

The Effects of Work-from-Home Policies on the Morale of Business Process Outsourcing Employees

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Abstract: Due to the COVID-19, remote and hybrid working adaptation has become a phenomenon in the Philippines. It became more prevalent during the pandemic, forcing a new work system adaptation. Offering flexibility as the main solution for distance and health safety, most employees were sent to work from home. Their morale is affected by several issues, including their environment, lack of communication and engagement, and work-life balance. This further includes the struggles experienced from equipment ownership and network issues that effect the performance and productivity of employees.

The BPO industry is characterized by high demand and frequent changes, it depends on the needs, current state of the community, or new company policies that may be implemented. This study attempts to determine how remote working in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) organizations affects corporate management and employees in the long run when it comes to performance, productivity, overall health, balance, and the obstacles and elements that can impact their overall morale. This study also aims to provide a different perspective about company-related work systems, highlighting various changes in handling employees and accomplishing work in the new century.

I. INTRODUCTION

Remote working first appeared in the 1970s when the terms “teleworking” and “flexible working” is created by Jack Niles and Franck Schiff (Chiru, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced many challenging working conditions for the business processing outsourcing industry worldwide, especially in the field of human resources, prompting managers to quickly adapt to a new policy of working remotely to assist their workforce in adapting to and coping with radical changes in the increasing demand. Encouraging the employees who previously spent the majority of their time in their company's physical offices to quickly adapt to remote work settings with employees that can adjust to remote working are having difficulty with the numerous health regulations being followed, the closure of non-essential establishments in the Philippines during the series of lockdowns, and finding an alternative workspace within their residence (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Thus, this will cause adjustments in how employees manage and create a boundary between their professional and personal affairs.

Felstead and Henseke (2017) assumed in a previous study that expanding location-independent work is advantageous for businesses and employees. Based on official

labor market data (Felstead & Henseke, 2017), they discovered only one-third of the increase in remote work. This increase could be attributed to compositional factors such as the shift to the knowledge economy, the rise in flexible employment, and the organization's response to the changing demographics of the working population. This analysis reveals that location-independent work is increasing. In addition, the research findings reveal that remote work is related to improved organizational involvement, job satisfaction, and well-being at work. These benefits come at the cost of more effort and an inability to turn off.

Several studies have examined the number of remote workers emerging in various countries around the world. The National Statistics (2014) report that the number of remote employees in the United Kingdom is at its highest level since 1998. According to Gower (2013), as cited in Felstead and Henseke (2017), a review of the decennial Census of the Population indicates that 9.2% in 2000 to 10.3% in 2011. From 2003 to 2015, the number of remote workers in the United States went from 19.6% to 24.1%. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). From 1999 to 2012, Sweden went from 5.9% to 19.7% (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016).

Person-Environment Fit Theory (Edwards & Harrison, 1993), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) are the two major theories in the study. According to the P-E fit theory, individuals and their environments have a reciprocal relationship. It focuses on how people impact their work surroundings and how their work settings influence them. Environment refers to the location, social traits, and physical conditions employees perform their duties. When the environment is supporting their needs (setting, social features) changes, workers may experience separation and loneliness (Gunawan, et.al, 2014).

The self-determination theory indicates that three fundamental and universal psychological demands drive human development and change. According to the theory's premise, individuals can achieve independence by satisfying their needs for competence, connection, and autonomy (Dec & Ryan, 2012).

Philippine-based business process outsourcing (BPO) companies started to implement working from home policies due to the pandemic and many industries worldwide were

affected by the sudden shift in the environment making it impossible for workers to work in the traditional arrangement as they used to do.

In 2019, "RA no.11165, or the Telecommuting Act of 2019" was signed by the 16th President of the Philippines, which stipulates the approval for organizations from various industries to start the implementation of work from home for their workers (Ramos & Prasetyo, 2020). The Department of Labor and Employment's implementation of the "Labor Advisory No. 17 series of 2020" allows organizations from the private sector to operate and observe minimum health standards that follow the Guidelines on Workforce Prevention and Control of COVID-19 pandemic and highly encourages to adopt of remote working when feasible.

According to de la Cerna (2019), the implementation of "Department Order No. 202 or the Telecommuting Act of 2019 by DOLE," which is the only piece of legislation in the country that regulates working arrangements in the private sector, has recently taken place. Similarly, fewer studies in the local literature have examined home-based workers' experiences. Companies from different industries can offer their employees work from home or alternative work arrangements (Ramos & Prasetyo, 2020). The rising usage of computers and electronic communication (ICT) has facilitated business expansion as the Republic of the Philippines becomes a global powerhouse in the global outsourcing industries (Bodwell, 2016). The COVID-19 crisis affected almost every industry in the world when it caused supply chains to break down, lockdowns across the country, and organizations to look into the potential of long-term or even permanent remote work. However, with the aid of the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry, contact center agents answer millions of daily calls from different locations (Espinosa et al., 2020). There has been a sudden resurgence in remote working because of the health preventive measures due to COVID-19. An official recommendation was made in 2020 for organizations to implement remote working to avoid workers from congregating in the same spot (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020).

