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Factors influencing attitudes of workers in the work from home environment in South African Organisations

Research Paper

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ABSTRACT

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, a plethora of articles published discuss the work from home (WFH) concept. Like in other sectors of industry, the model received much attention in the academic fraternity as millions of employees had to involuntarily employ the model during global lockdown restrictions. For some, the WFH model worked well, and yet it presented different sorts of challenges for others. While corpus literature has examined the WFH effects, limitations, opportunities, technicalities, logistics, inter-alia, there is a gap in explicating the factors influencing different employee attitudes in the WFH environment in South African organisations. As such, the objective of this study was to determine the factors influencing these differing attitudes. Following an interpretivist philosophy and exploratory approach, all based on induction, some key findings include the identification of eight factors that influence workers' attitudes towards WFH. These are: age, seniority and position, managing a team vis-a-vis being in a team, having a family, being career orientated versus work life balance orientated, type of work, type of organisation, and distance form work.

Keywords

Work from home, influencing attitudes, lockdown experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The work from home (WFH) phenomenon became a universally adopted model for many companies and organisations in the past three years. Its adoption and implementations grew exponentially as the world responded to the 2020 coronavirus pandemic (Neeley, 2021; Popovici & Popovici, 2020; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020). WFH saw widespread adoption as organisations faced the need to adapt overnight to a new reality where almost all work had to be performed in a virtual environment. The sudden WFH adoption exposed various global inequalities in labour, examples of which included cultural, social class, economic status, and the most discussed gender inequalities (Kurowska, 2020; Van Belle et al., 2023). Structural inequalities were exposed on the level of which jobs could be performed and which could not. Moreso, the divide between developed and developing economies grew with the former receiving far greater protection from the economic hardships of the pandemic (Bonacini et al., 2020; Duman, 2020; Irlacher & Koch, 2021).

While inequalities were noted in different spheres, the study delved into issues and inequalities that emerged between employees working in organisations within South Africa. It was established that inequalities and differences, influenced employees in various ways because of dissimilar preferences, hence their attitudes towards the WFH phenomenon. A dilemma was established about senior employees in terms of power structures who advocated for WFH, but still preferred to manage their subordinates from an onsite setup. While they enjoyed the offsite environment as was noted in one study, less senior employees often did not enjoy other necessary privileges like provision of new office equipment that seniors were privileged to (Van Belle et al., 2023). Again, there was a perception that junior staff who worked from home were less productive, less collaborative, offered few advancement opportunities, and were not as much part of the team as those in an onsite office environment (Faulds & Raju, 2021). Further literature indicates that the reluctance to WFH in the past can be attributed to the perception that employees generally lack discipline and neglect their responsibilities when they are unsupervised and left to manage their time and tasks (Bloom et al., 2015). As such, lower class or low-income earners were in the past confined to the strict office hours in an environment that their employers provided. In essence, WFH was perceived as a model for more senior employees.

Therefore, amid these developments, this study sought to explore the influencing factors for attitudes behind having some workers adapt easily to WFH while others have failed. The reasons for this disparity have not been elaborately investigated and the results contribute to the management methods of employees in the future. From the inferences that viewed WFH as a perk (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018), it was problematic to gather that employees still had contrastingly varying attitudes towards this assumed privilege. As such, guided by the question, “*What are the factors influencing workers’ attitudes in the WFH environment in South African organisations?*”, this study’s objective was “*To explore the factors influencing workers’ attitudes in the WFH environment in South African organisations.*” The rest of the paper is organised into a review of literature section about the WFH concept, methodologies employed, findings, discussion section, conclusions, and lastly, a section on the study’s limitations and recommendations for future work.

THE GENEALOGY OF WORK FROM HOME

In 1989, research was conducted to determine the feasibility of work from home (WFH) for computer professionals. The researchers and other practitioners did not use the term WFH at the time but rather referred to the concept as telecommuting or teleworking (Olson, 1989). The WFH phenomenon, also known as teleworking telecommuting, or remote working originated in the 1980’s with advancements in information technologies (Van Belle et al., 2023). Due to the rise of technological and computing power in the 1980s, Olson (1989) investigated the feasibility of WFH or telecommuting at fortune 100 companies in the USA. This was run through a three-month pilot programme that saw a virtual group of workers being compared to onsite workers. At the time of the study most teleworking was informal with only 4.5% of employees performing tasks out of the office. This too, was done on an ad hoc basis with no formal structure in place. The first instances were of employees who worked remotely when traveling for business related assignments. This differs from the WFH known today where WFH is not regarded as a complement to working in the office but a substitute (Waizenegger et al., 2020).

