Remote Work: Building a Framework for Success – Final Literature Review

Charmane B. Sablock

LD 850- MGMT 850.1OH: Leadership Integrative Capstone, Granite State College

Author Note

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Charmane B. Sablock. Email: cbsablock@go.granite.edu.

Abstract

The recent COVID19 pandemic has turned the word remote work into a business buzz phrase. While some businesses embraced remote work before the pandemic, many organizations needed to make quick decisions implementing a remote workforce as the pandemic unfolded and required them to send employees home to work during Stay at Home orders to insure employee safety through social distancing. This research is focused on both the advantages and disadvantages of implementing a remote work model within an organization.   While there are studies reporting aspects of employee performance that improved, there were also challenges noted with performance of individuals and teams. Remote work can also be seen as a valuable benefit for employees who desire flexibility in their work-life balance, but there are also some challenges for many individuals who may have a difficult time balancing their workload with their home life. Managers and organizations need to consider both the positive and negative aspects of remote work and tread carefully with appropriate evaluation of all the factors surrounding remote work and develop best practices and training to mitigate any negative impacts in order to insure success for both the employee and the business. This research uncovers some of the important factors managers need to consider for making remote work effective and successful.

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Remote Work: Building a Framework for Success

Telework provides an opportunity for employees to work outside of their normal office. Although the COVID19 pandemic has brought telecommuting to the forefront, as the pandemic eases and lifts the workforce out of restrictions, remote work will be more of an option than a necessity. At this time, companies should understand how to frame their remote workforce effectively in order for their employees and business to be effective in a telecommuting environment.

Often times we think that a company that offers remote work is providing a great benefit to their employees by improving their work-life balance. While this may be true for some, I will research further to fully discuss the bigger picture of remote work and how it affects employees and companies. An October 2020 online Forbes article reported that a recent FlexJobs survey indicated that 73% of employees working from home indicated that their work-life balance had improved (Spiggle, 2020). While on the surface this sounds positive, what are the impacts to the other 27% and also just as important, is the business performance improving as a result of the employee's remote work?

Business leaders should be strategic with how they approach telework by being "proactive and intentional" with remote work policies and practices coming out of COVID19 (Makarius et al., 2021). As a human resource professional there are times when offering remote work would help to have a larger talent pool when recruiting for specific skills and talent that may not be in the local area and do not want to relocate, so are their certain traits we should look for to ensure the success of the employee? SHRM notes that certain attributes are important for the effectiveness of the remote employee like having effective communication skills, being self-

disciplined and self-motivated, being comfortable with metrics based evaluations and have the ability to place efforts on engaging socially (Maurer, 2019).

       The purpose of this report is to provide research information regarding the advantages and disadvantages of a remote workforce and what managers need to think about when designing their remote workforce plans. This research will be used to further build a best practices guide

Literature Review

       It is necessary for an organization to understand both the advantages and disadvantages of utilizing a remote workforce. Because businesses may want to consider a remote workforce model to recruit and retain specific talents in the workplace, it is important for leaders to understand that there are special considerations for an offsite workforce before they embark into a telework model. The recent COVID19 pandemic has changed the way companies think about remote work, so as the pandemic winds down, there are not only learnings from past research, but from the current lessons that companies learned as organizations hastily adopted telework models just to keep employees working safely and to keep their businesses afloat.

       Although there are many employees and managers who feel that remote work offers the geographic flexibility they might need or offer as a benefit to employees, there are many notable challenges uncovered in my research that should be considered when making the decision to implement a remote work model. Some of the challenges and considerations reported in these studies included challenges with work-life balance, employee burnout, isolation, stress, poor performance, poor team cohesion/trust and communication along with business culture shifts creating confusion in the workplace.

Performance Impacts

There is a perception that an in-office employee provides more output than a remote employee. Consideration must be given to the remote workers ability to maximize their output because of the minimal interruptions occurring outside of the office, i.e., not having to attend many in-office meetings (Eckhardt et al., 2019).