The adaptation of working from home as a possible course of action has been evident with BPO to motivate their employees. However, work-from-home arrangements, like other things, have their drawbacks, including difficulties with plugging in and unplugging from work, disruptions to employees' work-life balance, and more significant difficulties for women than for men. Remote working is the greatest challenge faced by many organizations with remote workers. (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020) The allure of remote working is when employees can choose to work to achieve the ideal work-life balance (Prasad et al., 2020). When properly executed and meticulously planned, remote working can increase employee efficiency, creativity, and morale (Greenbaum, 2019). Lack of understanding of how workplace isolation could affect a remote worker and departmental knowledge led to developing and implementing strategies for remote work policies and procedures (Hickman, 2019). The research focuses on the

organizations' insight into the overall view of the organizational environment under the remote work setup. Also, to identify inadequacies and drawbacks in the organization during remote work, how the organization will comply with those deficiencies, and provide a perspective on employee well-being throughout remote work setup and know if the work setup has a benefit or has a detrimental effect.

Origins of Remote Work

Jack Niles' 1975 examination of the expanding information economy in California traced the word teleworking to its origins. As its name suggests, teleworking focuses on using telecommunications and lowering commute time. It was the most crucial issue in the United States, particularly in huge cities like Los Angeles. Employees' workplaces moved closer to their homes and away from their employer's location to reduce expensive and time-consuming journeys. Computers and telecoms facilitated decentralization with the new technology (Messenger, 2019). Reynolds (2017, as cited in Radović-Marković et al., 2021) states that remote working has a substantially longer history than an employee's time in the office, dating back to medieval times when merchants set up shops in their homes. Most working-class Englishmen lived in a single-story house with a kitchen and a space used as a workshop for spinning, weaving, or tailoring with eating rooms and meat shops during the Middle Ages. An article by Gupta (2021) added that the history of remote work dates back to two centuries ago, when carpenters, potters, whole-grain food producers, and smiths sold their wares from their homes. Messenger (2019) affirmed that the origins of Teleworking can be traced back to California when the information industry in the United States from the 1970s to the 1980s started and telework slowly expanded the domain to different countries of Japan, India, and Brazil.

The Current State of Remote Work in the Philippines

Prior to the introduction of "RA No.11165," the Department of Labor and Employment issued numerous department advisories between 2009 and 2012, including DA Nos. 02-09 and 04-12. (Bureau of Working condition, n.d). Aliling (2020) says that the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) believes that adapting remote work as a coping strategy "in times of economic problems and national emergencies" can be a beneficial choice for a working environment. Therefore, struggling companies are allowed to continue operating, and he further reiterates that DA no.4-12 encourages the improvement of many companies in terms of competitiveness and productivity by giving the employees balanced work life. Companies affected by the pandemic strive to adapt quickly to employee and business needs in the face of a changing environment and the threat of COVID-19. Prolonged periods of working from home produced surprising consequences. Employees might perform effectively with enhanced employee engagement and experience, yet obstacles result in negative repercussions". However, the existence of working from home will be present from now onwards (De Klerk, Joubert, & Mosca, 2021). Remote working

arrangements present beneficial opportunities to employees willing to work under these arrangements. According to an online article written by Lopez and Yap (2021) amid the pandemic in the Philippines, about 60% of all call center employees are now working from home, with some businesses now working entirely from home in, which the government allowed businesses in economic zones to let 90% of their employees work from home until next March. Various associations have adopted policies focusing on remote working to cut operation expenses and attract and keep good quality employees (Gai & Sai, 2020).

The Benefits of Remote Working

Flores (2019) says that one benefit of remote work is that it gives employees the chance to work in a flexible way. As well as having healthy work life and a happy family. Participants have seen that working from home had benefits, like giving them a choice and letting them spend their leisure time in other ways. Because they can work without interruptions, people who work from home are much more productive. So, this gives them a better way to use their time. Also, as technology improves, it makes it easier for coworkers to talk to each other.

The Challenges of Remote Work

According to Ipsen et al. (2021), some drawbacks of working from home include missing out on time spent with colleagues, not getting out of the house as often, and having less than ideal working circumstances at the home office with the establishment of a proper remote working environment might be difficult for some. Working from home can negatively impact employee productivity, engagement, and stress during the epidemic. Although remote working both reduces and intensifies work-family conflicts, it has a detrimental effect on employee productivity and engagement. Galanti et al. (2021), they identified that social solitariness is a severe disadvantages of remote work during the pandemic and this issue may be associated with decreasing employee job satisfaction and performance, as well as an increase in employee stress.

