Impact of Work from Home amid COVID-19 on Work-Life Balance of Academicians at Higher Education Institutes in India- A Literature Review & Future Agenda

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Abstract

Working from home was inevitable, but the pandemic turned it into a compulsion. Not only the way in which organizations work but also the relationship between workers and employers has been deeply impacted by this transition. Working from home (WFH) is proven to have both favourable and unfavourable effects on employees' work-life balance. The present study is an attempt to provide a literature review on the substantial linkages of Work from Home amid COVID-19 with Work-Life Balance particularly, in the context of academicians at higher education institutes (HEIs). The positive aspect of WFH is that academicians are able to spend more quality time with their families. Negative aspects include reduced social interaction, the need for more time to prepare for online classes and long working hours. The paper aims to give directions to future researchers to take up innovative HR practices to deal with work-life balance issues in WFH model and assess their impact on their performance. It suggests to them to perform a comprehensive study to understand the need for WFH dynamics and their impact on employees as well as organizational excellence.

Keywords: work from home, work life balance, COVID-19, HEIs, academicians

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 brought several challenges to the world. Many organizations were affected by the pandemic. World Health Organization suggested governments and organizations worldwide implement a work-from-home norm to prevent the spread of the virus and a solution so that work can be performed as usual (*Irawanto et al., 2021*). Working from home was inevitable, but the pandemic turned it into a compulsion. Not only the way in which organizations work but also the relationship between workers and employers has been deeply impacted by this transition. COVID -19 forced a decision upon people and with the world adapting quickly, many businesses opted to mandatory opt for the work-from option. Everything related to the job, education, and retail moved online globally. The Education Sector is one among them. Online Classes were introduced by educational institutions to safeguard the students' academic interest and continue the academic year. In fact, learning new technologies to take online classes is a new task for academicians (*Akula et al., 2022*). And so is the requirement of balancing the work and family life of educators increased. When working from home, it can be challenging to distinguish between work and home life because boundaries are frequently crossed by kids, family members, friends, and neighbours.

While the impact of COVID-19 has been studied extensively in the global context, the impact of working from home on work-life balance, especially in the context of academicians at higher education institutes has been covered a little. Thus, this study is an attempt to provide a literature review on the substantial linkages of Work from Home amid COVID-19 with Work-Life Balance and to identify gaps in the literature. The paper concludes by highlighting future research prospects.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study is undertaken to achieve the objectives mentioned hereunder:

1.   To understand what impact work from home has on the work-life balance of employees.

2.   To provide an LR on the most relevant contributions related to the impact of working from home on work-life balance of employees.

3. Research Methodology

The present study is conceptual in nature as it involves a systemic review of articles and reports related to the topic of the study. Hence, secondary sources have been used including journals, research publications, and the internet to fulfil the above-mentioned objectives.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Work from Home amid COVID-19- Theoretical Contributions

The Covid-19 pandemic, and subsequent public health lockdowns around the world, have precipitated a shift in the working practices of millions of people (*Platts et al., 2022*). *Kim (2020)* observed that the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic pushed all workers to observe social distancing and forced them to shift from the workplace to Work from Home (WFH). WFH, remote working, teleworking, and flexible working arrangements are among the most common terms used as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This type of flexible working approach does not have constraints relating to time, place, communication, and the use of information. Work from home is the ability to use technology to complete job responsibilities from flexible workplaces most preferably from home (*Gajendran & Harrison, 2007*). *Bataineh (2019)* mentioned that WFH has gained significantly in the changed work environment. Remote work is often provided to an employee already seeking some form of alternative working arrangement and is presented as a form of benefit (*Hayes et al., 2021*). It is a new model of work that has become mandatory due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift of the workplace from office to home has resulted in many positive and negative outcomes (*Kramer & Kramer, 2020*). Remote work raises a vast array of issues and challenges for employees and employers (*Mckinsey, 2020*). The global proliferation of COVID-19 has had an impact on education. Numerous institutions made an effort to continue the education and learning process once schools and universities closed. The education sector is one of several institutions that have relocated to online classrooms to conduct classes. And so is the requirement of balancing the work and family life of educators increased.

