

Navigating the Paradigm Shift in the Workplace Post 2020: A Review on Hybrid Work Model and Work-Life Balance

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Abstract:

The early beginning of flexible work arrangements was marked in the year 1960s that later evolved into the concept of a “hybrid work model”. The extensive adoption and rising prominence of hybrid work has significantly increased due to COVID-19 pandemic. The work environment for employees has remarkably moved from office to home. Today work from home has already gained massive relevance and has become an essential part of the work environment irrespective of the pandemic. The arrangements of flexible work have challenged the traditional work norm, working time and the work-life balance (WLB) of individuals. The paper is further classified into three phases: the catalyst COVID-19 and the remote work revolution, normalization of hybrid work model and the effects of hybrid work model on work life balance. As organizations and employees alike adapted to new realities of remote and hybrid working, the challenge of balancing work with personal time gained renewed focus. It is considered as an important aspect of healthy work environment. Hence, the study delves into existing literatures to identify how pandemic interrupted the traditional work norms, introduced the adoption of remote work, later normalized the hybrid work model and affected the employees work-life balance.

Keywords: work-life balance, hybrid work model, remote work, work flexibility, COVID-19 pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION

Technological, social, and political changes are dynamic forces that profoundly reshape various aspects of our lives, particularly the realm of work, as societies navigate an evolving landscape that demands constant adaptation in order to remain competitive and resilient. The global workforce has undergone significant transformation since 2020, largely driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has profound impact on nearly all aspects of life and the global economy (Jiang et al., 2023). Governments closed borders, banned mass gatherings, enforced social distancing, and introduced a new normal for workplace and individuals (Brammer et al., 2020). Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General stated “The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the way many people work”, (World Health Organization: WHO, ILO, 2021). Researchers have therefore, used the term “new normal” to refer to the changes in people’s life and work due to the pandemic (Corpuz, 2021; De Lucas Ancillo et al., 2023; Vyas, 2022).

On April 2020, approximately 81% of employees worked in countries where businesses were mandated to close (Krajčák et al., 2023) to minimize the spread of coronavirus disease and protect the well-being and safety of employees. Organizations adopted social distancing policies, remote work arrangements,

flexible working hours and various measures to reduce the physical availability of employees within office while carrying organizational activities concurrently (De Lucas Ancillo et al., 2023; Vyas, 2022). World Health Organization advocated to promote regular teleworking as it will allow businesses to keep operating while keeping their employees safe (World Health Organization: WHO, ILO, 2021). To slow the spread of infectious disease and protect individuals’, Government closed borders, imposed mandatory quarantine for returning travellers, banned mass gatherings, enforced social distancing (Wang et al., 2021) and adopted new protocols for workplaces and institutions particularly (i) remote work (Aleem et al., 2023) (ii) mask mandates (Colvin, 2021) and regular hand hygiene (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020) (frequent handwashing and sanitization) (iii) online learning for schools/universities (Hamida & Amal, 2022) (iii) contactless services (Chen et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2023) (iv) suspension of gatherings (Zhu et al., 2023) and other safety measures. Hence, the organizations were obligated to change their work model and at the same time, were expected to maintain productivity and engagement among remote workforces. Consequently, the remote work became a common norm throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and drew massive attention from academicians (Aleem et al., 2023).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

