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COVID-19 and remote work: Is it sustainable?

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Abstract

Key business publications have recently reported that some CEOs are unhappy with the results they are seeing from their employees who are working remotely due to COVID-19. The concerns that the CEOs expressed included loss of productivity, company culture and employee upward mobility. This paper documents the results from a survey of 109 working adults to gauge their opinion on the sustainability of working remotely. The results of the survey show that employees feel that remote work is sustainable. Further they feel that while it is harder to train new coworkers and to be innovative, they can still be sustained while working remotely. Remote employees do not feel that their careers will be negatively impacted, and they do feel that they still have good access to their manager. The majority of the employees surveyed did feel that they were socializing less with their coworkers. Employees also did not feel that the team morale had diminished significantly since starting to work remotely and that their company's culture had not been impacted. The paper calls for greater research on the impact of remote working on employees since many companies will be going to a hybrid model as the pandemic eases.

Keywords: remote work, COVID-19, culture, morale

Introduction

Recent articles in business journals have called into question the desire of management and workers to continue to work remotely during the COVID crisis. Two articles in the Wall Street Journal state that companies and in particular CEOs are questioning whether remote work is sustainable. Among the unsustainable factors discussed are the difficulty in training new employees, the difficulty in adding them to existing teams, maintaining the organizations culture, maintaining the career trajectory of employees as well as maintaining moral and innovation. These concerns have led some organizations to have employees return to the office in ways that are thought to maintain the social distancing needed to curtail the possibility of COVID-19 infection (Cutter, July 2020; Cutter, Sept 2020).

Other articles have found that working remotely during the pandemic has been a positive experience. A third of employees feel that they will never return to their office and half feel that they are more productive working remotely. By working remotely employees feel that they are better able to balance their work and home lives while still being productive. CEOs have also stated that the benefits of working remotely to their employees and companies have outweighed any disadvantages that they have encountered. The majority of employees also felt that their management and their companies took the appropriate steps in moving to remote work and that their companies were prepared for the transition (Robinson, 2020). This paper will explore current literature around what management thinks about workers working remotely. Both the advantages and challenges will be explored. It will also present the results of a survey of working adults regarding their opinions on the sustainability of remote work.

Specifically, the research questions will be:

- Do workers feel that working remotely is sustainable?
- Do workers feel that training is more difficult working remotely?
- Do workers feel that innovation is harder working remotely?
- Do workers feel that their careers will suffer working remotely?
- Do workers feel that it is harder to add new members to the team working remotely?
- Do workers feel that their manager is less available working remotely?
- Do the workers feel that their company has engaged in team and culture building exercises while they have worked remotely?
- Do workers feel that they are socializing less with coworkers while working remotely?
- Do workers feel that morale has suffered working remotely?
- Do workers feel that their team's culture has suffered working remotely?

The specific areas of interest for the survey are the employee's opinion on whether or not remote work is sustainable. We have the opinion of some CEOs but what is the employee's opinion? The survey also seeks to explore those things that impact the employees' work. The effort needed to train new additions to the team as well as their relationship with their boss and other team members. Does remote work make communication with their boss and their team members more difficult? Does remote work impact their relationships? The survey also wants to explore the employee's relationship with their organization. Has the culture and morale of the organization suffered? This survey and paper are the beginning of research to explore these issues brought on by the need to work remotely due to COVID-19.

COVID-19 and Remote Work

The COVID-19 virus was discovered in 2019. The virus began in Wuhan, China and spread from there ("Identifying the source of the outbreak," 2020). The virus's incubation period is up to 14 days. Therefore, people can become infected with it and can spread it to others before they feel sick themselves. Travelers to and from Wuhan did spread the virus to other parts of the world without realizing what they were doing. With the global economy and the frequency of international travel there was ample opportunity for the virus to spread across the world (Linan, 2020). In early cases the virus was mistaken for the flu. The start of the pandemic in the United States was on the West coast. The first case was reported in Washington State on February 25, 2020. Two days later it was reported in California (Branswell et al., 2020). President Trump declared that the virus was a national emergency on March 13, 2020 ("A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments," 2020).

California was the first state to issue a stay-at-home order on March 19, 2020 (A Timeline of COVID-19 Developments, 2020). This order was put into place to limit the movement of people and therefore limit the movement of the virus. Limiting the spread of the virus was one strategy that has been implemented in other states (Moreland et al., 2020). Other states followed this example and issued orders for residents to stay in their homes. Movement was limited to essential activities (Ortiz and Hauck, 2020). When the states issued the stay-at-home orders, employers had to follow the guidelines. Many employers had to quickly outfit their employees and infrastructures for remote work (Deniker, 2020). Many organizations used Zoom and Microsoft Teams as video conferencing and collaboration tools (Evans, 2020).