Likewise, as has been mentioned earlier, teleworking pre coronavirus era was viewed as a perk for senior staff (Bloom et al., 2015; Faulds & Raju, 2021; Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). Unpredictably, the results from Olson’s study established that telecommuting had little to no impact on employees’ productivity at the time. This countered the thinking in corporations at the time where managers believed employees needed direct, physical supervision to perform optimally. This initiative experiment into the feasibility of WFH or telecommuting described the following advantages of the model. They noted that employees enjoyed the elimination of time and stress from daily commutes which were no longer needed. They also noted that increased flexibility and autonomy was appreciated by employees. On the contrary, some drawbacks attached to telecommuting were listed as lower job satisfaction, lower organisational commitment, and increased role conflict. Olson attributes this to reduced opportunity for group interaction among staff members (Olson, 1989).

WFH experiences prior to coronavirus era

The concept of working remotely had been tested and utilised in organisations prior to the mass adoption during coronavirus pandemic (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Di Martino & Wirth, 1990). However, it was generally reserved for executives or senior employees and viewed as a perk of being in the position. Researchers Faulds and Raju (2021) noted that Executives and senior staff members who were privileged to WFH as a perk often chose to still work in the office as they were cautious to avoid hostility with lower-level staff members who reported to them and were mandated to work from the office. Similarly, it was noted that the model was more frequently used by executives when traveling to allow staff members to still engage in meetings and perform their duties even when geographically dispersed.

In terms of balancing the work and family responsibilities while WFH, most of the available research take a gendered detour to address what were inequalities even then (Bagraim et al., 2016; Jaga, 2014; Jaga et al., 2018; Koekemoer & Olckers, 2019). Googins & Burden (1987) claim that women in America, especially those of colour generally had a hard time balancing work and family roles considering traditional work and family divisions of labour. The number of women employees entering the labour force and who were parents to minors was increasing notably (Daipuria & Kakar, 2013), forcing the re-evaluation of household roles for affected families. Women in general, grew into spending more hours on work and home activities combined than men (Googins & Burden, 1987), highlighting the need to protect them from this inequality. Other studies revealed that while the labour force [gender] composition changed extensively, organisations still had no policies nor created legislative provisions to cater for women's needs (Daipuria & Kakar, 2013; Googins & Burden, 1987; Kelliher et al., 2019; Wiens et al., 2022). Fundamentally, these are some of the factors that influenced employee attitudes in the past, most of which were brought forward and amplified to influence the attitudes today.

WFH experiences during the coronavirus era

When the coronavirus pandemic hit the world in 2020, teleworking or WFH became universally adopted and compulsory for many nations. Although nations adopted the model at different times and approaches, the severity of coronavirus effects in the time of its outbreak eventually led to a global lockdown in March of 2020 (Andriani, 2020). Given the pandemic's recent history the research published on individual lived experiences while WFH during the pandemic focuses mainly on its effects on populations, and to this study's knowledge, there is limited research to investigate what attitudes were developed by the same populations towards the sudden WFH revolution, under what influencing factors. The experiences are often localised to small population sets across differing corners of the globe. To examine the effects of WFH policies on employee experiences and productivity, engagement, and stress, five case examples are used. Detailing these experiences helped the study formulate interview questions that led to determining the attitudes of employees towards the WFH phenomenon. The experiences during coronavirus were drawn from synthesising a few studies namely, one on Indonesian teachers' performance, and others examining large Japanese corporations, Slovenian tertiary institutions, Information Technology (IT) firms in China, as well as fortune 100 companies in the United States.

Performance of Indonesian Teachers while WFH

An Indonesian study by Purwanto et al., (2020) examined the impact of WFH on Indonesian students during the coronavirus pandemic when the policy was enforced on organisation by government. The aim of the study was to obtain information about the advantages and disadvantages to WFH between teachers and students. The main advantages to note were a greater flexibility in completing their tasks, and this was the case for both teachers and students. Similarly, it was noted that there are increased comfort levels during the workday from the informal work environment. Cost and time savings from commuting being eliminated was the most noted benefit with many teachers and students experiencing less stress.

Conversely, the researchers found that while some participants experiences increased productively many felt demoralised from the social isolation coupled by increases in loneliness and depression. Further negative experiences included increased electricity and data costs as these were not provided for by their organisations. Many participants noted a blurring between the world of work and their personal life and an expectation that they would be always available for work matters. The researchers found that Indonesian teachers and students struggled to adapt to a WFH noting the cost and accessibility of internet and smart devices. The researchers conclude that WFH was not optimal in Indonesian schools, describing it as "a work system that is increasingly difficult" (Purwanto et al., 2020).