In 2020, Popovici et.al noted that a study completed in 2015 of over 16,000 Chinese employees revealed that work from home improved employee's performance by 13% with factors that included more work minutes per shift and the fact that employees took fewer breaks and used less sick time (Poppovici et al., 2020). Another factor of this improved performance was attributed also to the employee's ability to have more quiet time to focus on their work (Poppovici et al., 2020). Additionally in an article published in 2021, Ferreira et al. reported the results of interviews with 129 remote working professionals where they noted advantages of working remotely. During these interviews 25 workers indicated that they felt their productivity had increased due to their ability to work remotely (Ferreira et al., 2021). This topped the list for reasons why employees felt working remotely was beneficial. Moreover, remote workers also indicated that they were more productive since they were able to carry their technology where ever they were (Ferreira et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Eckhardt et al. reported that remote workers are also more productive when participating in virtual meetings than with typical in office meetings. Remote employees were better prepared and could avoid office politics (2019). This study also concluded that teleworkers tend to base their value to the company on their personal output, so they go above and beyond to meet performance expectations (Eckhardt et al., 2019).

Similarly in 2018, Golden & Gajendran noted that particular roles that require an individual remote employee to work independently can have a positive influence on their work performance. It seems plausible that without the need for support from the team in addition to the remote quite time allowed the remote workers to raise their performance efficiency (Golden & Gajendran, 2018).

In the studies published by both Ferriera et al. and Golden & Gajendran, similarly they report that remote workers spend less time commuting and therefore spend their additional time working and therefore increasing their productivity (Ferreira et al., 2021and Golden & Gajendran, 2018). Golden and Gajeendran further report that telecommuters are working a minimum of 4 hours more per week than their in-office counterparts, therefore increasing their performance (2021,2018).

On the other hand, it can be difficult for a company to transition to remote and onsite workers as the culture of the organization can shift and have unexpected consequences of lower performance with teams and individuals as they struggle with communication and team cohesion (Poppovici et al., 2020). Furthermore, businesses struggle with understanding how to engage the remote workers with the onsite workers (Eckhardt et al., 2019). In addition employees find it difficult to build relationships when working from home which inhibits the ability to build trust – an important factor for team cohesion and effectiveness (Eckhardt et al., 2019).

Similarly, another study indicated that the higher the percentage of remote workers a company employs, the consequence will be the further decline in employee performance including declines in team performance as more and more employees work from home (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2019). This study also named large companies that discouraged work from home assignments due to these challenges including Yahoo, IBM, Bank of America, HP and

Best Buy (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2019). It is also important to note that employees working

remotely can feel separated from their workplace, creating worries of missing out on

opportunities for career advancement and feeling social isolation which can have an effect on

work performance (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2019). Golden et.al. also reported that poor job

performance was impacted by the professional isolation of a remote worker (2008).

   The research shows that a remote employee is more than likely to put in that extra effort

to perform to the best of their abilities while working offsite. With the extra challenges of

communication and building team cohesion in a remote environment, the manager must work

hard to foster an environment of collaboration and trust and inclusion with their teams through

the use of scheduled meetings and promoting the use of various technologies to combat the lack

of face to fact interaction.

Work-Life Balance

   Poppovici et al., notes that another advantage to telework is that it improves the

employee's work-life balance (2020). Furthermore, both Ferreira et al. (2021) and Golden &

Gajendran (2018) agree by indicating in their research that the work-family enrichment is

improved for the remote worker thereby increasing job satisfaction and morale with the increases

in work-life balance.

   Although work-life balance can be an advantage to remote workers, it is important to

conversely discuss the major disadvantages that can be experienced by remote workers which

counterintuitively affects their work-life balance. Most resources discuss challenges of an

employee's inability to disengage from work and the blurred lines of work and home life that can

develop for the remote worker as a major impact to employee mental health and stress.

Many remote employees find it difficult to put the work down and focus on the family when working from home which leads to overwork, burnout and stress. More and more remote employees are working while cooking dinner, working weekends and late into the night even though the demands of the workday has ended. The workplace becomes part of home life, so the employee feels like they should always be working, creating stress when trying to disengage (Eddleston & Mulki, 2015). Kazekami also notes that although remote work can increase productivity of employees, it can increase stress for those who cannot balance work and home life (2019).

