

Work from Home in COVID times –boon or bane?

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ABSTRACT

The advent of COVID-19 has changed the way we perceive every aspect of our lives. If we especially investigate the business world, it has redefined our working styles. While this paper began as an attempt to understand the employee pulse in the aviation industry during COVID times – issues faced, aid from management, further expectations from both the parties, some interesting observations were made which led to a gap due to the trend of working from home. Online platforms opened up new avenues, easing work from home. In this paper we will discuss the repercussions, work from home has on the employees in terms of ease of working, advantages and disadvantages, and how the HR team can strategically work with the management to enhance work from experience for employees in the aviation industry in India. Preparedness for the future in case of recurrence of similar pandemics would also be discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, HR practices, aviation industry, new normal, next normal, work from home, management, humanresources

JEL classification: M10, M51, M52, M53, M54

INTRODUCTION-THE GENESIS OF “NEW NORMAL”

COVID-19 has been the buzzword for 2020. It brought a lot of chaos and angst into our lives. Many unfortunate lives paid ransom to this deadly virus. Emerged from Wuhan, China in December 2019, it spread like wildfire across Europe, U.S. and other Asian countries in mere months. The virus predominantly spreads through droplets of saliva and affects the respiratory system, most common symptoms being cold, dry cough, pneumonia, shortness of breath and loss of taste. People exposed to these symptoms are put under mandatory quarantine – at home or at a designated COVID facility. Those diagnosed with symptoms are to be isolate data facility or home for 10-14 days and 3 days without symptoms. On 30 Jan 2020, W.H.O. declared corona virus as a public health emergency of international concern, the highest level of alarm (W.H.O., Timeline: WHO's COVID-19 response, 2020). A lot of safety precautions such as the use of sanitizers, masks, coughing and sneezing etiquettes, washing hands frequently, sanitizing food such as fruits, vegetables, etc. were reiterated time and again so that they reach all masses and are followed to contain the virus. While the safety measures have slowed down the virus, there were still a lot of casualties. According to the latest update from (W.H.O., WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, 2021) as on 7th June 2021, there have been 173,005,553 confirmed cases and 3,727,605 deaths across the world and specifically, in India, there have been 28,909,975 confirmed cases and 349,186 deaths.

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The entire world went into a state of lockdown –businesses were temporarily halted or working remotely, food and resources were stocked up by citizens, curfew began whilst providing meagre hours to restock on necessities. International and national travel were restricted due to which many migrant workers were stuck homeless. There were many schemes introduced by the government, such as Pradhan Mantri Gharib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) or Aatma nirbhar Bharat (Self-reliant India) to aid these workers. Many voluntary organisations emerged and did their part to help these workers sustain themselves during the lockdown and reach their homes in sound health. Since the onset of lockdown on 25 March 2020 till 1st May 2020, a non-government voluntary organisation, SWAN – Stranded Workers Action Network has reported that 82% of the workers who reached out to them have not received any kind of support from various COVID relief funds (SWAN, 2020). This is just one of the many formal and informal organisations that stood by the community in times of need.

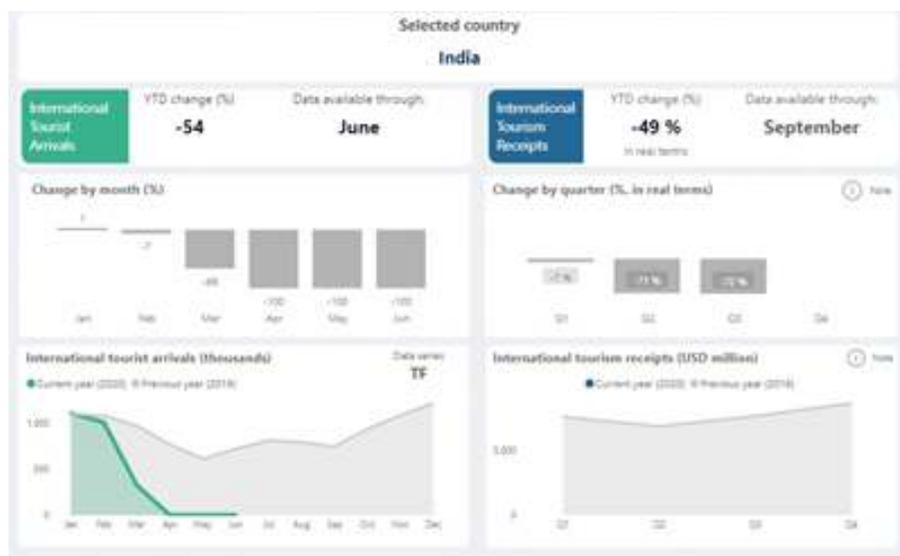
After the Ministry of Home Affairs released an order to permit inter-state travel towards the end of the second phase of lockdown, there was a huge rush to travel back to their homeland. Workers resorted to travelling in lorries, cycles and there was also a mass exodus of workers who set to travel on foot. On 9 May 2020, 16 people were crushed by a train in Aurangabad as they fainted on railway tracks. (SWAN, 2020). Such scarring incidents, some stated above, have changed every aspect of our lives in ways more than we can contemplate.