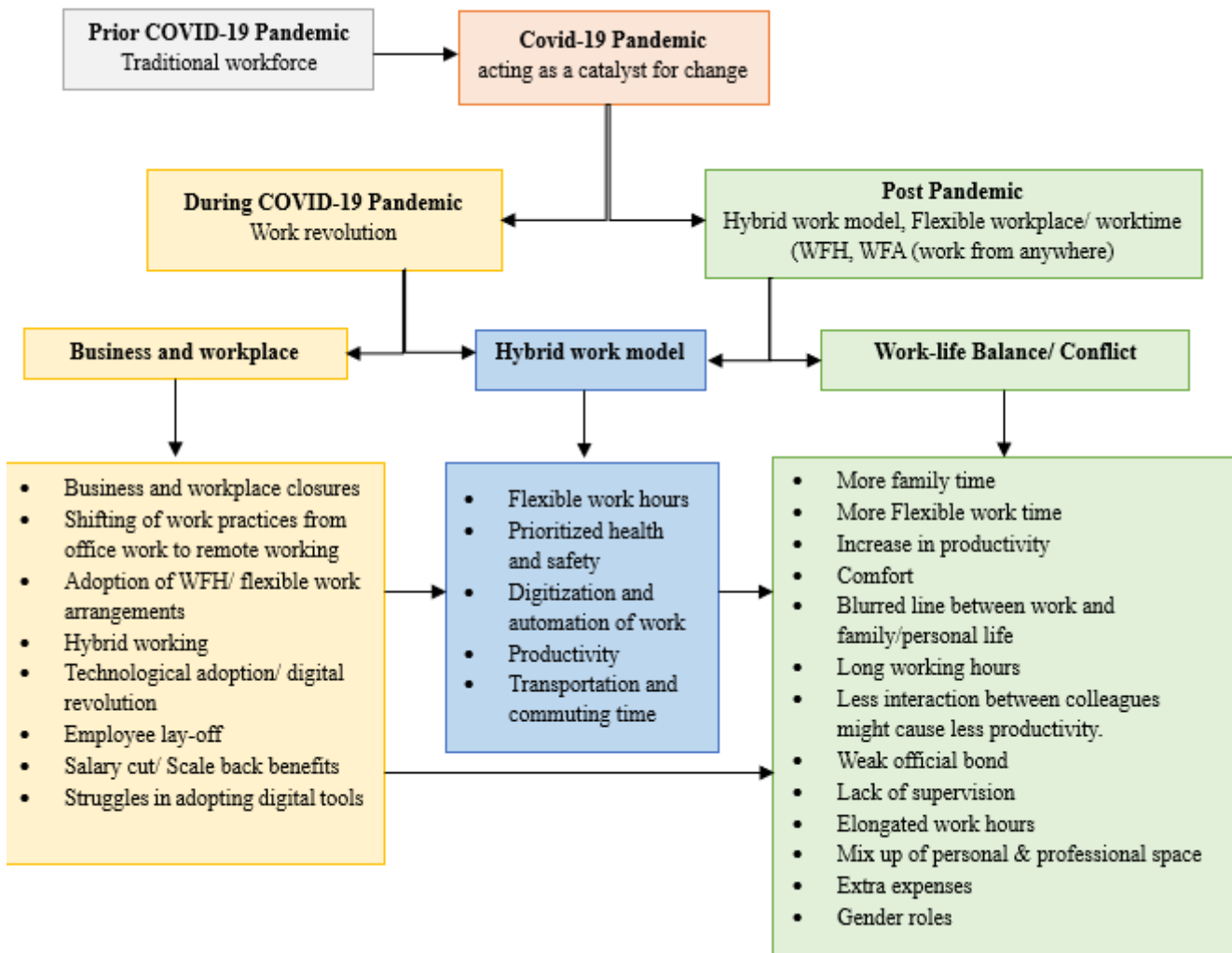


Figure 1. COVID-19 Pandemic, Workplace, Hybrid Work Model and Work-Life Balance

2.1. The Catalyst: COVID-19 and the Remote Work Revolution

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a remarkable catalyst for the remote work revolution, that fundamentally revised how business work used to operate and how employees approached their work. The work evolution from traditional office to remote workplace happened during the pandemic. It has indeed been a turning point in global workspace, remodelling how and where we work (Aleksandra, 2024). Flexible work arrangements, including remote work and skeleton staffing, became the most practical solutions to maintain business continuity (KPMG, 2020). The term remote work implies work from home or outside the workplace/ office. With the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic, the businesses where recommended closures (Krajčák et al., 2023) and number of policy changes were initiated to ensure business continuity and support employees. The sphere of work fundamentally changed: Work from home (WFH) in pyjamas became new normal, and meeting virtually the new conventional (Vyas, 2022). Though, prior pandemic WFH was often viewed as a privilege or perk for certain employees, was a slow but gradual rise in the number of remote workers but the COVID pandemic fundamentally changed the world of work (Vyas, 2022).

The remote work revolution accelerated (i) digital transformation, (ii) reimagining of office space, (iii) reduced commuting time, (iv) resilience and adaptability of work, (v) employees' expectations and retention. Organizations' dependency on online/digital tools and platforms significantly increased during the pandemic (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Adoption of tools like Zoom, Google meet, Microsoft Teams, Webinars became essential for communication, meetings, collaboration and project management. These online platforms have helped firms to boost productivity, protect work continuity, and mitigate economic disruptions during the pandemic. It is the surge in digital technology that shielded many firms' productivity from the pandemic, allowing them to adapt work through online operations (Jaumotte et al., 2023). Digital transformation was not only that brought about significant changes, but there was also a notable shift in office spaces. Re-inventing and re-improving the change in the workplace have been adopted by the organizations that included several factors for the organizations at work namely telecommuting, safety and health measures, adaptability and flexibility in the workplace (De Lucas Ancillo et al., 2023). A significant number of workers appreciated the importance of eliminating travelling time when working from home (Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021). Further, COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the necessity for resilience and adaptability at work, requiring employees and employers to retrain and adjust to the new work style. Simultaneously, businesses had to adopt visionary leadership, a shift in strategic thinking and embrace innovative approaches to address the evolving demands of new normal at work.

