



Work from home: challenges amidst opportunities

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Work from home emerged as the pandemic proof solution for getting work done. It is not that working from home is a new phenomenon, but with the Covid-19 pandemic last year, millions of workers shifted to work-from-home mode, joining millions of others who had been doing this for many decades. As per the estimates of the ILO before the Covid-19 pandemic, there were approximately 260 million home-based workers in the world. This represented 7.9 % of total world employment (ILO, 2021).

But the outbreak of the pandemic saw an unprecedented rise in their number. IT firms had the infrastructure for this and during the pandemic they became the early ones to adopt the practice (Business Standard, 2021). Earlier, these firms also gave the employees the choice of working from home on some occasions. During the lockdown all of their employees started working from home. Some of the tech giants, such as Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Facebook, Twitter, etc., have already moved further in this direction. Twitter has already announced that it will let its employees work from home permanently. TCS is working on a model to reduce the number of its employees working from office space to 25% by 2025 (Business Standard, 2021). It has become clear that working from home is here to stay longer.

Hybrid model

It is also believed that the future will be a combination of home and on-location work - a hybrid model. There are two reasons for this: first, some forms of work need customer interface and, second, the hybrid model will be required for the mental well-being of the employees (The Print, 2021). All this has led to an urgency to understand its implications for businesses and workers alike. Many sectors in which the concept was not there previously have now adopted this practice, and this has led to a debate whether work from home is good or bad as we are forced to stay in our homes, and also we are forced to think of alternative ways to work beyond traditional forms.

In this Covid-affected world, work from home seemed to be a very good idea. There are a number of benefits attached to the practice. Work from home means a worker can, theoretically, choose to work from any place - it can be a café, beach or a mountain. It has also been argued that this will help to improve the productivity of the worker. A survey done by Airtasker last

year showed that remote employees worked 1.4 days more per month than their office-based colleagues. In addition, reduced carbon footprint and reduced cost of real estate look very appealing on the surface; it can't be denied that the cost of real estate for these firms has been very high, reducing their profitability. Climate change is another problem staring all forms of terrestrial life in the face. Cutting out the need to commute to offices cuts down the need to commute at all by a large degree. All these were visible during lockdown and after lockdown in different countries.

Another area in which work-from-home will have an impact is migration. Migration has become a source of distress for workers, employers and governments across the globe because of their vested interests. To them, working from home seems really beneficial. And the possibility that they could work and earn from their own homes seems to be a newly found ray of hope. Industry believes that the new system will help in getting talents which were unavailable earlier due to various constraints (Business Standard, 2021). Another point is that this will help in creating more work and will also increase the number of freelancers. The impact of these will be on the planet and climate crisis as well (The Print, 2021).

But work from home comes with some challenges as well. A major problem with work from home will be work disrupting private lives. Being at home always brings about a conflict between participating with family and working for the employer. And even for the most disciplined employee, their children or old parents could always walk in. That is a severe conflict of interest. Privacy of employees will be compromised as employers may want complete surveillance of their employees.

Logistic costs

Further there are logistic costs associated with working from home. Work from home has digitally divided the workforce, with one side being those who have technological resources to work from home and on the other side those who lack these resources, who will find it difficult to work from home. Although some companies have provided support it is usually insufficient. Will one's employer assist to develop a workplace at home? Who will pay for it? Who will buy my coffee? Home offices will be required as working in the living area will reduce productivity.

Will one's salary that is currently paid under different categories, including travel allowance, be reduced? The trade unions have also raised concerns on work from home and termed it as 'cheap for employment' and against the interest of the workers (The Economic Times, 2021).

Also, offices have work cultures. Often, unwritten rules are passed on from seniors to juniors in the workplace. Work from home kills that avenue. Often it is said that the best way to learn is to watch experienced workers perform. Work from home shuts off that avenue for new employees and interns. We need to regularly interact with others in order not only to perform better but also for the simple reason that we are humans. These interactions are sources of great learning and open doors of creative learning/knowledge for us. Through interactions we develop our understanding of things. This will be cut off to a very large extent if populations start working from home.

Work-life balance

A number of workers have reported health issues, citing work-from-home ailments such as back pain, difficulty sleeping and stiff neck, among others (News18, 2021). Similarly, work from home will further reinforce gender roles and women may be more burdened, balancing both office work and domestic chores. Workers have also said that they missed everyday social interactions and casual conversations with colleagues at the office. They have also emphasized the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life (ILO, 2021).

Work from home will have an impact on the training of workers. The firms that will adopt massive working from home will have to find ways to train the workforce as, with more use of technology, the need for reskilling will rise further. Some undesirable features have arisen with this such as irregular working hours and slowing the training process, thus affecting the human capital. It has affected the work personal life

balance.

Many countries have come with regulatory measures for work from home (ILO, 2021). We also need to think for those whose livelihood depends on movement of people and those who cannot work from home, such as the cab drivers and canteen workers who worked near offices

So, the trade unions need to come together to find solution to these problems in order to make work from home decent for all the workers. If work from home becomes a normal model of working, organizing workers will become more difficult; this will weaken workers solidarity and bonding. Trade unions also need to launch online campaigns and awareness programmes so that they can engage with the workers working remotely.

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