biggest economies in the race of getting everything back on track by adopting new methods to cope with the social distancing and other safety norms, while fighting the pandemic alongside. The results of this research provide a clarity and a better understanding on the impact that the concept WFH can have on the society both directly or indirectly while also motivating and sensitizing the audience to have an open mind before making a decision.

KEYWORDS: Remote Working, Work from Home (WFH), Covid-19, Pandemic.

I.   INTRODUCTION

The technological advancement has definitely brought the world closer. Now a person living in a different city or even in a different country can report to his employer who maybe in a totally different geographical location. This idea is called 'remote working' or 'work from home' This concept is not at all new but has got on the tongues of people recently just like the word 'quarantine' or 'hydroxychloroquine'. The traces of this idea can be found as long as 1.4 million years ago, in some version or other. Early men used to hunt and farm crops near their shelters making it the very first form of work from home. In 1950s, a cleaning company called Stanley homes developed a new method, "home party" to sell products directly to the housewives. Brownie Wise an employee of the company realized the potential in the model and went ahead to form her own business called "Patio Parties". Recruiting and giving employment to housewives, multi-level marketing was another form of work from home witnessed during this time. It was not until 1980s that the companies really started experimenting with the concept of remote work. One company which realized the benefits of remote working is IBM. In 2009, by installing "remote terminals" in several employees' home, IBM was able to enable as much as 40% of its global employees i.e. around 3,86,000 employees to work from home. This helped the company save around $100 million in the US annually by simply reducing the office space by 78 million square feet. So the Work From Home is not novel idea but still popularize, tried and executed by different types of business in this pandemic. So, the research will help companies in the smooth execution of Work from Home.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A lot of work has been done in the western literature about the implications and future of remote work. Some of the prominent research has been discussed:

According Dubey et al, in the research on analysing the sentiments towards work-from-home experience during covid-19 pandemic has significantly highlights that: "This novel virus has enabled people get a first-hand experience of remote working.Hence, the initial impressions of the same ranged widely from very excited to very frustrating." Itis further mentioned that, "positive is to negative outlook ratio towards the concept showed a clear majority in favour of the concept at 73.10 % were as the later stood at 26.10%. This signifies that the people had a positive outlook towards the concept of remote working. Analysing the tweets further, a detailed report on the emotional quotient is generated. Total of 8 different emotions were found among the people who were working from home, namely fear, joy, anticipation, anger, disgust, sadness, surprise and trust."

On the other hand the Bick et al, is his research on Work from home after covid-19 Outbreak had identified that the "education level and income distribution are some key factors that affect the feasibility of work from home. Month of May 2020 saw a rise people working from home to 35.2 percent from 8.2 percent in February 2020."

Another study by Bartil et al backed the importance of education level in easing the process of remote work by saying, "the number of people working remotely are higher in industries that require its employees to have relatively higher educational qualifications. Also, they were perceived to lose less productivity while working in an informal environment. Knowledge-intensive work is easier to do online via platforms like zoom, google meet, etc. whereas skill-based work and services like hospitality and leisure require the personnel to be present at the source of activity."

Adding to the previous study, Gottlieb et al in his research pointed that, "In professional and knowledge driven sectors like IT and Education, remote working is easier to carry out in the long-run, at 76.8 and 70.6%, respectively. However, in manufacturing, transportation sectors and machinery driven industries find it hard to work remotely. Also, in sectors like hospitality and other similar services, the trend of work from home is relatively lower."

Talking about the cyber-security issues, Ahmad . T. (2020) emphasized in his research that , "February alone recorded scams related to coronavirus fraud amounted to £800,000. A person reported he lost £15,000, after buying a face mask which too never arrived."

Some of the other significant research in the domain of Work From Home can be summarized as:

AUTHOR	YEAR	FINDINGS
Alan Felstead et al	2002	Discussed about the importance of wok life balance and how work from home can helpful to achieve the same.
Marcel Lourel et al	2009	Discussed the both negative and positive spillover between work and home and its relationship to perceived stress and job satisfaction.
Beauregard	2006	It compares the impact work from home on self – evaluation traits and also includes three situational factors which are organizational time demands, potential negative career consequences and managerial support.
Margrethe H. Olson	1989	This research significantly highlights the point that work from home is not a new concept rather it is practiced in 19s also. It measures the work from home for

		computer professionals the current attitudes of 1989s and also the future prospects.
Irene Hardill et al	2003	It highlights the new technology, work and employment. The evaluate the remote working , how it impact the work and home in the new economy.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

The research was carried to investigate following objectives:

RO1: To access the implications of remote working for different sectors.

RO2: To examine the impact COVID-19 on Work from Home

RO3: To investigate the pros and cons of Work from home concept.

RO4: To examine the hurdles in implementing the Work from home in India.

RO5: To propose the execution plan for work from home implementation.

III.   DISCUSSION

RO1:TO ACCESS THE IMPLICATIONS OF REMOTE WORKING FOR DIFFERENT SECTORS.