Though, the transition to remote work has brought many benefits, but in the beginning, it came up with challenges that is also important to note. Firstly, COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unusual surge in the unemployment rates. Businesses were compelled to lay off employees, cut salaries and scale back benefits to sustain their operations running. This phenomenon has created an enormous ripple effect on the economy, which had recently started to bounce-back to its former state (Lowe, 2024). Secondly, at the initial phase of the pandemic, number of employees struggled to adapt using online tools while balancing working hours with personal life routines and family commitments. However, the research done by (Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021) indicated that within a short timeframe the respondents quickly gained the necessary experience and knowledge needed for digital work by leveraging online tools and platforms. Thirdly, lack of face-to-face discussion and informal meetings were identified during working days (Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021). According to the statistic, 59% of employees felt less connected to their coworkers after shifting to remote work (Deloitte, 2020). Also, the employers of the organizations faced challenges with how to

replicate in-person mentoring and development in a remote environment (Deloitte, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic introduced the concept of remote work to the global workforce, offering numerous advantages while also presenting significant challenges as discussed above. As the world has begun to recover, the work environment is gradually returning to its former state (Lowe, 2024).

2.2. Normalization of Hybrid Work Model

While the hybrid work models, remained mostly a luxury, for most workforce prior to Covid-19, the social distancing and quarantine norms during the covid era turned hybridization of workspace into a compulsion which both the employer and the employee had to adhere to.

However, even though we have now come past those social-distance compulsions, we are witnessing that the hybrid work models haven't been done away with. On the contrary, we see organizations (industries, educational institutions etc.) all around the world, not only keeping the model alive, but also promoting it further. On the other hand, it is not only the employers but also the employees who are benefitting from this novel work model. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss as to why hybridization of workspace is slowly but steadily becoming the new normal.

1. Is work-from-home (WFH)/ work-from-anywhere (WFA) benefiting the employer?

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' article 'Beyond the Numbers', (Pabilonia & Redmond, 2024) WFH is a mutually beneficial setup for both the stakeholders. This report has been prepared, based on data collected from 61 U.S. based industries which shifted to WFH work model during and after Covid-19. It attempts to find out, what the effect of hybrid work model is upon productivity. To do so, the report takes into account the Total Factor Productivity that is measured by dividing the total output by a sum of all inputs used in the production process. This input will include all factors of production like labour expenses, machinery involved, capital, energy etc. When workers migrate from the office setup to WFH setup the sum total of inputs automatically comes down as the employers can downsize their office expenditure when workers are not using the commercial office space.

The article shows that there was an increase in overall Total Factor Productivity when the hybrid work model was adopted by these industries. In other terms, when the employees shift to WFH/WFA model, the industry/company gains in terms of lower investment upon its employees. Smaller office spaces, lower power consumption, decrease in office goods/services consumption etc. ultimately result in better productivity; "the larger the increase in remote work, the larger the decrease in unit capital, energy, material, and service costs growth across industries."

However, the gains for the employers aren't just limited to cost cuttings in factors of production. According to a study done by Nicholas Bloom, a Stanford economist (Bloom et al., 2024; Stanford Report, 2024), there is sufficient proof to conclude that distance work models are a win-win situation for both the employer and the employees. The outcomes of the study which included over 1600 employees of a Chinese travel agency – Trip.com show the multifold benefits of hybrid models for the employers. Published in the journal Nature (Bloom et al., 2024), the article highlights employer benefits: Bloom found that there was no disparity in the productivity of employees who worked from home for two days a week and those who worked at the office full-time.

Equally encouraging results were also seen in the case of employee turnover. Resignations fell by a remarkable 33% when the hybrid schedule of 3-day WFH and 3-day work at office was implemented. Women and long commuters were the biggest benefactors of the schedule. Trip.com estimated saving millions of dollars due to reduced attrition. Thus, this study stands out as a perfect example of the positive

effects of hybrid work model on productivity, employee retention as well as employee satisfaction (Bloom et al., 2024).