Large Japanese Corporations

Researchers examining employee productivity during WFH revolution in Japan gave insights on how the policy had an impact on both employees and employers (Morikawa, 2022). A notably large population of workers who could work from home were highly educated, earning high wages, in white collar jobs at large firms in metropolitan areas. The Japanese research highlighted that WFH policies may exacerbate economic disparities amongst workers. The most significant challenge seen with WFH in Japan was lack of face-to-face interactions, poor telecommunication environment at home, tasks that did not translate well to remote work. Japanese work culture is highly collaborative hence WFH presented an added strain to cultural norms.

On the other hand, the biggest advantage of WFH policies was that staff enjoyed the benefit of not commuting long distances anymore. Morikawa (2022) stresses the importance of work systems on the success of WFH and how many successful systems in brick-and-mortar enterprises are unable to translate effectively to the systems needed to work remotely. Still, workers were found to be 68% as productive at home compared to the workplace.

This average is across many industries, and it can be noted in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector and early WFH adopters who experienced the lowest productivity loss percentages.

Slovenian Tertiary institutions

A paper by Drašler et al., (2021) examined the WHF experiences of Slovenian university students and lecturers and reached the following conclusions. Both students and employees highlighted the advantage of reduced commuting, improved eating habits, and more time with family members. However, disadvantages that emerged from the study included higher stress levels, loneliness, a less suitable WFH environment, lower quality for certain services, as well as reduced service efficiency. Students favoured WFH on average more than staff counterparts and this was attributed to greater financial savings from WFH setup. Students and Educators agreed that inadequate social interactions were a primary concern with the WFH model. They also noted drawbacks with regards to work that does not transition well when performed at home, for instance, laboratory exercises conducted online. Be that as it may, they still felt that more work was conducted more efficiently at home, hence suggested that a greater portion of online educational activities be maintained in future.

It was noted that social connections play a big role in how well someone transition to WFH. Evidence of this was seen in first year students, who knew less people before transitioning to WFH. They reported the worst experience with the WFH model. Senior staff at the university with an established network of connection viewed WFH most favourably. The reported satisfaction of WFH was shown to be correlated to how one's financial situation was affected during coronavirus lockdowns. Those whose financial situation improved during the pandemic reported significantly better perceptions of WFH compared to those whose situations worsened. Drašler et al., (2021) emphasised the need to examine transition to WFH in the full context of the coronavirus era. As such, the results concerning acceptance of WFH were higher at the start of the pandemic due to the novelty of the situation and perceived danger of the outbreak. It was observed that the acceptance and excitement of online work decreased in proportion to how long the lockdowns lasted.

Chinese Information Technology firms

Researchers in China investigated how teleworkers work life balance was affected by the transition to universally enforced WFH policies because of pandemic measures. Research into the consequences of WFH on employees with regards to strategic development in Asia established that the benefits of WFH to employees are suspended commutes [saving time and financial resources], which led to more freedom to choose where to live [as there were no worries of how one will get to work every day], and a higher disposable income (Davis et al., 2021). The most notable finding reported that while employees considered themselves more productive at home, the productivity increase is attributed to a change in expectations of how much time will be spent working at home compared to the office. In essence, time that was consumed in daily activities of leaving home, getting to the office, chatting with colleagues, and getting ready to commute back home, was added to the time spent doing the work, hence more productivity.

What the study does note however, is that there were no benchmarks of acceptable service quality established yet, which made it difficult to assess opportunities against drawbacks of the WFH concept. Some service quality standards were lowered across industries the study reports, as the world struggled to adjust to pandemic restrictions. The performance measures and expectations of employees were lowered in tandem (Davis et al., 2021). In such a case, the benchmark argument becomes a grey area as it is not clear how those benchmarks were set because of the novelty of the WFH model practiced during the coronavirus period.

Fortune 100 Companies in the USA

Faulds and Raju (2021) examined executive teams at fortune 100 companies in the USA to better understand the sentiments of WFH on "employees, society, and scope relative to the pandemic". Like in the Chinese IT firms, one key insight noted was the increase of the workday time as opposed to when employees were onsite. The study states that productivity is often regarded as a positive yet the reason behind it is a notable drawback on WFH policies. With the workday increasing by an average of 48 minutes across fortunes 100 companies and total meetings increasing by an average of 13%, this was exerting pressure that would later become detrimental to employees' state of mental well-being. Above that, when the human resources (HR) let employees to manage and work on their own terms with regards to time, there emerged a blurred line between office time and their own personal time. As such, while employees who are more productive at midnight hours or early hours of the morning felt more empowered by that flexibility, they still needed to be available during the day checking if any matters arise concerning their work. This slowly chipped away into those employees' personal time.

