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Working from Home and its Impact on Leadership - The Employees Perspective

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Abstract

Working from home is a way in which employees do their job and tasks outside the usual office setting. They are linked to the organization and its other colleges through the use of the operation of information and communication technologies. As employees work from their homes leaders must be able to communicate with them to continue to influence them to achieve a common goal. Previous research has shown that working from home can be beneficial as it boosts productivity but can easily become complicated if the leaders do not know how to guide their employees. This paper explores what sort of influence did work from home have on the relationship between leaders and employees. An online survey was distributed to 149 participants. This questionnaire measured the participant's perceptive and overall satisfaction with the leadership support they have received. Results suggested that the participants are leaning towards a positive outlook on their leadership support and relationship. As the results did not reach the highest value it presents that the participants believe that the leadership support can be improved.

Keywords: *leadership, e-leadership, digital technology, virtual teams, working from home, telework*

Working from Home and its Impact on Leadership - The Employees Perspective

The norms of how we work today have significantly changed as working from home has become common. This is not the result of some new trend that we decided to enthusiastically embrace. Even though telework has been a concept that businesses have experimented with for quite some time, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced most businesses to move their activities online, including those that were previously exclusively delivered in an office type of setting. Consequently, one of the issues that we need to address is what happened to the role of leaders in this type of environment? Is leadership as a concept affected while leaders/supervisors are physically distanced from their employees?

The purpose of this senior project is to explore what impact did work from home have on the relationship between leaders (regardless of the level of leadership position) and employees. Questions like; *how frequently, or to what degree, employees believe they have received support, or engaged with their supervisors* will be central to our study. Essentially, we will focus on the employee's perspective of how physical distance affected the leadership of their supervisors. Another element that our project will try to include is the level of technology integration and understand how technology is intertwined with transformational leadership.

There were numerous studies conducted focusing on reasons for effective leadership skills to introduce technology in a beneficial way for employees (Aurik *et al.*, 2018). According to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2018), it seems as though there is no way to avoid the at-home workforce and that both leaders and employees need to grasp their new working environment to

lead and operate effectively. Once leaders understand the power and capabilities of it, they will be able to adjust their leadership style and benefit employees that work from home.

While conducting our project we used the survey method to reach results. A self-administered questionnaire type will be used to find out what impact did work from home have on the relationship between supervisors and employees. The self-administered questionnaire will be made up of formed questions that each participant will answer individually. The questionnaire will be an online survey that will be distributed through email.

We will be guided by the following research questions:

How did employees perceive overall leadership support while working from home?

Were leaders able to maintain productivity and employee engagement?

Were leaders providing technological support?

How effective were leaders in their communication (work from the home context: responsiveness, clarity, frequency etc.)?

Were leaders able to provide emotional or social support?

The following literature review will give us an introduction to the topic of remote work; its key terms, definitions, and consequences. Scholarly articles will be reviewed with the relationship between supervisors and employees working from home as the main focus. A great number of studies reviewed show that working from home may positively and negatively affect an employees' working habits.

According to Rupietta and Beckmann (2017), with the continuous advancements in information and communication technologies, the popularity of working from home arrangements in firms has escalated over the recent decades (Shamir and Salomon 1985; Baruch 2000). Hospitality and tourism being human-centric industries rely on creating a safe environment and superb experience for their guests. Front office employees play an important role in keeping the hotels running. Nonetheless, the back office relies on keeping the hotels up and running as well.