2. WFH/WFA benefits for the employee

a) Better Productivity

Hybrid work models have been shown to increase productivity. Alike Nicholas Bloom, other studies have also pointed towards the same direction. Research both before 2019 and after 2019 uphold this claim. “WFH can increase performance due to flexibility because the employees can decide their own working time and place” (Abdullah et al., 2020). Probable reasons behind this improvement have been pointed out by researchers who claim that the workers feel a surge of positive encouragement when provided with flexible work schedules (Bloom et al., 2015; Church, 2015). On top of a positive mindset the workers also get the liberty to work at such hours of the clock when they are most efficient and productive (Singh et al., 2017).

b) Greater Real Income

A study was carried out by an associate professor of Harvard Business School and his team at the US Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) (Choudhury et al., 2019). Their finding state that work-from-anywhere (WFA) model is an even better option than WFH for the employees.

According to the article “Work from Anywhere: The Productivity Effects of Geographic Flexibility” (Choudhury et al., 2019), which cites the findings of the research, WFA option is even better than WFH because it not only provides the employees with temporal flexibility (flexible work hours) but also with “geographical flexibility” which is the flexibility of location. It allows employees to work from any geographical location of their choice. It allows employees to work from any geographical location of their choice. This adds another layer of benefit to the employees as it liberates them from the environs of their office. Such an arrangement could be used by employees to relocate from an expensive location to a place which has lower cost of living. Holding the nominal income constant, this would allow the employees to enjoy greater real income as they are able to save so much more.

On top of this many workers who worked from office previously and commuted to it daily were able to save both time and money by the introduction of the hybrid models, “The evidence for WFH adoption in this paper suggests that the pandemic may have unlocked important longer-term welfare gains in the form of lower commuting costs...” (Bick et al., 2023).

c) Improved Familial Engagement

Probably, the most profound effect of hybrid work models upon workers has been noticed in the field of familial life. Hybrid models have come with the blessing of increased availability of the employees at their homes. This too has proved itself to be a great positive influence upon employee satisfaction and overall performance.

The article “Coping with Post Covid-19: Can Work From Home Be A New Norm?” by (Abdullah et al., 2020) shows conclusions related to this aspect: “This study reveals that working from home does influence family values as the respondents’ responses positively in the survey. They agreed that the communication between them and their spouse, as well as children, can be enhanced as they are able to spend their time with them when they are working from home.” Moreover, the article also talks about greater levels of contentment among those employees who had either young/old/unwell-dependents in their family. We can see that remote work is especially beneficial for employees who have ill family members and/or children at home (Kłopotek, 2017).

Therefore, considering the above-mentioned factors we can understand as to why there has been such a surge in the number of remote work/hybrid work settings all around the globe. The multi-dimensional benefits, both on the employee's and the employer's end, make the hybrid model a truly lucrative option in the modern workspace.

However, like most other things, hybrid work models too have their own sets of challenges and obstacles to deal with. While there are numerous benefits, as we saw in the paragraphs above, there are some very real problems attached with the model too. In the next section we will shed some light upon such problems.

2.3. Effects on Work-Life Balance

While a traditional workspace offers strict routine and demarcation between professional and personal life via designated work hours, assigned workspaces and familiar colleagues, the differences begin to diminish as one moves from working at an office to working from home. Devoid of set schedules and the environment of an office it is quite possible that one may stray away from the norms of discipline and routine which are necessary for the sustenance of a good work-life balance. In this section we will attempt to understand some barriers and challenges that entail hybrid work models, and which pose a direct threat to a balanced professional and personal life.

Work Life Balance (WLB) can be defined as “satisfaction and good functioning at work and home with a minimum of role conflict” (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) or as “WLB is about being able to combine family commitments, leisure and work – including both paid and unpaid work” (OECD, 2020). While hybrid work models (WFH, WFA, tele-work etc.) are usually viewed as a boon to better WLB, the reality might not necessarily be the same. Long term effects of hybrid models might not be as propitious to WLB as traditionally believed to be. In the following paragraphs we will discuss such areas of an employee's life which might get adversely affected by teleworking.