This development, amongst executives at those fortune 100 companies had come from a consensus emerging surrounding the benefits employees receive from a WFH policy. These primarily consisted of flexibility from not

being bound to office location and hours. Additionally, staff felt more autonomous and in control of decision making. The autonomy enhanced self- image which in turn can increased productivity. The other key benefit was in the form of cost savings. The paper found that the average commute related costs for employees in these companies was an average of USD6,000 per year. This in addition to reduced childcare expenses was a major saving for employees. Apart from that, a lack of collaboration and face-to-face engagement between co-workers made it more difficult for employees to be creative and generate new ideas. More ideations proved to have occurred in office, and it was noted that had not translated well in video conferencing or remote work environments. Higher rates of employee withdrawal and disengagement were observed. This disengaging behaviour was shown to increase the probability they will leave the company in the future.

Cross cutting issues surrounding the WFH concept

Given the foregoing, this study posits that it has become a puzzle globally, how all the factors brought forward in relation to challenges and opportunities experienced by employees during the WFH era shaped their attitudes towards the phenomenon. Examining the origins of WFH, its dynamics prior to the mass adoption seen during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as during the pandemic, motivated this study to explore the factors influencing workers' attitudes in the WFH environment, specifically in the South African context. While the same can be done for any other context, the uniqueness of South Africa was highly motivated by its huge divide (Acilar & Sæbø, 2023; Bornman, 2016; Lubinga et al., 2021; Odularu et al., 2023) in accessing digital resources, the backbone of which most WFH models are dependent today. While it is not only in South Africa where the digital divide issues prevail, these issues were not so evident for employees in other contexts (Indonesia, Japan, Slovenia, China, and USA) examined herewith. Nevertheless, there were some cross cutting issues experienced in similar manner between South Africa and the other five contexts in concern. For instance, all studies reported on the benefits reaped from reduced commutes during the WFH era. These ranged from flexibility of work and time saving for teachers in Indonesia; higher productivity in Japan and USA; more time with family and improved eating habits for Slovenians; and freedom of choice where to live for Chinese employees; most of which were experienced by South Africans as well.

While the digital divide challenge was not the epitome of the issues in other contexts, as is in South Africa, those countries were nonetheless plagued by increased electricity bills, data costs, isolation, and demoralisation; strain on cultural norms; loneliness and high stress levels; compromised service quality; and lack of creativity (Indonesia; Japan; Slovenia; China; and USA respectively). Be as it may, South Africa proved to be rich in context because of the heterogeneity of its sample. For instance, large corporations in the remote work like Amazon and Alibaba, to upcoming ones such as Takealot are represented. It was found that more developed economies had far greater jobs that could be performed from home due to advanced IT infrastructure and a lower percentage of manufacturing jobs in comparison. After establishing which jobs could be performed at home, the experiences of workers who performed WFH during coronavirus were examined to account for their different attitudes. Numerous studies across the world outline the negative and positive experiences felt by workers, however, for South Africa, none have accounted for the underlying factors that cause such discrepancies in workers' attitudes. A gap was identified therein. As such, as coronavirus subsides and the world considers the implementation of hybrid models, or remote work as a full-time policy, the underlying causes behind workers' attitudes are vital to investigate.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section was dedicated to discussing the methodologies that were followed to conduct the data collection and analysis of the empirical evidence drawn from the participants of the study. To capture what Saunders and others (2009) entail as a typical research methodology approach, the section will present these methodological steps based on the research onion concept. Such steps begin with the philosophical stance, through to the techniques and procedures of the methods.

Philosophical underpinnings

The study employed an interpretivist research philosophy which claims that phenomena is understood through the process of interpreting what the participating stakeholders experienced (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). This theory follows the assumption that knowledge and truth are both subjective and depended on understanding the lived experiences of those involved. By engaging the experiences of employees who were a part of a WFH model the study established the factors contributing to a vast spectrum of attitudes. An interpretivist philosophy generated an understanding of WFH through interpreting the lived experiences of workers.

Because the area of attitudes in South Africa seemed to have received less attention around the WFH phenomenon, an exploratory purpose was taken. Exploratory approaches examine phenomena that have not been deeply investigated in the past to gain new insights (Saunders et al., 2009). As such, an exploratory lens was deemed

most appropriate considering the research objective. South Africa's heterogeneity in terms of the organisations and vast social classes presented a case fit for exploration with regards to factors influencing employee attitudes towards the WFH phenomenon. In trying to account for why individuals had such varying experiences with WFH, exploratory questions were formulated and posed to the target group to explore the nature of their attitudes.