4.2 Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is described as achieving a balance between employees' family or personal life and work lives (*Jyothi & Jyothi 2012*). Work-Life Balance (WLB) includes the interaction between the duties for the paid work with any organization and the unpaid work obligations of the family and self-improvement (*Noronha & Aithal, 2020*). It is the degree to which an individual can simultaneously balance the emotional, behavioural, and time demands of paid work, family, and personal duties (*Clark, 2000 Hill, et al, 2001*). *Parkes &Langford (2008)* defined work-life Balance as a person's ability to meet family and work commitments as well as non-work responsibilities and other activities. It is maintaining the situation in which employees are capable of giving the right amount of time and effort to their work as well as their personal life outside the work premises. Work–Life balance normally is said to be achieved when an individual's flexible working arrangements provide a balance between work responsibilities and personal responsibilities (*Marafi 2012*). It leads to the harmonious and holistic integration of work, family, social life, and personal life and is the extent to which individuals are equally involved in, and equally satisfied with their professional and family roles. Work–life balance can affect employee performance both positively and negatively. An imbalance between work and personal life can have an impact on low productivity and decreased performance of a person for an organization (*Konrad & Mangel 2000; Cohen & Liani 2009*).

Impact of WFH amid COVID-19 and Impact on WLB- Empirical Evidence

Working from home is proven to have both favourable and unfavourable effects on employees' work-life balance. The benefits of WFH on work-life balance include flexibility in terms of time and location. Employees can work at their preferred time and save time on their commute to and from the workplace (*Varma et al., 2022; Habaibeh et al., 2021*). According to *Hilbrecht et al. (2008)*, remote working has provided some individuals with more flexible working hours. *Grant et al. (2013)* believe that remote working has played an important role in overcoming work-life balance challenges for organizations to retain talented employees. This has been specifically beneficial for those employees who need to make special arrangements due to family-related matters. Working from home allows freedom in terms of choosing when and how to complete tasks as well as how to divide up one's time, focus, and energy between various roles (*Allen et al., 2013*). Moreover, benefits include less travel; better productivity and motivation; reduced conflicts among co-workers; more room to manage family responsibilities; and improved work-life satisfaction (*Chiru, 2017; Degbey & Einola, 2020; McAlpine, 2018*).

Biju et al. (2022) found a significant positive effect of WFH on the WLB and a positive relationship between WFH employees with work and family. They found that the employees of WFH had equal job satisfaction irrespective of gender. However, male IT sector employees were found to have better work-life balance than female IT employees because being the primary homemakers, they must meet the challenges of working on their job as well as caring for their families. WFH does not increase the working hours of IT sector employees, which means it does not result in any additional duties and responsibilities to the employees. According to *Nam (2019)*, it also enables the employees of the IT sector to effectively utilize their time at work and to engage in more productive activities and hobbies.

However, on the negative side, evidence is available that employees remain whole time busy "on call" to respond to business communications (e-mail, virtual meetings, etc.) which disturbs their work-life balance (*Kossek, 2016*). According to *McCormick (1992)*, the majority of respondents reported feeling more stressed due to difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities. In line with these findings, *Grant et al. (2013)* also found that while remote working helps individuals to deal with both childcare responsibilities and online working activities, this results in having little leisure time. In another study, *Grant et al. (2019)* revealed that e-workers find it difficult to manage boundaries between working and non-working time resulting in a tendency to overwork. Home e-workers discovered themselves working longer hours and not being able to completely switch off from work, which may cause anxiety between work and family. It was also found that unplugging after work is the biggest difficulty in WFH. While remote workers are technologically connected, poor face-to-face interactions with coworkers can cause emotions of loneliness, tension, and unhappiness (*Hill et al., 1998*), which surely harms one's social life. *Lizana & Vega-Fernadez (2021)* revealed that WFH intensified work overload, generated work-family balance conflicts and resulted in a negative effect on teachers' mental Quality of Life components.