An online article by Davis (2021) states that having a slow internet connection is one of the stress-inducing reasons why the morale of employees can be heavily affected as it disrupts their workflow and makes them feel that they are not able to do their responsibilities more efficiently and this also can cause a ripple effect in the overall performance of the company. It can be challenging to work from home when employees must share their workspace with family members. As more people engage in job and school-related activities, this atmosphere might become increasingly distracting. Employees who control their work environment are content with their occupations, as opposed to those who must contend with distractions (Galanti et al., 2021).

Health Issues on Working from Home

Remote working can affect both the employee's health and lifestyle. According to a study (Barone Gibbs, Kline, Huber,

Paley, and Perera, 2021), COVID-19-caused "Changes" in the workplace constituted a risk to one's health and lifestyle of employees. Working from home during COVID-19 changed employees' lifestyles, becoming more sedentary, characterized by lack of physical activity, poor sleep quality, improper eating habits, and mental health problems. Ekpanyaskul & Padungtod (2021) found that various work factors such as the environment or behaviors led to occupational health issues that followed the same pattern as in traditional settings. They added that they discovered ergonomic issues, issues with the indoor environment, and working conditions that led to "*physical and psychosocial concerns*" such as social isolation due to a lack of socialization and issues with job and family life. Some health issues at work, such as changes in body weight, were also associated with employment intensity. Therefore, the number of full-time professionals who experienced weight loss while working in a remote environment was more than those who gained weight, experienced "musculoskeletal" discomfort, had issues with the interior environment, felt lonely, unhappy, overworked, or burned out, and this is when employees may react negatively to these challenging conditions, they may be unable to perform their duties

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a narrative qualitative methodology and a phenomenological research design to examine and determine the effects of working from home on BPO employees' morale. The research design was based on the phenomenological methodology. Austin and Sutton (2014) state that phenomenology desires to "comprehend problems, ideas, and events through the lens of shared cognition and experience instead of distinctions." Through the analysis of the extensive experiences of those who have encountered remote work, the researchers investigate remote work on how it impacts the morale of BPO employees using phenomenology. This discourse research proposal describes the experiences of employees who work from home. The researchers' interpretation of the employees' experiences will be the basis for data collection. Butina (2015) describes "narrative inquiry as a qualitative research method in which narratives serve as the raw data." Numerous disciplines have employed this strategy to deepen comprehension of culture, historical experiences, identity, and way of life.

Instruments

This study used several guide questions to conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants. The interview guide questions assisted the researchers in defining and obtaining the experiences and perspectives of the participants regarding remote work in BPO firms. Allowing interviewers to obtain more in-depth information or ideas from informants.

Participants

This study's participants are BPO employees who worked in traditional and remote work arrangements. The key

participants consist of three (3) males and three (3) females, with a total of six (6) participants voluntarily participating in the study.

Sampling Procedure

This study utilized a form of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is based on the researcher's judgment in picking the units (e.g., individuals, cases/organizations, events, data points) to be examined. Typically, the evaluation sample size is small, especially when compared to probability sampling approaches. (Rai & Thapa, 2015)

As a result of the small sample size and the researchers' discretion in selecting participant profiles, the researchers adopted purposive sampling as the primary sampling technique in this study. Due to limited resources and time constraints, the researchers gathered six individuals for the study, despite the researchers' intention to recruit ten participants.

According to the researcher's discretion, the participants sought are BPO personnel who work in NCR (National Capital Region) and have experience with both traditional and remote work arrangements, from entry-level to managerial.

Data Collection

This study's data collection began on June 12 and concluded on June 24, 2022.

The researchers collected data via online video platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom, with each informant interviewed by researchers with no more than 60 minutes worth of questions regarding the research problem.

The researchers facilitated video recordings as a means of note taking. After transcription, the researchers will delete those recordings.

Data Analysis

The interviews were categorized and transcribed to examine the data considering the study's aims. The researchers coded the transcripts to extract the informant's experience and determine the interview's consistency and gaps.

The researchers utilized narrative analysis to evaluate the participants' responses, and the results were presented in thematic forms to investigate the recurring themes in their narratives. The analysis results will establish the relationship between the study's theories and the participants' experiences. The researchers will evaluate participants' narratives to determine the compatibility of Person-Environment Fit Theory and Self-Determination Theory within the participants' narratives.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following is the analysis of the data gathered by the researchers. From the six (6) participants in the study, these are the themes that emerged from the data gathering process.