Furthermore, because the study was focussed on drawing informed interpretations from empirical evidence, an inductive reasoning stance was taken. This involved "the search for patterns from observation and the development of explanation-theories [from the data collected from the participants]" (Bernard & Bernard, 2013). No hypotheses were applied at the beginning of the research. The inductive approach meant that all findings and the discussion around the WFH phenomenon were informed by the patterns and relationships identified in the data collection and analysis process. To do that, a heterogenous purposive sampling strategy was used to pick the participants suitable for interviews.

The targeted population included staff members at companies that participated in the WFH model during the period of concern. The companies were hand-picked purposefully at random, as well as the employees to interview. Selecting participants was augmented by a pilot study (using random sampling), that established if the selected participant was suitable before conducting a full interview. The group constituted of a spectrum of positions, experience levels, age, as well as gender differences. This was again, done purposefully to account and triangulate a heterogenous sample with varying WFH experiences reported in literature. It was also done as a measure to improve the representability of the sample. Because the study was qualitative in nature, the numbers of participants interviewed were not the focus, but rather the depth and quality of responses recorded. As such, data were analysed as they were collected to avoid double dipping when no more new insights emerge. Similarly, a range of positions and experience levels were taken into consideration to account for differences in experiences across the hierarchy of seniority within organisations working from home.

Techniques and procedures

In line with the interpretivist philosophy and exploratory purpose of the research, qualitative data were collected through semi structured interviews. Participants were interviewed until a saturation point was reached. This was achieved at 11 interviews. A combination of face-to-face and virtual interviews were offered to all participants in the interest of convenience, thereby reducing barriers to participation. Semi structured interviews were deemed ideal to capture both the demographics of the participants as well as their freely expressed thoughts, a development that is not possible in exclusively structured interviews using binary approaches and survey questionnaires (Saunders et al, 2009). The transcripts were coded, analysed, and aggregated in NVivo to discuss the themes which were constructed from the line-by-line coding. As such, the primary method of data analysis was performed using thematic analysis.

Table 1

Participant Alias	Participant Job Role	Age	Gender	Industry
PO1001	Junior Consultant	24	M	Consulting
PO1002	Business Analyst	24	F	IT Development
PO1003	Managing Executive	53	F	Telecommunications
PO1004	Risk Analyst	35	F	Telecommunications
PO1005	Senior Salesperson	62	M	Telecommunications
PO1006	Managing Director	44	M	Insurance
PO1007	Conservation Specialist	53	F	NPO Government
PO1008	CEO	51	M	Telecommunications
PO1009	Manager (CA)	34	F	Banking
PO1010	Manager (CA)	60	M	Insurance
PO1011	Junior Consultant	23	M	Consulting

Note. Breakdown of Research Participants.

The goal of a thematic analysis was to uncover and identify from line coding, initial codes leading to nodes, patterns, and hence common themes across data (Caulfield 2019). The 6 Step method of thematic analysis of 1) Familiarisation; 2) Coding; 3) Generating Themes; 4) Reviewing Themes; 5) Defining and naming themes; and 6) Writing up the first step of familiarisation was thus followed. After these steps, ideas and feelings drawn from

the text were grouped. Through this process, a condensed overview of the main points and common meanings that recur (Caulfield 2019) were eventually grouped into relevant themes that inform how the attitudes were influenced.

All appropriate standards to preserve participants' anonymity and confidentiality [in terms of personal identifying information], human dignity, and ethical viability of the research were upheld (Bell & Bryman, 2007). As such, consent of all participants was a mandatory requirement, and the participation was voluntary. Participants were informed that the data would solely be used for academic purposes as there was no financial gain associated with the research. Ethical clearances and permission were sought from all relevant parties.

FINDINGS

The following section details the findings from the data collected during the interview process, after which a discussion follows. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the factors influencing WFH attitudes for employees in South African Organisations. While the study was an exploration of those factors, the findings also revealed an interesting view about the attitudes. They showed that not only did the attitudes develop, but that they also changed within the course of the pandemic era. Eleven participants from six different organisations where WFH measures had been in place were interviewed. Their responses were collected and analysed to produce the following findings. Eight main factors were shown to influence attitudes of employees who WFH, namely, i. Age; ii. Seniority and Position; iii. Managing or being managed in a team; iv. Family care; v. Work life balance versus being career oriented; vi. Type of work; vii. Type of organisation; and viii. Distance from work.

Effects of Age on WFH Attitudes

Findings revealed that age was a prominent factor seen in participants attitudes towards WFH. At the lower range of the age bracket (23-24) attitudes towards WFH were largely negative. Younger participants sampled were still growing networks and visibility in companies. As such, working from home made it harder to prove themselves and cement their importance without face-to-face visibility.