Trouble at Work

According to certain studies, prolonged WFH could hamper social interactions among employees and weaken the professional bonds among them (Abdullah et al., 2020). It also leaves the employees bereft of the easily accessible help and guidance that they could avail from colleagues and superiors (Yusof & Rahmat, 2020). Additionally, no sharing of knowledge or teamwork takes place effectively, hence it deters employees from improving and sharpening their skills (Elshaiekh et al., 2018). Moreover, it also hinders the superiors from accurately evaluating the progress of their subordinates, thereby making the subordinates uncertain of their performances and burdened with extra responsibilities (Wilton et al., 2011). Additionally, tele-work also diminishes the constraints of office hours. Flexible work hours often translate to longer durations of work as compared to working at an office: “many employees feel that they are overworked as their supervisors and colleagues can access them online beyond their normal office hours, and this has the potential for creating personal distress, anxiety and family conflicts leading to potential impact on their work-life balance”(Al Riyami et al., 2023). “Some people need to contact their managers out of the schedule, and this also affects the tasks required” (Songsangyos & Iamamporn, 2020). Such factors eventually lead to burnout and stress (Song & Gao, 2018) thereby causing a disbalance in the equilibrium.

Diminishing Boundary Between Family and Profession

A major challenge offered by remote work is that of maintaining a well-defined boundary between office work and family time. This ability to distinguish between the two has been termed as “psychological detachment” (PD) (Kinnunen et al., 2017). An employee with good PD could maintain a good work life

balance (WLB) while the one with bad PD fails to do so. Employees with bad PD are often noticed to be distracted and less motivated towards their assigned tasks.

Besides this, the home environment also poses other forms of unavoidable distractions which cannot simply be sidelined. These include the presence of young children (Kazekami, 2020) and/or elderly or unwell members of the family (Gálvez et al., 2020). The office work coupled with added familial responsibilities and domestic chores could lead to increased stress and workload.

Added Expenses and Miscellaneous Challenges

While remote work takes away expenses of commuting from one hand, it delivers added expenses to the other. WFH did indeed lead to personal expenditure for such employees who did not already have a proper office setup at home- computers, laptops, web cams, headphones, steady and fast internet connection etc (Gorjifard & Crawford, 2021)

Besides financial expenditure, an improper work environment can hinder productivity, steal away concentration and lead to reduced productivity.

Gender roles also come into play during WFH. Women may face greater challenges in managing work and family responsibilities while working from home. Owing to traditionally assigned gender roles women are supposed to be the caretakers of the family. Therefore, while working from home, it is not only the official duties that they have to tend to but are also expected to fulfill their familia responsibilities. They often take on more domestic work than their male counterparts, such a scenario can exacerbate stress and reduce job satisfaction (Lippe & Lippényi, 2020)

Thus, we see that while Hybrid Work Models do offer opportunities for the betterment of both employee and the employer, they are not devoid of certain shortcomings. These shortcomings, if not dealt with properly, might lead to an imbalance in the work life balance of a person.

3. CONCLUSION

The paper explores how the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst and changed the traditional work model post-2020 by introducing the concept of remote work, work from home, work from anywhere and hybrid work model. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, working in an assigned office space was the standard work model in many countries. Work from home (WFH) was considered a privilege for certain employees and was not widely accepted; also, many employees associated it with isolation, distractions at home, technology & communication barriers and lack of productivity (Vyas, 2022). The home space was typically considered a place to relax and separate from work stress, with clearly defined work hours that began and ended with arriving at and departing from one's office.

However, post-pandemic, remote and hybrid work got normalized, and perceptions shifted. As has been evident, the pandemic led to many changes in the working world, which nobody would have thought of. These changes accelerated the adoption of flexible work hours, flexible work arrangements, hybrid working, digital transformation, reimagining of office space, reduced commuting time, resilience and adaptability of work, employees' expectations and retention, etc.

In the initial phase, employees were forced to work from home without additional aid from their organizations. They managed using their limited resources while carrying out the official requirements of the job. Many employees acquired skills and knowledge suited to future work-from-home policies, such as remote work, online tools, managing stress and productivity, and carefully demarcating the border between work and family responsibility.

Gradually, both the employee and the employer started comprehending the benefits of this set-up. While

the employee could cut down on expenses of commutation along with enjoying quality time with family and friends, the employer benefitted by cost cutting through reduced office expenditure (power, office resources, etc.). In fact, recent studies have shown that in certain cases employees turn out to be more productive at home than at the office. Upon noticing this and certain other benefits, companies have now started adopting policies and strategies for better implementation of hybrid work model in their offices. However, despite these positive changes, new challenges are emanating out of the hybrid work model like social isolation and mismanagement of work-life balance to say a few. Therefore, this paper has attempted to highlight the challenges that hybrid work model casts upon the work life balance of an employee.

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