Empowering Leadership

According to Seyal (2015), leadership is described as “a process whereby one individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal”. Leaders play a crucial role in the evolution of digital culture (Cortellazzo *et al.*, 2019). Successful leaders, according to Schrage *et al.*, (2021), should “understand and embrace the reality that effective digital transformation can't work without their own effective digital transformation”. Having leaders understand and accept these technological changes, as well as the shift of work in the environment, will have a positive effect on the follower's mindset and adaptive response to change. Fiona Blades, the president and chief of experience officer at data and analytics company MESH explains that there is never enough communication between the leaders and followers (Schrage, *et al.* 2021). She claims that

it is vital for leaders to communicate and have the followers be engaged as much as possible. For this reason, the creativity model is an exceptional model that allows leaders to communicate and engage their followers to execute excellent work performances from home. In addition, empowering transformational leadership “can be considered an important facilitator of technological communication, which enhances interactions among organizational members and departments and improves the extent to which knowledge is shared and is accessible for all employees”, according to Sayyadi (n.d.). Therefore, transformational leadership and creativity are in relation to one another by creating a communicative base for the leaders and their employees (Wang *et al.*, 2013).

Employee’s Performance while Working from Home

According to Rupietta and Beckmann (2017), working in an at-home setting affects an employees’ performance. As there are constant advancements in technology the popularity of working from home has heightened (Shamir and Salomon 1985; Baruch 2000). There are two characteristics that define working from home. Predominantly, employees do their job in a new environment that is not their regular work arrangement. Secondly, the new at-home office must be linked to the organization site in order to be able to interchange details (Rupietta and Beckmann, 2017). Different technological devices are utilized for communication purposes between co-workers and customers (Belanger 1999).

Those who have the opportunity to do their job at home are independent and have the ability to develop their own plan and arrange their own schedule (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). Different theories such as the job characteristics model (Hackman and Oldham, 1976) or

self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) indicate that jobs that require self-government expand the worker's intrinsic motivation leading to a finer work ethic (Oldham, 1976). This suggests that working in an at-home setting certifies employees to be sedulous towards their work without being pushed by a leader.

The method used to determine if the innate motivation has an impression on the working from home employees' performance is the theoretical model as well as the estimation strategy. The outcome of this methodology has shown that working from home indisputably affects the employees' work performance positively. The estimation theory results unveil that those who work from home, work five additional hours than the employees that work in the firm. Furthermore, the paper also uncovers that employees' effort and motivation are boosted when working from home. In addition, the research done shows that the regularity of an employee working from home is significant. As it is concluded in the text "the more frequently employees work from home, the higher the work effort they provide is" (Rupietta and Beckmann 2012).

Characteristics of Working from Home

According to Nakrošienė *et al.*, (2017), technology turned out to be a fundamental element in a workplace, and it no longer matters where one is physically stationed. Working from home is defined as Telework. Telework is a way of work that is executed outside the usual office setting through the operation of information and communication technologies (Nilles, 1997; Perez Perez *et al.*, 2003). This type of work scenario has shown to benefit the employees and employers, as there is the possibility to select diverse talents, decrease the rental costs, inspire employees and look after the work and private lifestyle balanced (Madsen, 2003). There are many benefits of telework yet the most vital one is that it heightens employee efficiency. They are considered to

be more productive as they have the freedom to choose their most effective time to work (Golden and Veiga, 2008; Martinez-Sanchez *et al.*, 2008; Tremblay and Genin, 2007).

To be able to assess how telework components influence work development, an online survey was conducted by 128 teleworkers. This questionnaire consisted of ten telework factors that were measured by a five-point Likert scale particularly designed for this study (Nakrošienė, 2017). According to Nakrošienė *et al.*, (2017), the ten telework factors are time-planning skills; time for communication with colleagues; possibility to work from home in case of sickness; supervisor's trust; supervisor's support; possibility to reduce expenses for travel; possibility to take care of family members; sustainability of the working place at home; possibility to access organization documents from home; and the possibility to work during the most productive time. The results displayed that the most vital aspects of working from home are that there is moderate communication with co-workers, that leaders provide encouragement and assurance, and that the environment is befitting, these also have the greatest impact on work development.