PO1001 - "As someone who isn't high up but has ambitions of being there, I didn't like WFH. It didn't let me do what I need to do to move up. Relationships are the most important thing and losing those ties from 2 years of remote work was a real frustration."

PO1002 - "I was left out at times and losing visibility in the company was a challenge at the beginning. Being so new in everything it was hard for me."

Seniority and Position in company

Separate views on WFH emerged when the position and seniority of employees are considered. Junior/mid-level/Senior manager+ all had distinct views, and these were shared with the co-workers within those groups. Junior employees had less favourable views of WFH which is in line with those that were younger in age who reported similar attitudes. Senior and mid-level employees on the other hand, responded most favourably to WFH. These are employees that have been in organisations long enough to form networks that softened the transition to WFH. This is because they have familiarity with the people responsible for day-to-day processes and did not feel as isolated by WFH because of reduced managerial responsibilities. At this level employees enjoyed extra freedom over their day and work duties.

PO1002 - "I think it worsened a lot of the relationships I had with people in the office. Because I'm not always with my team I needed those conversations at work to build relationships. Not having that was really a problem as covid went on and it made me feel very lonely at times."

PO1008 - "Aside from visibility which was a big problem my biggest concern is about culture and learning. When everything is online our interactions become too transactional. We need to be engaged with our colleagues and so much value happens outside of those explicit discussions. Deeper relationships with our colleagues were lost and that's so valuable to our business. In the future we'll definitely see companies that have WFH policies losing to those that work in person."

PO1004 "I do see it as a positive thing for my flexibility. I can get my work done in 2 or 3 hours at home and have the day free so that's a huge benefit. I don't really know how people fake a full workday at the office. Most people I know are trying to look busy not really working so WFH has helped in a lot of ways."

Managing versus being managed in a team

Managing a team was found to be significantly more difficult during WFH because of the added burden of communication in an asynchronous environment. Managers' report losing visibility over staff when they are working remotely.

PO1003 - *“It also came with its challenges in managing people because I could go into the office speak to everyone I needed to in an hour and that would handle things. Now things changed a lot as far as communicating goes.”*

PO1003 - *“It depends a lot on how well you can manage your team and all the people below you remotely. I know the CEO absolutely hates it. He wants visibility over the people, and I get that from a management perspective. There’s a lot of people who just see work as a job and they value the extra freedom over their time.”*

Researchers found that participants working in a team as opposed to managing a team had more positive views towards WFH. This is because of not being under the same level of supervision and oversight allowing them more freedom to work on one’s own terms.

PO1002- *“It made it easier for me to finish my work faster if anything. For the last 2 years I’ve only worked a 2- or 3-hour day. Without having to travel or the other distraction in the office it let me do things faster”*

Family care

Having a family or young children to take care of was linked to mixed contradicting views about WFH attitudes during the pandemic. For male parents it was not a pleasant experience hence negative attitudes developed. It was convenient for parenting females, nonetheless. This was due to that while males were not obliged to take care of children because of the cultural setup in South Africa, female parents always felt they needed to be closer to their offspring at tender ages, hence they managed to handle extra responsibilities with children while working remotely too.

PO1009 - *“I think it was really helpful to me honestly. With 2 young children being at home helped me handle all my personal things without having the extra stress of being away from them. WFH let me do my work on my own time while I was able to help the kids with their work, and make sure they were okay working online too.”*

PO1006 - *“I had quite bad experiences with it. I have 2 young daughters at home who weren’t going to school as well during covid. My wife was also working from home and the household became a lot to manage. We fought a lot more than we ever did and it brought up a lot of issues I didn’t think were problems.”*

Work life balance versus being career orientated

Some differences in the attitudes towards WFH were based on employees’ tendencies to describe themselves as being more focused on work life balance than career orientation or vice-versa.

PO1001- *“People with less ambitions in the company tend to prefer it in my experience. It lets them do their work on their own time and have more leisure. Power is a social game, and you can’t move up [by] only operating virtually.”*

Participants who favoured work life balance rated WFH more favourably. They cited flexibly over their hours, commuted being eliminated and cost savings as major benefits to them.

PO1007 - *“I love it. It gives me so much free time and I don’t have to travel anywhere too. Being able to do everything from home was a huge bonus for me. There’s so many cost savings and also just freedom over my day.”*

PO1007 - *“I can still get everything I need done without having to commute or the distractions at the office. Most days I can do things in a few hours and have the day free.”*

Type of work

Other differences in attitudes were influenced by collaboration required in their day-to-day tasks. Participants working within team where frequent collaboration was needed reported more stress and an increased workload from communication delays and challenges when communication was asynchronous as opposed to in person collaboration. Participants reported that when job roles encompassed tasks where collaboration was not needed i.e., writing reports, excel file edits, WFH was met with positive attitudes of acceptance. Without the need for high collaboration workers in WFH enjoyed more benefits including greater flexibility over their time and personal life.