Despite all this, there is an upside to this – nature started healing itself. The Himalayan Dhauladar ranges could be seen from Jalandhar after 30 years due to reduced air pollution. (Thacker, 2020). There were sightings of animals prowling on the roads, sharks and dolphins on the shore without the noise of land and sea traffic across the world. These changes made us ponder on the power of nature around us and made us question if we should slow down to co-exist with our mother nature.

Challenges of the Business World due to COVID-19

While an outline of how COVID-19 has impacted the people and nature has been painted in the above segment, let us dwell further and look at its effect on the world of business. Indian economy took a massive hit, regressing years, costing millions of people their jobs. The tourism industry took a plunge of 54% in terms of the international tourist arrivals which in turn impacted the aviation industry. (UNWTO, 2020).

Figure 1 : Plunge in tourism industry w.r.t. international arrivals

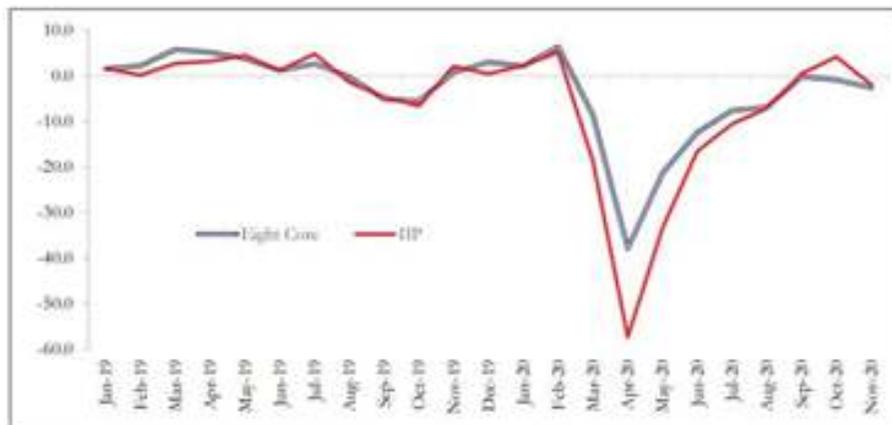


Source: (UNWTO, 2020)

The pandemic crisis has also impacted the inflow of western capital markets owing to up heavals in the stock market. As per the NSDL data, Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) with drew from India, ₹247.76 billion from equity markets and ₹140.50 billion from debt markets in a short span of 13 days, that is, from 1 to 13 of March 2020. Oil prices have hit an all-time low in 18 years in March 2020. (Chaudhary, Sodani, & Das, 2020).

According to the (Economic Survey, 2020), if we look at the 8 core industries (coal, crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, fertilizers, steel, cement, and electricity) and their Index of Industrial Production (IIP), though the industries registered very low growth in April 2020 (-37.9%), they gradually picked up (-2.6 % in November 2020) during the “Unlock” process as shown in the below figure.

Figure2 – Growth tracking of 8 core & IIP



Source: Survey calculations based on MoSPI and Office of Economic Adviser's data.

To recuperate from the losses caused by the lockdown during the pandemic, the world sought the support of the internet and online communication thereby repairing to an extent the dire state of the world and national economics. Most of the small-medium scale businesses (SMBs) in Asia would have perished had it not been for digitalisation. Nearly 75% of them concurred that switching to digital platforms revived their business in a survey conducted by HP. (Money Control, 2020). Work from home has become the norm of this game. Out of the 2000 people surveyed in the US, there has been an increase from 8.2% in February 2020 to 35.2% in May 2020 in terms of the number of people working from home based on a survey conducted by (Bick, Blandin, & Mertens, 2020). A survey conducted by Lenovo for 20,262 workers across the world showed that 74% of the respondents from India said they'd continue working from home post-pandemic. (CRN, 2020). The hugely positive response towards work from home is not without its reasons. An Indian employee saves 2 hours of travel time, on average, and Rs.5520/ month according to the survey by Awf is during June and July 2020. (Haider, 2020). Techgiants like Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft have cut down on a huge chunk of their expenses by allowing work from home that they decided to continue after the pandemic as well. (Page,2020).