E-leadership

Wart *et al.*, (2017), noted that “there are at least three major reasons why electronically mediated leadership, e-leadership, is important to understand and study”. First, leaders should show skill in several communication types. Commonly, oral communication is seen as most dominant. As a result of this, the communication revolution has created modern communication tools that have allowed communication to be effortless. Although, it has also created complexities such as communication overload and always having the need to stay in contact. These elements have had a major influence on the way leaders are developing (Avolio *et al.*, 2017). As digitalization is

coming to light, the second argument for the significance of e-leadership is that there is a need for organizational modification. Seeing that there is a rise in telework, teams, and electronic communication leadership styles a leader must become an expert in knowing how to manage and tie in all of these aspects. A good way to take control of electronic communication is through the information and communications technology method (Wart *et al.*, 2017). It has become a necessity for leaders to be skilled in information and communication technologies (Gorysberg, 2014).

According to Wart *et al.*, (2017), “e-leadership is the effective use and blending of electronic and traditional methods of communication. It implies an awareness of current information and communication technology, selective adoption of new information and communication technologies for oneself and the organization, and technical competence in using those information and communication technology selected”.

A single-case study was the choice of method used to determine how e-leadership changed relationships with employees. The study was focused on studying at a public university that had about 19,000. The main idea was to keep track of emails, online teaching, and file sharing. These three platforms were chosen because they will be able to show the required technical skills of the users. Furthermore, data were collected through interviews, focus groups, self-administered surveys, and participant observation (Wart *et al.*, 2017). Since there is a mix of methods, the results were categorized by expert sorting. In addition, “an informal grounded theory approach was based on an inductive review of the data, and a discursive review of the problems identified to generate the discrete elements necessary for good e-leadership” (Wart *et al.*, 2017).

The findings show that e-teaching and e-leadership hold similar characteristics. Instructors play the role of leaders for students in terms of the impact and authority they have over them (French and Raven, 1960). Furthermore, it is shown that information and communication technologies are a successful tool for instructors acting as e-leaders. This tool allows different teaching options such as face-to-face, hybrid and online. In addition, these teaching options can be easily compared and analyzed to see what is the best fit. Moreover, this tool allows leaders to build relationships in individual, group, or combined settings. Ultimately, information and communication technology motivates a person's performance as there are vast opportunities and tools that can be used to do a single job (Wart *et al.*, 2017). However, there are disadvantages to information and communication technology. Findings show that there are moments of poor communication, miscommunication, lack of support, lack of motivation, poor trust, unacceptability towards change, and low comprehension of information and communication technology (Wart *et al.*, 2017).

In closing, this study suggests that information and communication technology should be used only when it's beneficial. E-leadership is interpreted as most successful when the technology tools are used appropriately and are valuable in terms of resources. It is also vital to understand when face-to-face communication is considered suitable. Furthermore, successful e-leaders utilize technology in a variety of conditions, yet combine physical practices (Wart *et al.*, 2017)

METHOD

This study has used the survey method to explore what impact did work from home have on the relationship between supervisors and employees. The definition of survey analysis according to Arlene Fink (2003), “is a system for collecting information from or about people to describe, compare, or explain their knowledge, attitudes, and behavior”. For this particular study, the self-administered questionnaire type was used. The self-administered questionnaire is based on formed questions that single respondents answer individually. The questionnaire was produced as a computer-assisted survey that was distributed through e-mail. A computer-assisted survey is exhibited as an online questionnaire, presenting the questions and choices on the monitor (Fink, 2003).

A computer-assisted survey has several advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that there is access to new and wider populations that have vast characteristics, a greater amount of data can be collected, saves time as well as costs, and allows participants to contribute anonymously which creates a larger audience appeal (Rice *et al.*, 2017). The disadvantages are that there are low response rates, participant dishonesty, limitations on the kind of data accumulated, and time the participants are inclined to give (Rice *et al.*, 2017).

This method is beneficial to finding the relationship between the leaders and employees through the new norms of working from home. By focusing on the employees’ perception, we were able to determine how physical distance affected the leadership of their supervisors. To collect this data we have come up with 10 questions that challenge the participants to reflect on their at-home work experience. These 10 questions focus on details about the participants’ perspective

of whether or not they have received support and assistance from their supervisor while working from home.