Literature Review

Sustainability has been defined as workers being able to do their work without feeling burned out or isolated, and at the same time feeling that they can advance in their careers. The worker must also be able

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to maintain their productivity and the company culture (Caggiati, n.d.). According to a recent study factors that increase the success of working remotely include the use of a video camera, the employee having a specific workspace and having many functions in the company working remotely simultaneously. Being able to see teammates is considered to be an essential element for a work team. Studies have shown that the more that people see a co-worker's face the more that they like them. The increase in comradery can lead to increased productivity (Wheeler, 2020). Having a designated workspace while working remotely is important. The background of the video should be engaging. Zoom and Microsoft Teams provide the option for people to select a background (Ozenc, 2020). Companies benefit the most from remote workers when they are cross-functional. Not just developers and engineers but other job categories need to be able to develop their own system for working remotely and learn how to remotely work from one another (Wheeler, 2020).

One of the arguments for employees working remotely is the flexibility that it provides to them. The remote workers can do their tasks when it works best for them. For the company, this flexibility means increased productivity. Remote employees are thought to be more likely to go beyond the effort needed to complete their work and this extra effort creates value for the company ("Remote Year," n.d.). The benefits for employers with flexible working arrangements are a decrease in turnover, an increase in the ability to attract employees, a reduction in sick time, a reduction in overhead, a reduced carbon footprint as well as the increase in productivity. While not appropriate for all positions and people, remote work can have benefits for both the employee and the employer (Emek, 2020).

The COVID 19 pandemic caused many companies to shift workers to working from home in order to create the needed social distancing. The shift was extraordinary for both workers and companies. As things have progressed over the last several months the question has been asked regarding how sustainable the remote working arrangements are. Can workers be remote indefinitely? In some organizations, before the pandemic, working remotely was seen as a perk and was treated as one ("Is 'Working from Home Forever,'" 2020). Now with the use of collaboration tools such as Teams, Zoom and Slack 51% of workers were remote in April 2020 (Brenan, 2020).

One aspect of concern for remote workers is maintaining the organization's culture. Sixty three percent of workers stated that they have spent less time socializing with their coworkers since starting to work remotely. The breakroom type chats that are possible when collocated are not easily replicated on Zoom or Teams. Workers also state that their companies have not hosted social event as a way to maintain the culture. At the same time workers have reported that their managers have been more available during COVID-19. Over four fifths of workers state that their manager has been as available or more available since starting to work remotely (Roddy, 2020).

As reported by Cutter (2020) in the Wall Street Journal, CEOs are seeing issues with workers being remote. Projects are thought to be taking more time. Hiring, training, and integrating new employees into their work units also takes more time. The culture of the company and the connection between employees and between employees and their managers has suffered. In addition, the development of workers careers is being impacted. The perspective of the CEOs is that the workers are experiencing fatigue and that while some organization have committed to staying remote indefinitely not all companies can sustain it successfully.

One of the drawbacks of being able to continue to work remotely is the access to broadband internet. Microsoft ("Nextlink Internet and Microsoft," 2019) found that 162 million people in the United States do not have broadband access. Rural America in particular is deficient in the access to faster internet speeds. The states of Alaska, Mississippi, Montana, Kentucky, and Wyoming in particular lack high speed internet access (Chakravorti, 2020). This could jeopardize the ability for employees to remain remote since

maintaining communication via Zoom or Teams is difficult without broadband. A slow internet connect can cause issues with voice and video access on collaboration tools (“Seeing Zoom Audio and Video Issues,” 2019).

Another drawback of the remote work environment is the lack of face-to-face meetings and interactions. The human brain has evolved to need the face-to-face interaction. Zoom and Teams can be used to communicate but it is not the same as being in a room together. The non-verbal aspects of communication are lost. Trust is gained from strong eye contact and this contact is not achievable over a video screen. The video still represents a distance between the parties communicating that cannot easily be crossed (Semuels, 2020).

One aspect of remote work that must be present in order for it to work is that the C-suite executives must embrace it. If they do not, then middle management will not, and then individual contributors will also not embrace it. The executives must set the example in order for the rest of the company to feel comfortable with it. Organization must also not just embrace work-from-home arrangements but work-from-anywhere arrangements (Rosenbaum, 2020). The pandemic has increased the number of digital nomads. Digital nomads are defined as workers who are technology dependent while being location independent. They can work and at the same time travel to any internet connected location. The number of digital nomads has grown by 96% due to COVID-19 (“COVID-19 and the Rise of the Digital Nomad,” 2020).