PO1001- *“It was also harder to communicate within my team – people were harder to reach at home and you couldn’t have the same open dialogue where ideas pop up in those fixed meeting slots.”*

PO1004- *“I think having a job that can transition well to WFH is the most important thing. My work is mostly about conservation, so I write reports on sustainability and what measures we need to / have been taking. It’s something that I work on myself for weeks at a time, so I never needed to be in the office for it anyway. Having work like that made it really easy to switch over. My husband’s job is very different has always in meetings online and says he finds it quite frustrating.”*

Type of organisation

The type of organisation participants worked at also played a significant role in their attitudes towards WFH. Key distinctions were observed between private and government employees that were interviewed. Employees in a government Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) responded positively to WFH as they noted that working in government had limitations in career progression.

PO1007 - "Working in government is very different than working in private sector. We all know there's a limit to how high you can go so there's not that motivation to climb the ladder. The people I know want security and to do their jobs well. For me I think realizing I could do as good of a job at home and not have the extra hassle made me view it very positively"

PO1001- I was less interested in my job during WFH for sure and if we weren't working from home, I think I could have moved up in the company faster.... would never want to WFH on a full-time basis again. An early morning meeting can be convenient to do from home because it can make life easier but definitely not full time. WFH doesn't give me the same advancement opportunities as if I was in the office so it's something I could never see myself doing.

Distance from work

The distance was also an influential factor. Participants with commute times longer than 30 minutes reported more favourable responses to WFH than those with shorter commuted. This is because of the elimination of cost and time expenses.

PO1002- "It made it easier for me to finish my work faster if anything. For the last 2 years I've only worked a 2- or 3-hour day. Without having to travel or the other distraction in the office it let me do things faster"

PO1007 - "Going back to the office was really draining for me. I felt the fuel price a lot since my office is about 40 minutes away from me. I feel like I can do everything from home anyway, so I don't see why I have to be there. Getting over that frustration was a big challenge but I'm getting used to it."

DISCUSSION

It has been established through literature and analysis of responses from the data that pre pandemic, senior level staff members often had the option to work from home whereas lower-level employees generally did not enjoy the same privileges. Senior staff viewed WFH as a perk to be used when traveling or ad hoc reasons, hence they grew fond of it and developed positive attitudes towards it then. However, these views changed when the model was for a period adopted for all employees and senior staff started disliking the model. The main issue for them was loss of complete visibility of their teams. This perception of WFH by senior staff and executives was also observed by Faulds and Raju (2021) and corroborated by attitudes of participants interviewed in this research study. It can be noted that their attitudes towards WFH have changed post coronavirus, reflecting the new challenges of managing a team when all the staff members are working from home.

Senior staff found WFH more challenging due to this added managerial responsibility. Managing a team/teams proved more challenging in remote environment. This was because of more workload to manage dispersed teams. Participants that manage teams reported losing visibility over teams making working in a remote environment more challenging. Similarly senior staff found collaboration for high level discussions hard to do online. Often, high-level discussions were meant for boardrooms, and it was difficult to tell who is listening at the end of the call during video conferencing.

Despite the added challenges of managing a team remotely there is a greater willingness for staff to work online now. Perceptions of laziness have been largely removed as no significant productivity loss was experienced in organisations. Post pandemic, senior staff and executives are more willing to accommodate small productivity losses and visibility issues mentioned for added convenience and flexibility afforded to staff. An example of this willingness to accommodate staff as seen in one participant [PO1009] who lived in a different city from the team they are managing. Face-to-face meetings are done once a month to touch base with the team. This form of arrangement would not have been considered prior to the pandemic and reflects the changing attitudes of management as well as the lessening of negative stereotypes about remote work.

Employees in lower-level positions noted many positive benefits of work from home in line what that seen in the literature from varying WFH experiences across the world. However, literature did not distinguish between positions within a company and referred rather only to the emotions reported. Participants interviewed enjoyed WFH after realising their jobs could be performed at home with no impact to company. This was often done with no distractions and in a few hours with many finishing tasks in 2 to 3 hours per day. The extra time, freedom, and flexibility of WFH were also highlighted in literature (Drasler, 2021; Morikawa ,2022; & Vjiakar et al., 2021).

However, it should be noted that many of the employees did not have full-fledged experience with WFH prior to the pandemic. From the findings it was seen that participants with less collaborative tasks reported more favourable attitudes towards WFH than those whose duties required a higher degree of collaboration.