In addition, a 2020 survey of 500 employees working remotely conducted by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), found that 50% of the participants were unhappy with their work-life balance, with many working more hours and keeping irregular work hours while working from home. Moreover, 33% of the respondents reported that they felt isolated (Churchill, 2020).

Furthermore, if the employee cannot manage their time, it overlaps into their personal time and creates stress. It is important for a remote employee to understand how to separate and balance their personal and work time so not to become stressed and burned out. The telework can overtake the worker so that the line of work and personal separation becomes distorted (Eckhardt et al., 2019). The other studies also agree that work-life balance can be negatively affected by the inability of a remote employee to maintain a balance between their work and home activities (Poppovici et al., 2020 and Ferreira et al., 2021).

While work-life balance can be seen as a benefit for an employee who works remotely, the impacts of having an employee who has a difficult time balancing their work and personal time can have an impact on their effectiveness and therefore the organization's performance.

Managers need to monitor and encourage their remote employees to disconnect from work to create a healthy balance.

Technostress

Another challenge for an employee working remotely can be the intense focus on technology for communication. Remote workers can develop high levels of anxiety and stress because of the continuous use of technology – computers, tablets, phones – the demands of a constant connection to technology (Poppovici et al., 2020). Ferreira et al., similarly noted the challenges for employees working remotely to be technologically dependent (2021). Additionally another study reported that teleworkers can suffer from "technostress" because of their constant contact to technologies (Eckhardt et al., 2019). *"Experts say that technostress results when people feel overwhelmed by the presence of technology in their lives or when they begin to feel technology is taking over their lives.*" (Ungvarsky, 2019).

This "always on" concern was also confirmed in a study where many employees felt stressed about being expected by their managers to be available to respond outside of their work hours through the use of mobile phones and other electronic devices (Parker et al., 2020).

Similar to the negative impacts that remote work can have on work-life balance, employees can be further impacted negatively by their ability to connect anytime and anywhere to their work. Being able to shut down the technology will be an important management expectation to alleviate the stress of the employee's constant connection.

Organizational Recommendations

After reviewing the research available on the advantages and disadvantages of remote work there are many suggestions for managers and organizations to consider when they are

proposing a move to remote workers. These suggestions could also be considered to make improvements in their current model of remote work activities.

One study suggests that organizations should train remote workers on the need to establish schedules and boundaries of their work and family life so that they have the ability to disconnect from work (Poppovici et al., 2020). Eckhardt et al. furthermore suggest that managers set clear expectations of work availability so that it will not be misinterpreted by the remote worker (2019).

Eddleston & Mulki also encourage managers to set clear boundaries of expectations so that they do not set their employees up for 24/7 work (2015). Similarly van der Lippe & Lippényi suggest that managers provide training to workers on how to productively work from home (2019).

Eckhardt et al. specifically reports that companies do not appropriately evaluate an employee's mental, technology and relationship skills to be able to effectively work from home (2019). Therefore it is not surprising that one recommendation for managers is to understand which workers can better balance personal and work-life (Ferreira et al., 2021). Remote work is not suitable for everyone and managers need to take into account that some employees might not perform well with uncertainty (Eckhardt et al., 2019). Oakman et al. also indicates that managers should make it clear to remote employees what the expectations of hours are so that they can help with work-life boundaries for the employee (2020).

Furthermore, another study found, the most successful remote employees have virtual intelligence where they are able to have rules of engagement for their remote interactions and also have the ability to build and maintain trust (Makarius & Larson, 2017). Managers should consider how to train employees to foster this skillset.

Other recommendations from Eckhardt et al. are to set up a mentor for a new remote worker to share experiences of their remote work. Encourage managers to build a mix of remote and onsite teams and encourage planned face to face meeting to build relationships. They also encourage the manager to set up time for social communication to help with team building and to also provide the appropriate technologies needed for remote work. Beňo also suggests that employees may be more effective remotely when they spend two to three days per week in office (Beňo, 2018).