Furthermore, the goal is to analyze what employees require from their supervisors while working from home in order to execute work performance outstandingly. Questions that are crucial to finding the answers to are; how frequently, or to what degree, employees believe they have received support, or engaged with their supervisors.

SAMPLE

Those who participated in the study were individuals who work or have experience working from home. The survey was created in an online format and was distributed to those who work from home. From a sample of 151 completed surveys, the majority of the participants were female (77.85%). Most of the participants fall into the category of 26-39 years of age (42.28%) and the others fall under the category of 40-55 years of age (36.91%), as well as 18-25 (12.75%). Next, regarding educational levels, most participants have a bachelor's degree (59.06%), followed by a master's or Ph.D. (30.87%), and a high school diploma (10.07%). Out of 151 participants, the majority were employed in educational departments (33.79%), then in finance and insurance departments (24.14%), and closely followed by scientific and technical services (20.69%).

	N	%
Gender		
Male	33	22.15%
Female	116	77.85%
Age		
18-25	19	12.75%
26-39	63	42.28%
40-55	55	36.91%
>55	12	8.05%
Education		
High school	15	10.07%
Bachelor	88	59.06%
Master or PhD	46	30.87%
Department		
Finance and Insurance	35	24.14%
Education	49	33.79%
Telecommunication	5	3.45%
Hospitality & Tourism	5	3.45%
Art, entertainment & leisure	5	3.45%
Gov't and public admin	12	8.28%
Healthcare	4	2.76%
Scientific and technical services	30	20.69%

Table 1, Participants' demographic data
Source: Author

RESULTS

The online survey contained 10 questions. For nine statements the participants had to respond on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being - Strongly Disagree, 2 - Disagree, 3 - Neutral, 4 - Agree, 5 - Strongly agree, while one question was designed as a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being very unsatisfied to 5 being very satisfied. After analyzing all the questions from the survey

Q1: How did employees perceive overall leadership support while working from home?

In answering this question, we see that the participants' average value is 3.64, demonstrating that the participants were leaning towards being satisfied with overall leadership support while working from home.

Q2: Were leaders able to maintain productivity and employee engagement?

Participants' answers to this question have shown that the average value is 3.28. The lowest average value for the five questions. It shows that the participants are slowly leaning more towards positive.

Q3: Were leaders providing technological support?

The answers to this question have shown that the participants' average value is 3.70, demonstrating that the participants were leaning towards being satisfied with the technological support that they have received from their supervisor while working from home.

Q4: How effective were leaders in their communication (work from the home context: responsiveness, clarity, frequency, etc.)?

Participants' answers to this question have shown that the average value is 3.85, which presents that the participants were leaning towards positive when it came to their supervisors' communication satisfying while working remotely.

Q5: Were leaders able to provide emotional or social support?

In answering this question, we see that the participants' average value is 3.65, demonstrating that the participants were leaning towards being satisfied with emotional or social support provided by the supervisor while being out of the office.

DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to explore what impact did work from home have on the relationship between leaders and employees. Furthermore, the aim was to better understand the employees' perception of their supervisors' support while being out of the office. The research was oriented towards the participants' responses to the online survey. The results display a great significance for supervisors and organizations to better understand the employee perspective, satisfaction, dissatisfaction of their supervisors' leadership while working from home. This study is of great importance as working from home is and has to an extent become the new norm as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As COVID-19 has forced many organizations to move their activities online, the dynamic of work has completely shifted. This pandemic has left no choice but for organizations, managers, and employees to completely put their trust into technology. Remote work does hold some advantages as it is a method that has pushed people to communicate better, forced hard work in order to clearly get the right messages across, as well as enhanced productivity and a healthy work-life balance (The Economist, 2021). Harvard Business School has conducted a study in September that has shown that 3 million employees in 21,500 companies have seen that

employees work harder, work longer hours, take part in more meetings, and handle more emails (The Economist, 2021). These facts simply make it hard for managers and organizations to turn down the process of working from home as an option. Furthermore, The Economist states that, “good jobs tend to be those that can be done from home. The best educated are also most likely to be allowed to continue working for part of the week out of the office...”.