In the context of academicians at Higher Education Institutions, there is a paucity of research work. *Parham & Rauf (2020)* indicated that faculty members working in different countries are experiencing both positive and negative sides of obligatory remote working. Flexibility/freedom was referred to as the main positive side of remote working while the negative factors include but are not limited to time management and scheduling issues, separating work from private life, interruptions by children and family members, no clear difference between weekdays and weekends, limited working space/infrastructure at home, distractions and noises coming from the surroundings. Moreover, it was also revealed that working remotely encourages academics to initiate activities to briefly socialize and check on their colleagues' well-being. As a result, participants felt a stronger sense of community, team cohesion and well-being (*Lustig, et al., 2020; Kotera, et al., 2020*).

Further, *Ilic-Kosanovic (2021)* concluded that all levels of teaching staff have had difficulties in maintaining work-life balance during work from home, especially the ones with children of school age. *Nayak et al. (2022)* revealed that online teaching, lack of technology acceptance, poor working environment and work-life conflict negatively affected faculty productivity. It was suggested that IT training work can reduce WFH issues and increase faculty productivity. *Akula et al. (2022)* found that designation does not have an impact (independent) on the work-life balance of academicians during work from home. Whereas the Nature of Employment (Government/Aided or Private) and Good Working Environment at Home have an influence on the work-life balance of Academicians.

With regard to the impact of WFH on the WLB of academicians, only a handful of studies are available, particularly in the context of a developing country like India. However, it can be concluded that WFH has positive as well as negative aspects. The positive aspect of WFH is that academicians are able to spend more quality time with their families. Negative aspects include reduced social interaction, the need for more time to prepare for online classes and long working hours.

Future Research Prospects

1. The world is now moving towards virtual universities (VU), which means no concrete campuses and no physical presence of staff. Experiments are also conducted through remote labs and haptic devices (*Thakur and Mantha, 2021*). Future research can include this factor as an innovative HR practice in the context of higher education institutes to hire academicians on work from home mode and assess its benefits to both academicians and HEIs as this model has been successful in terms of the outcomes such as the incremental revenues generated (*Biju et al., 2022*).

2. Organizations are now planning to develop new hybrid models that integrate WFH with work from an office (WFO) (*Mariniello et al., 2021*). Thus, future studies can include this aspect in the context of HEIs.

3. There is a dearth of studies that assess the impact of WFH on the WLB of academicians at HEIs specifically in the Indian context.

4. There is an inevitable need for HEIs to redesign the jobs for academicians working on online platforms. Traditional HR practices which have been proven detrimental in raising WLB issues should be redesigned. However, still, a handful of studies are available that too in the international context.

5. The impact of WLB in the WFH model on work performance is still not much researched in the Indian context. The median effect of demographic factors (age, gender, no. of dependents), motivation, and job satisfaction is worth to be taken up in future research.

Conclusion

At present, the WFH model is little practised in HEIs in India but due to its advantageous effects on employers and academicians both, hybrid models of working can take place in future. Thus, there is a need to redesign HR policies and practices to deal with WLB issues. There is a need to deconstruct the traditional workplace model and design a contemporary model for overall effectiveness. The present study is an attempt to provide a comprehensive literature review which would help employers, policy makers, and managers at HEIs to understand HR practices that can enhance the motivation, job satisfaction and productivity of academicians. Moreover, this study aims to guide future researchers to take up innovative HR practices to deal with WLB issues in WFH model and assess their impact on academicians' performance. It suggests to them to perform a comprehensive study to understand the need for WFH dynamics and their impact on employees as well as organizational excellence.

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