Our study revolves around three business sectors and we have tried interpreting the feasibility of the concept of remote work for them. The first and the worst hit sector that this research has covered is Manufacturing sector. The sector contributes 20% to the total GDP half of which is from auto industry. According to Mr. Manu Sharma who is the President of Kider India, a leading manufacturer of display units and racks, "even highly advanced and automated manufacturing units can't ask their employees to work from home as these huge machines require people to operate them." Only if operating a whole assembly line while sitting at home was possible this sector wouldn't have taken such a big hit due to the lockdown. Another big problem which handicaps the manufacturing sector from being able to enable its employees work remotely is the usage of IT in the company which is well established. Sadly, the manufacturing sector does not possess the right arsenal to achieve the same.Coming to the educational sector, it has surely evolved in this pandemic. Smooth functioning has been made sure by proper training of faculty and immense patience by both the students and the institutes. One interesting observation found in our study though is that a major composition of the faculty from pre-primary topost graduate level comprise of females. Working from home for them, however is very much possible, but hampers with their productivity levels due to the additional pressure of household responsibilities. Talking about the IT sector. If manufacturing is at one end then IT is at the complete opposite end. This sector was very much comfortable in enabling its employees to work remotely even before it was a necessity. In a report published by the Times of India on 21 April 2020, it was highlighted that India's IT industry has been able to function smoothly in this pandemic time by enabling it's 90% employees (I.E. nearly 4.3 million workforce) to work from home. Various reports suggest that this sector looks the most promising in adopting to the long-term remote working for majority of its employees.

RO2TO EXAMINE THE IMPACT COVID-19 ON WORK FROM HOME

COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst in enabling different organisations realise the new possibilities. According to research done by Brynjolfsson et al (2020) "Early surveys in US show a significant rise of people shifting to work from home. As much as 36% of total working class shifted to remote work in the first couple of months of the virus outbreak."while the sectors like IT industry which was already well versed with the concept noticed a smooth transition from working in-person to remote working, other sectors like manufacturing and transportation sector experienced a lot of losses and found themselves vulnerable as it is not possible to implement this concept in these sectors. This unexpected pandemic

made the professionals realise how uncertain the future can be. Huge rise in the number of people working from home can be seen in the current times either willingly or unwillingly.

RO3TO INVESTIGATE THE PROS AND CONS OF WORK FROM HOME CONCEPT.

The advantages and disadvantages of remote work can be categorised in three broad categories based on the person enjoying/bearing them, namely – the Employer, the Employee and the external stakeholders. Starting with the advantages for the same:

EMPLOYER –

• Astonishing productivity
• Increased employee retention
• Decrease in sick days and employee time off
• Reduction in cost for employer

EMPLOYEE–

• Reduces stress
• Prolong the careers of older workers
• Sense of freedom
• Eliminate travelling expenses

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS –

• Reduce traffic on roads
• Reduce migration leading to a reduction in over population of metropolitan cities
• Reduce the emission of greenhouse gases

Surely remote work has something to offer to everyone. But as rightly quoted, "life is not always a bed of roses". There are some downsides to this conceptas well.

EMPLOYER –

• Demotivation among employees
• Hard to communicate the work
• Low reliability
• Difficult to manage and maintain accountability

EMPLOYEE –

• Bad exercise regime
• Higher bills of electricity, internet etc.
• Lack of proper equipment
• Ergonomic issues

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS –

• Adverse effects on Auxiliaries to trade
• Lack of personalization for the customer

RO4 TO EXAMINE THE HURDLES IN IMPLEMENTING THE WORK FROM HOME IN INDIA.

The task of successful implementation of remote working in India in the various sectors is like climbing a hill, that too a steep one. Two factors affecting the are –

INTERNAL FACTORS –

These are the factors which are dependent on the resources and capabilities of the employee.

• Human psychological barriers
• Lack of level of technical know-how
• Adverse effects mental health
• Difficulty in time management

EXTERNAL FACTORS –

These factors are not related to the employee however the external environment which are not in the hands of an individual.

• India's lack of IT infrastructure
• Lack of access to various resources required by employees
• inter-regional differences in income

RO5TO PROPOSE THE EXECUTION PLAN FOR THE WORK FROM HOME IMPLEMENTATION

One way to tackle multiple disadvantages of work from home is the concept of 'each one teach one', this is an African proverb which came into existence when slavery was practices in America. Slaves were denied the right to education. So, when one got education it was his duty to teach someone else.People in an organisation come from different backgrounds with different perspectives and skillsets, thus making their knowledge a valuable asset. Brining this concept to the corporate world will not only help maintain the wellbeing and social needs of an employee through regular interactionon time management, work life balance or just a normal day-to-day discussion but will also help people gain new skills by simply communicating with the fellow colleagues. Additional incentives can be offered by the employer to encourage this concept among the employees. This concept is feasible if the organisations are looking for a long-term solution to facilitate the process of remote work. Coupled with motivation to proper exercise routine and frequent breaks between works for the employees through various checks and policies can act as a solid base to start experimenting with the longevity of remote work.

IV. CONCLUSION

We can't deny the fact that a lot of efforts havebeen made to accustom to this novel virus, learning new things every day. From educational institutes brining new and innovative ways to teach the students, to big companies organising virtual meetups and dinners in order to ensure the employee wellbeing. Sectors like IT and Education show a promising result in the feasibility of remote work in the long-run, however still require a strong mechanism to maintain the productivity levels of the employees and keep them motivated by reducing the distractions. Also, a lot of work is required in the pharmaceutical and similar service sectors. Work from home is possible in these sectors but huge investments are required for adequate infrastructural development as well as training the personnel about the usage of same. On the other hand, manufacturing, transportation and hospitality sector require as much as nearly 97% of the personnel present at the work place to do the work. So, work from home is not much possible in the later sectors. Problems like high poverty rate, illiteracy, huge income differences where the gap between rich and poor is only widening as the time passes is only adding to the difficulties of India in coming at par with the world's biggest economies. COVID-19 has surely come as a blessing for the IT sector as it has made them realise the true potential of their workforce whichstill needs to be uncovered to not only save costs but also increase the productivity, ultimately leading to boosted growth.

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