As the amount of time spent working in a WFH environment increased, participants described a sense of restlessness because of the lack of human connection which became apparent. Only one participant indicated they would want to work from home full time in the future. Additionally, participants with children that enjoyed WFH reported that they missed work onsite once their children returned to school post coronavirus. This made parents more inclined to return to the office, an indication that could implicate a blended approach for future considerations.

The challenges experienced by workers in the WFH environment were multifaceted and often differed depending on one's: age, position, and network within the company as well as other factors detailed in the findings of this study. Technology challenges in WFH were observed more frequently with older staff. In the transition to WFH, participants highlighted they needed significant adjustment periods in getting accustomed to the technology and remote working tools. This was slightly contrary to literature that predominantly attributed technology challenges to the digital divide (Hannah, 2021), leaving out the age factor. The age factor is likewise revealed through the young newly hired staff who often felt alienated from rest of team. Not knowing anyone, they struggled to build a network and assimilate into the teams. They further reported being passed up on for projects and other work because they were less noticeable to others in the company. Consequently, feelings of invisibility in WFH environment were a significant challenge experienced by young and newly hired workers in organisations.

CONCLUSIONS

Factors influencing workers' attitudes to work from home are multifaceted. This study aimed to explore the reasons behind differing sentiments, hence different attitudes towards WFH. It also detailed how these attitudes changed over the course of the pandemic. Additionally, based on the empirical evidence, the study also identified challenges faced by workers in the WFH environment. The primary factors influencing workers' attitudes towards WFH are age, seniority or position, managing a team or being managed in a team, having a family/younger child, career orientated versus work life balance orientated, type of work, type of organisation, and distance from work. Cross cutting factors realised from a global perspective in literature such as reduced commutes, helped explain the different benefits that came coupled with. Such benefits for both South Africa and the countries discussed included but were not limited to flexibility in the work schedule, more time with family, improved eating habits, and increase in productivity.

On the contrary, many other norms were disrupted as a result. A concept of collaborative work culture in Japan, similar to the one of *Ubuntu* in South Africa (Okyere-Manu & Morgan, 2022) was highly disrupted during the WFH era. Even when there was then a greater willingness by management to allow staff to work from home, many workers did not want to continue to WFH on a prolonged basis due to the lack of human interaction despite the advantages that have been discussed. It was a direct disruption of their culture of *Ubuntu* in South Africa, as was of their face-to-face work culture in Japan (Morikawa, 2022). In the grand scale of issues discussed, challenges that influenced WFH attitudes the most in South Africa, include some technological challenges for senior staff, newly hired staff feeling alienated, and a blurring of work life and home life, a development that was also shown to be detrimental to the mental health wellbeing of workers in USA (Faulds & Raju, 2021).

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was subject to limitations leaving room for further research into WFH. Further research can be conducted over a longer time frame (alternative to this cross-sectional approach) to evaluate the participants' changes in attitudes over more than one point in time. While the sample size was adequate to draw meaningful conclusions for this work, future studies can increase depth of the context to strengthen generalisability. For instance, in the study's selection of companies, the randomisation was too wide. While it gave the study a feel of concerns in diverse firms, this posed a limitation in justifying why those different firms were picked and the motivation to select them. It is, however, important to note that at the time, all firms were applying remote work to some extent. As such, it was a matter of selecting those organisations which were highly engaged in the WFH concept than others. Again, because of time constraints, categorisation of the firms was less of a priority. For future work therefore, it will be necessary to increase the rigor of the sampling strategy to inform a more streamlined contribution that speaks to firm size, type of industry, and WFH infrastructural setup.

While the findings did not seem to have established any insights on how technological factors played a role, mainly because of the question that is inclined to social aspects (attitudes) than technological (devices and systems adopted for use), the technological effects were implicit. Entrenched as they were, this study did not delve deeper

into the obvious adoption of new technology effects, the widespread digital divide, and technophobia challenges, as influenced by the factors of age, position, managing, home setup distractions, and type of work. This is because the participants were purposefully picked from a sample of technologically savvy employees as the study was more concerned with attitudes (social implications) over technological issues. As such, future research work could focus on these attitudinal factors not only from a social perspective, but sociotechnical as well. Similarly, future research could be conducted to determine the influence of age and gender dynamics towards WFH, as these were shown in literature to underpin some of the attitudes. Lastly, with a more systematised and categorised selection of firms (based on size, type of industry, and WFH infrastructure), future studies could explore the successes and failures of organisations that continued to WFH after lockdown restrictions were lifted. This is because this study did not explicate explicitly the benefits and losses organisations experienced from WFH but rather, explored employee attitudes towards the concept within the organisations.

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