A survey completed by MIT in April of 2020 with respondents answering questions about remote work also concluded that employees felt that good communication was critical to the success of remote work teams. Remote employees found it to be important for managers to provide a structured meeting schedule along with frequent check-ins with their employees (Donald Sull, 2020).

Smith et al. also have a few recommendations for managers of remote workers (2015). Their study concluded that for employees to be satisfied with their remote work, there should be multiple channels of communication to help the employee stay connected, especially video communication to replace the lack of physical face to face meetings (Smith et al., 2015). Similarly, Smith et al. also suggested that managers consider having a remote work model that includes some onsite time and not have the remote employee exclusively offsite and have them visit the office occasionally.

Golden et al., 2008 also found that a tele-workers isolation while working remotely has a more negative impact on their job performance the longer they work remotely without the in-person face-to-face communication (2008). Oakman et al. stresses that it is important for

organizations to provide training and assistance for managers who support remote work teams(2020).

Framework for Analysis

Because the future of remote work is going to become a part of most companies DNA, it is vital that organizations are prepared to integrate a remote program that supports the needs of their business. A company's success will largely depend on how well they utilize their workforce to be the most efficient as possible including either embarking on a new culture of remote work or some sort of hybrid mixed approach. The approach I took for this research was to collect information from studies and reports that offer both the benefits and watch-outs of telework. Adding to this research is information collected on what businesses and employees have done or should do to insure success with a telework program.   The business not only needs to make sure the remote work makes sense for a particular role in the organization, but also that the employee is the right fit for remote work.

The managers within organizations can also make or break the remote work effectiveness. Parker et al. notes from their 2020 study that managers who set their expectations too high with remote workers can in turn upset the work from home work-life balance and in turn cause more job related stress impacting the employee's effectiveness (2020). This study pushed 92 questions to managers and employees (1200 participants) from a wide range of industries working remotely during COVID19 in order to understand manager and employee wellbeing and productivity (Parker et al., 2020). Understanding how to improve manager's skills for managing remotely is just as important as their subordinate effectiveness training.

Remote work provides an opportunity for employees to work from anywhere and anytime, so managers need an all-inclusive understanding of both the benefits and pitfalls of a remote work model (Allen et al., 2015).

My research includes both aspects of effectiveness for managers and employees so that organizations can have insight into what steps they can take to be successful with their goals.

Because the effectiveness and performance of the employee is also just as important for success in remote work, I have discovered what employees can do for themselves to insure their success in a remote environment to mitigate the effects of their remote work creeping up into their home-life and creating undue stress.

Conclusion

In conclusion of this study, I have found that there is relevant research available on the topic of remote work. There have been many advantages and challenges identified through the previous research for managers and companies to embrace before embarking on a path of a remote work culture and improving upon programs that are already implemented. With the recent influx of remote workers from the impacts of COVID19 there is much more business and employee experiences that can be researched for additional findings.

Some of the limitations of building a manager and employee best practices is the impact of the recommendations made for the previous research. For instance, what is the impact for hiring the right personal, conducting appropriate trainings for workers and managers on the business results and success of work from home programs utilized by organizations. There was limited information on the cost savings or increases for businesses that implement remote work within these resources. It would not be surprising to find that although there may be cost savings with buildings, electricity, etc., that those savings might be deferred to additional training/efforts

for managers/employees and technologies needed to make remote work successful. SHRM notes

that by year 2025, more and more employees will be working remotely and that companies will

be adopting a "hoteling" type model where employees do not have static office space. The

spaces will be shared with others who are coming on and offsite site, therefore enabling the

organizations to downsize their office space which can turn into cost savings (Agovino, 2020).

Employers who are able to capitalize on how to manage a remote model will be able to

welcome a larger pool of candidates to effectively run their business. Managers who have the

ability to effectively manage remote individuals and teams will be set up for the success in the

post pandemic future of remote work.

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