Predictions and surveys indicate that after the virus is under control and the country moves to a more normal state the work environment will be a hybrid of onsite and remote. A majority of employees expressed a preference for a hybrid environment. Hybrid work involves providing the employees the freedom to decide where and when to work. Employees have the ability to fit their work around the rest of the things in their life instead of structuring their day around the time they spend in the office. Employers might designate certain days that the employee must be in the office and days that they can be remote. Other companies have employees come to the office one week out of four. The employees are scheduled so that social distancing can be maintained (Ro, 2020).

Results

The survey was conducted in November of 2020 and involved 109 respondents. The respondents were working adults between the ages of 30 and 65. This age group and employment status was chosen since it is most likely that they would be working and working remotely. Ninety six percent of the respondents were between 30 and 60 years in age and were evenly divided by gender. All the respondents were working in the United States and represented all regions of the country.

The point of the survey was to gauge the view of works as it pertains to the concerns of management that had been reported in the literature. The questions looked at training, innovation, career advancement, teamwork as well as company culture and morale. It also asked the opinion of the respondents as to whether or not their remote work was sustainable.

The results of the survey indicate that the workers feel that remote work is sustainable at least for the short-term if not for the long-term. Eighty-nine percent held this opinion. Over 50% felt that it could go on a long time or even forever. Training is an area that respondents felt was more difficult to do working remotely. Eighty-six percent felt that it was more difficult, but the majority believed that they could handle it in the short term and possibly into the long-term. Only 7% felt that training remotely was impossible.

The same is true regarding innovation. The majority, 68%, believed that it was more difficult to innovate when working remotely but felt that they could handle it in the short-term and perhaps into the long-term. Only 5% consider it to be impossible and a full 33% see no issues with innovating while working remotely. On the question of the trajectory of their career and how it will be impacted by working remotely the majority, 61%, believe that it will negatively impact it. There is a strong correlation in the data between those who believe working remotely is sustainable and those who do not feel that it will adversely impact their careers. The majority, 64%, of the respondents did feel that it was harder to add new people to the team. This has a strong relationship between those who do not feel that working remotely is sustainable. In addition, the majority, 83%, felt that they had the same or only a bit less access to their manager. This did not have a strong correlation with the belief that working remotely would continue to be sustainable.

Viewing the responses from the standpoint of the age of the respondent the most popular response is “For a while longer.” This is followed by “For a lot longer” and “Forever.” The respondents by age group break down as 70 in the 30 to 44 age group, 35 in the 45 to 60 age group and 4 respondents in the over 60 age group. The responses therefore skew towards the under workers.

Regarding their company’s efforts at building or maintaining the organization’s culture the majority, 88%, felt that little or nothing had been done. For socializing with co-workers, the majority, 76%, felt that it had diminished since working remotely or was not there to begin with (9%). Just over half of the respondents left that team morale was down some, a lot or had already been bad. Seventy-six percent of the respondents felt that the culture of the team was the same or better but 24% did feel that it has gotten worse with working remotely. Not surprisingly there is a very strong correlation between the respondents who felt that the socializing between the team had diminished and those who felt that the morale had also diminished.

Table 1: Responses by Age Group

Age	Survey Response			
	No, it can't go on much longer	For a while longer	For a lot longer	Forever
30 - 44	10.0 %	38.6 %	28.6 %	22.9 %
45 - 60	11.4 %	28.6 %	22.9 %	37.1 %
60 -	50.0 %	25.0 %	25.0 %	0.0%

Table 2: Survey Questions and Results

Q1: Do you feel that working remote from home is sustainable into the future?	
No, it can't go on much longer	12%
For a while longer	35%
For a lot longer	27%
Forever	27%
Q2: Do you find that it is harder to train team members working remotely?	
No, it works fine	13%
Yes, but we can manage in the long term	39%
Yes, but we can manage in the short term	40%
Yes, it is impossible	7%
Q3: Do you find that it is harder to innovate working remotely?	
No, it works fine	33%
Yes, but we can manage in the long term	28%
Yes, but we can manage in the short term	35%
Yes, it is impossible	5%
Q4: Do you feel your career will suffer working remotely?	
Yes	39%
No	61%
Q5: Do you feel that it is harder to add new people to the team working remotely?	
Yes	64%
No	36%
Q6: Is your boss as available to you working remotely?	
Yes, the same as before	50%
Yes, but less than before	33%
No, they are available a lot less	15%
Q7: Has the company done team/culture building events for the remote workers?	
Yes, a lot	12%
Yes, a little	48%
No, nothing	40%
Q8: Have you socialized with coworkers less since everyone started to work remotely?	
Yes, we never socialize any more	17%
Yes, we socialize less	50%
No, we socialize about the same	24%
We never socialized before COVID	9%