Challenges of HR due to COVID-19

With all the upheavals in revenues across every industry, it has become a gruelling task for the HR teams to strategize to keep up with the times. The primary concern is to ensure all the employees are healthy and safe. Sanitizers, multi-vitamins, PPE kits, masks have been supplied to the employees free-of-charge and in abundance.

Referring to the survey conducted by Lenovo for 20,262 workers across the world, 43% of there spondents suggested additional time and money need to be invested in technical training for smoother work from home. (CRN, 2020).

While productivity has increased due to the decreased travel time and those subsequently invested in working. About 27% of respondents feel isolated and 23% of respondents said work-life balance is the biggest challenge while working from home. (Haider, 2020). The HR team needs to take specific action to neither wipe out the fading line between work-life balance nor add reasons to caused epression among their employees.

The decreased revenues have severely impacted the benefits basket offered to the employees. Many companies had to right-size themselves to break even in spite of the government urging public and private enterprises to not do so.(Dhingra, 2020).

Aviation Industry Amidst COVID-19

With a strictcurfew, decreased commercial activities and fear psychosis, there venue of the aviation industry hit a massive low (Agrawal, 2020). Indigo had net losses worth ₹2,884 croresa nd ₹1,194 crores in Q1 and Q2 of this fiscal, respectively. Spice Jet incurred losses of ₹600crores and ₹112 crores in Q1 and Q2, respectively. CAPA India projected in October that the Indian aviation industry will lose a combined USD 6-6.5 billion in FY21, of which airlines will account for USD 4-4.5 billion. (Mintnews, COVID-19 had a massive impact on the Indian aviation sector in 2020, 2020). The government is planning on selling its residual stake in the already privatized Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Hyderabad airports as a part of a 2.5 lakh crore asset monetization pipeline. Additionally, 13 AAI airports have been identified to be privatized.(PTI,2021).

Despite anticipated losses, the aviation industry in India took a step forward and suspended all flights on 23rd March 2020. For those working abroad i.e., Indian citizens /passport holders, Overseas Citizens of India (OCI), special services namely Vandemataram flights have been initiated on 7th May 2020. Over 7.88 lakh Indians have been returning to their homeland since inception till 22nd July 2020. The flights of companies Indigo, SpiceJet, Air India group and GoAir have covered 29 countries and reached 34 airports in India. (Mint news, Vande Bharat Mission: Phase 5 to start from August 1, 2020) Passengers who travelled thus were put under institutional isolation until they aretested negative for the virus.

DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

A survey was conducted across select units of the aviation industry in India during March 2021 to get insights on the major issues faced during the pandemic times, come up with recovering techniques and the expectations of the employees from the organisation. A combination of interviews and questionnaire was used to collect responses. This has given us some scintillating insights and one of the topmost priorities among them, besides health care, was aid while working from home. While working from home has its own advantages, such as time and money saved while travelling, working at the comfort of one’s home and not missing work in pandemic times, the employees tend to face certain issues in this process. To understand the exact concern, the following aspects were considered for the questionnaire based on interviews conducted during the pilot study.

Figure 3 – Aspects affecting WFH stress



Based on responses received and some quantitative analysis techniques mentioned ahead in the paper, key actionable aspects would be identified and a frame work would be developed to cope with those issues.

The first quantitative technique used on the data is correlation which is an effective tool that can be used to understand the degree of association between two variables. This technique will now be used to correlate WFH stress and the impacting aspects mentioned in Figure 3. The correlation was run on SPSS to understand the most relevant of these aspects and the following were the results –

Table1 : Correlation between WFH stress, Tech issues and Job security

		WFH stress	Tech issues	Job security
WFH stress	Pearson Correlation	1	.318*	-.279*
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.020	.043
	N	53	53	53
Tech issues	Pearson Correlation	.318*	1	-.001
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.020		.994
	N	53	53	53
Job security	Pearson Correlation	-.279*	-.001	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.043	.994	
	N	53	53	53

*.Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

From correlation results, technical issues faced and job security emerged as the issues which correlated the most with stress caused in work from home (WFH stress). One can observe that WFH stress and technical issues are positively correlated, i.e., as technical issues increase while working virtually, stress caused due to work from home also increases. Whereas job security and work from home stress are negatively correlated i.e., as job security decreases, stress caused while working from home increases.