Remote Working being an Advantage

According to Kopotek (2017), the advantages of remote work include flexible work hours and less time spent commuting. According to the study's participants, working in a remote arrangement saves them time and money. Their opinions on remote work are generally positive because they can now work from home, and their work preparations have changed because they are no longer required to deal with traffic. One participant explains that his coworkers benefited from remote work arrangements because they could care for their children and elderly parents while working. Dizaho et al. (2017) stated that "flexible work arrangements and schedules are effective for achieving work-life balance. Flexitime, working from home, part-time, job sharing, and teleworking are effective methods for achieving work-life balance".

Job satisfaction in Remote Work

Bellmann & Hübler (2020) stated that "employees who work from home are more satisfied than those who desire to work from home." Working from home increased job satisfaction and comfort, as stated by the participants. One participant was pleased with their work-from-home arrangement because they do not use energy commuting. A study participant said she is pleased with remote work arrangements as she can take care of her family, but sometimes she desires to return to the office. Another participant stated that he is satisfied with remote work because he can multi-task.

Lack of Communication while working from home

The most commonly cited disadvantages include relatively poor communication with coworkers, which can significantly complicate work, lead to employee frustration, and lengthen the time required to complete tasks. The lack of personal contact with co-workers, clients, or other individuals, can lead to mental or social problems for workers (Kučera, et.al, 2021). According to the participants, communication is challenging in cases when they have concerns and inquiries that may not be immediately noticed. In one instance, a participant who worked from home was dissatisfied with their job due to a lack of communication. The most frequently cited drawback is the lack of personal interaction with co-workers. Communication in this work arrangement has some issues, such as when the usage of messaging applications might lead to miscommunication, such as determining someone's sentiment in a chat if the employees are not accustomed to utilizing emojis. Extroverted employees are driven to work because they want physical communication and connections, also Introverted employees tends to feel the need to communicate when they are isolated for long periods of them as stated by one of the participants

Slow Internet connection is a bane for remote workers

According to one participant, a poor internet connection inhibits their capacity to complete their work, particularly when it is raining in their area. Internet Connection is one factor that affects communication, as

internet connections in the Philippines are much slower than in our neighboring countries. The Philippines ranks 104th out of 160 developed countries in Asia with 2.8 Mbps of average internet speed. As a result, the Philippines today ranks in the bottom half of Asia's developed nations. This ranking placed the Philippines among Asia's most developed nations. (Salac & Kim, 2016)

Remote Working as the preferred working arrangement

According to a study conducted by Zalut and Bolbol (2022), more than half of the participants in their study recommended continuing telework post-COVID-19 due to its positive effects on their professional and social lives. Most participants prefer working from home because it motivates them more than traditional work arrangements. According to other participants, remote work benefits employees with families or single parents. Due to remote work, one of the participants does not have to travel five hours to the office. According to one participant, some of her co-workers prefer working from home because it is more convenient and eliminates the need for commuting.

The Workspace in Remote Working

According to the participants, a lack of workspace is another obstacle they face when working from home. One participant argues that a good working environment is essential because it can affect employee morale. Shirmohammadi, Au, and Beigi (2022) state, "*a suitable workspace is necessary for employee satisfaction with remote work, work-life balance, and well-being.*"

While working remotely in the Philippines, it is normal to experience high humidity and lack of ventilation, which can be distressing because not everyone has air conditioning units in their homes. According to another participant's experience, in the early stages of remote working implementation at his company, some of his co-workers are working on the floor because they are ill-equipped to set up a suitable workspace at home. Another participant stated that he sometimes could not work because of loud noises outside his home.

The Feasibility of Remote Work

With the increasing demand in the BPO industry and the impact of the pandemic on many industries in the Philippines, businesses were compelled to find a way to continue operating in a high-stress environment, and remote working policies have been widely adopted. According to one of our participants who works as a Quality supervisor, their company's first step was to conduct surveys to determine if they could send the necessary equipment to the agents.

The Emergence of Hybrid Working

When working from home became a phenomenon in the Philippines after the high number of Covid-19 cases showed no indications of decreasing in the first and second quarters of 2020 when the pandemic began. Currently, certain BPO companies in metro manila started implementing hybrid

working, as stated by one of the participants. They are now working on-site and working from home alternately. She also added that employees with tenure preferred working from home because they are more adept at performing their duties and responsibilities. At the same time, there is a need that the company must train new hires on-site even if they are capable of remote working because they still need support in familiarization.

IV. CONCLUSION

The morale of BPO employees tends to improve as a result of increased opportunities for remote work. Participants in the study reported feeling more motivated and advantageous due to the fact that working from home conserves vital resources. In addition, employees who have families can profit from working remotely.

Long-term effectiveness may rely on the organization, but remote and hybrid work is advantageous for both the business and its employees. Due to the fact that not all firms are able to provide their staff with the appropriate equipment and some organizations may not have the funds to continue operations if they switched to this type of work arrangement, it is necessary to conduct additional studies.

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