Q9: Has team morale gone down since everyone started to work remotely?	
Yes, it's down a lot	16%
Yes, it's down some	34%
No, it's about the same	49%
It was always bad	2%
Q10: Is team culture better or worse since everyone started to work remotely?	
Better	18%
Same	58%
Worse	24%

Discussion

The CEOs noted in the Cutter (2020) article expressed concerns for their employees and for the good of their company. Companies rely upon their employees to be productive and innovative. They want to maintain the culture of their organization and make sure that new employees are getting the proper training and are acclimating to their work groups successfully. The CEOs also expressed concern about the career advancement for their employees since the CEOs will rely upon these employees as they move up the ranks of the company.

The employees that responded to the survey shared some concerns with the CEOs. The respondents felt that adding new employees to the work group and getting them trained has become more difficult during COVID-19. McKinsey (Kshirsagar et al., 2020) states that training during COVID must be continued using alternative methods. These alternative methods include digital learning which can be used not just as a replacement for face-to-face learning but as a catalyst to evolve how the organization does its training.

The employees surveyed also share the concern about innovation. Ninety-five percent considered it to be more difficult to innovate while working remotely. Some CEOs also expressed the concern that innovation is just not possible when the team is not collocated. Particularly in companies developing new technologies the CEOs expressed great concerns about employees not being able to work face-to-face (Cutter, 2020). It has been found that innovation works best in cities of over one million inhabitants. The close proximity and the large number of people interacting offers the greater opportunities to cross pollinate ideas and innovations (Ali, 2020). Further it has been found that the real innovation comes from informal gatherings in bars and restaurants (Andrews, 2020). Without the ability to easily interact both formally at work and informally after it might pose a problem in innovation that both the CEOs and employees see.

Employees do express feelings that their companies are not creating opportunities to build or maintain the culture of the organization or to socialize with their teams. A company's culture prioritizes behaviors that are needed to make the organization successful. Employees in a successful company value and trust the culture (Chatman and Gino, 2020). Sull and Sull (2020) surveyed employee sentiments on Glassdoor and found that employees were satisfied with the company culture during the pandemic. They discovered that this satisfaction had risen during COVID-19. The authors found that the reason for the greater satisfaction was that the leadership was providing more and better communication during this time. There have been efforts by companies to create virtual socializing events, but they have proven to be unsuccessful (Clutch, 2020).

One aspect of importance is that not all jobs can be performed remotely. In a survey by Bloom, Barrero and Davis (2020) it was found that just one third of employees felt that they could completely do their job working remotely. Another 30% felt that they could not do all of their job remotely but could do over 50% of it remotely. Over 36% felt that they could just barely do their jobs remotely or could not work remotely at all. Employees in health care, retail, business services and transportation in particular are not able to perform their jobs outside their workplace. In addition, only half of workers working remotely have a place to work that is not a bedroom. The other half must work either in their bedroom or must share a room with others. The study also found that being able to work remotely was more common with employees with more education and more highly paid. This represents an imbalance of opportunity and power between workers (Bloom, 2020).

Conclusion

This paper examined the opinion of employees as it relates to working remotely. It examined their opinion regarding the sustainability of remote work and how it impacts training and innovation for their teams. It also examined their opinion on the impact that working remotely will have on their career trajectory, the availability of their boss as well as the impact of working remotely on the culture in their organization. In addition, the morale of their work group was examined.

In contrast to the opinions of some CEOs (Cutter, 2020) the employees surveyed for this article felt overwhelmingly that working remotely could continue for quite some time. The changes brought on by COVID-19 could continue indefinitely (Scudellari, 2020). Organizations will need to adjust to continue to be successful and some remote options might become permanent (Cutter, 2020). There should be more research on the impact that COVID-19 is having on the employees. Much of the literature looks at the organizational impacts but not necessarily at the employee impacts. More research could be done in the areas that this paper touched on. How does remote work impact the employee's relationship with their manager or their co-workers? How is an organization's culture and morale maintained when the employees are working remotely? How are training and innovation impacted? With the real possibility that many organizations will continue to operate with remote work forces or with the hybrid model these types of questions will only grow in importance.

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