Using stress caused due to work from home (WFH stress) as dependent variable and job security and technical issues faced during work as independent variables, we further refine the data to test the following hypotheses –

Hypothesis 1 –

- Ho –Stress caused due to work from home does not increase as technical issues faced during virtual interaction increases.
- H1 - Stress caused due to work from home increases as technical issues faced during virtual interaction increases.

In order to test this hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA technique is used. Analysis of Variance(ANOVA) was first proposed by R.A. Fisher. It is a hypothesis-testing technique. It is used to compare means across the population. In order to apply ANOVA to a population sample, there are some rules–

- Population should be normally distributed, i.e., equal variance
- Population is randomly drawn and independent of each other
- Independence between and within samples

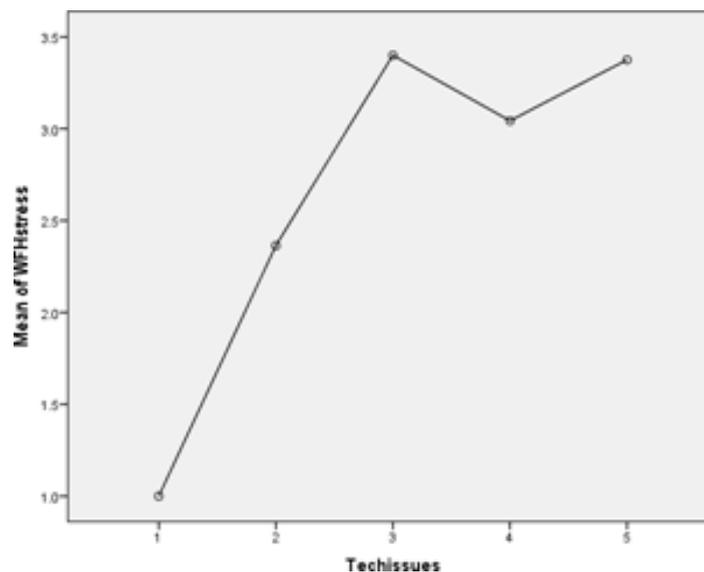
If the p-value is lesser than the level of significance, then the null hypothesis is rejected and alternate hypothesis is accepted.

If the p-value is greater than the level of significance, then the null hypothesis is accepted and alternate hypothesis is rejected.

Table2 : ANOVA – WFH stress & Techissues

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	11.204	4	2.801	2.814	.035
Within Groups	47.777	48	.995		
Total	58.981	52			

Figure 4 : Graph between means of WFH stress and Techissues



1- Strongly disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Neutral, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly Agree

Since the p-value (0.035) is less than the level of significance (0.05), H_0 is rejected and H_1 is accepted. Hence, WFH stress increases as technical issues faced while working virtually increases. The same can be observed from the graph plotted between WFH stress and technical issues in Figure4.

An increase in stress might be due to a lack of familiarity with the online platform used. This problem would be prevalent especially in employees from the older age group. This needs to be properly addressed by the training and development team. Proper training needs to be arranged to familiarise the employees with the layout of the application used while working virtually.

Some might not have the financial means or connectivity in their locality to get a wi-fi connection that provides an uninterrupted connection. Appropriate aid from the organisation, in this case, can help ease the situation of

the employee in pandemic times when one depends on virtual working completely. The solution will be elaborated in further sections of this paper.

Hypothesis 2–

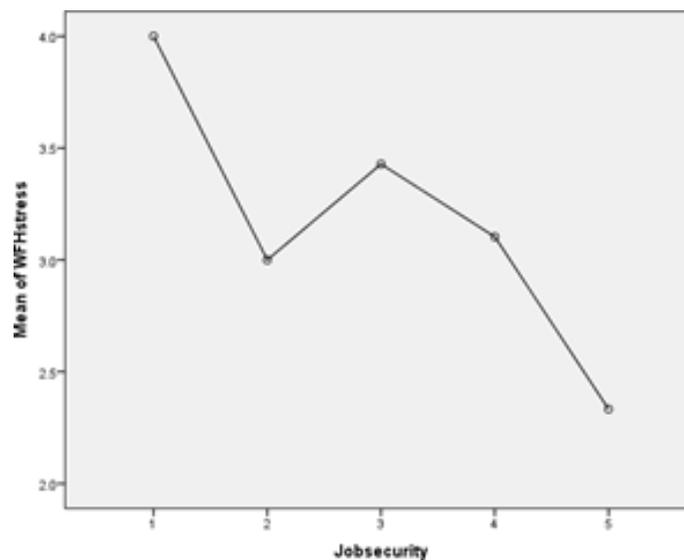
- Ho– Lower job security, higher stress caused due to work from home.
- H1-Lower job security, lower stress caused due to work from home.