Nevertheless, there are some evident issues when it comes to remote work. One major concern is that as this is becoming a new norm it involves many complications when it comes to the development of new rules and laws. Some countries still struggle and are fighting to handle these issues in order to fully accept that the possibility of employees working from home is here to stay (The Economist, 2021). Additionally, employees find meetings over the screen to be uncomfortable and a little personal as the camera does do a major close-up of a person's face. Other issues that arise from remote work are the struggles with bad connection, struggling to keep positive energy and the constant battles that managers must face in order to upgrade their plan.

As the facts above show there is a mix of positive and negative outlooks when it comes to remote work. Therefore, the author was curious to find out whether or not employees are satisfied with the support that they have received while working at home. By basing the research on 5 main questions the author has concluded that employees are leaning more towards finding the support and relationship with their supervisors as satisfying.

The results of the first main research question that revolves around how employees perceived the overall leadership support while working from home seem to be prowing towards a satisfied perception as the average value was 3.64. The second key finding is that employees found the capability of a leader to maintain productivity and engagement almost neutral as the average value was 3.28. The third key finding shows that employees found to be leaning towards a satisfying view on the leaders' providence of technological support as the average value was 3.70. The fourth key finding revealed that employees felt closest to being satisfied when it came to the leader's effective communication as the average value was 3.85. Lastly, the fifth key finding demonstrated that employees once again seemed to be closely leaning toward being satisfied with their leaders' emotional and social support as the average value was 3.65. Overall, the key takeaway is that the results have shown that the participants are mostly leaning towards finding their experience from working at home and the support that they have received from their leaders as positive. However, as it is displayed the scores are not perfect clearly presenting that there is obvious room for improvement. The results show that employees need more from their supervisors to be completely satisfied with the support of their leaders while working from home. To an extent, these results made sense to the author as she understands that working from home is just now becoming the new norm due to the COVID-19 pandemic and that the whole concept is not yet fully mastered.

As the findings show the results are surprisingly revolving around a similar average value that has almost all leaning towards employees being satisfied. As the author did not expect the results to be so close to one another she additionally took a look at the detailed results between female vs male and ages 18 to 25 vs 25 to 39.

The results show that the males had a higher average value than the females. The males show that they were satisfied with the leaders' providence of technological support and the leaders' communication. They are also very closely leaning towards being satisfied with the overall leadership support while working from home as well as with the leaders' emotional and social support. While the females on the other hand are all almost leaning towards being satisfied with their leaders' support while working remotely but are not completely there yet. These results did not in fact shock the author as she expected the male gender to be more open to the whole idea as well as be less critical. As for the females, she expected them to be more critical and analytical of their leaders' support while working from home as they have an eye for detail.

As for the age groups, the results show that ages 18 through 29 demonstrate to be satisfied with the leaders' providence of technological support as well as with the leader's effective communication and the leaders emotional and social support. Age groups 29 through 39 have shown that they are dissatisfied with the leaders maintaining productivity and engagement. The rest of the results show that they are leaning towards being satisfied with the leaders' support while working from home. These results have not shocked the author as she believed that the younger ages would be more willing to work from home as they have a better understanding and knowledge when it comes to technology. They also are able to learn and adapt quickly and are simply more engrossed with the online world. Whereas the older age groups might not be as up to date with the technologies and would consider it easier to keep their private life separate from their work-life especially if they have children and for that reason would rather stick to the older ways where everything is done face to face.

In closing, working from home is quickly becoming the new norm and is certainly here to stay. This study has shown that employees seem to conclude that leaders have not yet completely mastered the characteristics of leadership while working remotely but are considered to be very close. There is still a lot that must be discovered, determined, and understood. Leaders will be faced to overcome challenges every day that will require extensive brainstorming, hard work, and dedication in order to maintain a positive relationship with their employees as well as keep productivity at a high level and successfully guide their employees while they work from home.

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