Table3 : ANOVA– WFH stress & Job security

WFH stress

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7.911	4	1.978	1.859	.133
Within Groups	51.071	48	1.064		
Total	58.981	52			

Figure 5 : Graph between WFH stress and Job security



Since-p-value (0.133) is higher than the value of significance (0.05), Ho is accepted and H1 is rejected i.e., WFH stress increases with decreasing job security. It can also be observed in the graph plotted between WFH stress and job security in Figure 5.

The fear of losing their job during a pandemic is an inevitable add-on to the stress caused while working from home, according to the results from the questionnaire and interviews. Constantly being surrounded by news about lay-offs due to losses incurred by the overall industry can hamper productivity while working from home, especially since they are socially isolated as against working in an office setup. It would greatly reduce this stress if the supervisors and management keep the employees in loop on the ongoing business decisions made. This will keep them prepared for whatever step the organisation is about to take. In case of a lay-off, it would greatly aid the employees if the HR team helps them out with proper career planning. Being in the field of HR, one is aware of the market landscape and thereby career opportunities provided in the industry. Thus, they can provide apt career guidance to their employees even if the company has to let go of their employees due to their crisis. This will be elaborated further in the upcoming section of this paper.

SUGGESTIONS AND PREPAREDNESS

As Socrates said, “the secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new. ”Today’s working class bore witness to one of the biggest crises of all times. The current lifestyle and working styles which we have grown accustomed to and rather comfortable are inevitably the “next normal”. (Mc Kinsey, 2020). This experience gives us great understanding on how to deal with such situations in case of an unfortunate recurrence.

HR Interventions to reduce Stress caused due to Work From Home

In order to reduce caused due to technical issues faced while working from home, a training model needs to be developed to ease the employees into working on the virtual platform that is being used while working from home. This model cannot be a one-time session but should be a step-wise plan spread over periodic intervals so that questions raised in the course of work can also be addressed in these training sessions itself. Having experts available to assist them during all working hours is also an effective way of averting stress during these challenging times.

At times, the issues with the virtual platform could also be due to a lack of proper internet connectivity. In order to address this concern, the HR team has to strategize with the business and consider financially aiding the employees as an investment that would benefit the organisation in the long run. HR has to emphasize to the management that such an investment would have a great impact on the productivity of the employees. Monthly reports have to maintain to track the effectiveness of this venture.

Secondly, worrying about job security while working from home during COVID-19 according to the data interpretation and analyses can be countered by pro-actively updating the employees about the situation of the company. This will also instil a sense of belongingness in the employees towards the company. Employees need to be aware of how the industry is performing as a whole and of how the organisation is performing in particular. If the organisation is doing well, it will give them a sense of safety around their job and employees need not worry unnecessarily. Such information can be spread by updating the website, weekly email updates, or through an intranet used for informal communication between the employees. Word of mouth is the most effective tool, hence have the word spread across by local HR teams and supervisors.

In case the employment cannot be continued, the HR team can assist the employees by referring them to their HR counter parts in other organisations and also by providing career guidance. As the HR team is aware of the current job market in their industry, it would greatly benefit the employees if the HR team can guide them towards vacancies. The local HR person is aware of the strengths and weaknesses of an employee. Thus, they can provide counselling and offer suggestions on the role they would best fit in or any short-term courses that the employees can take up to enhance their skills and apply for a better position. Career planning is a great way of employer branding as well. It would create a positive image about the organisation in the industry by the high quality of employees referred.

These could be some of the effective counter-measures to decrease stress caused due to work from home and increase productivity. The times are challenging and demand innovation on a whole new level. As Warren Buffett once said, "There will be interruptions, and I don't know when they will occur, and I don't know how deep they will occur, I do know they will occur from time to time, and also know that we'll come out better on the other end." Due to the uncertainty of this pandemic, the organization should be prepared on all fronts to be viable and sustainable in the long run and this preparedness is the first of the many steps towards our next normal.

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