Employees Perception on Work from Home During COVID 19 Pandemic and Impact at Organizational Level

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Abstract

This article presents the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic on Human Resources (HR) Corporate Department of a European oil & gas company and the key mechanisms of change within the whole business. The main scope of this research was to analyze the impact of the pandemic period on employees (at individual level), on the HR Corporate department (at team level) and on the overall satisfaction level within the whole organization (at company level). The purpose of this research was a pulse check exercise to identify the key elements employees are struggling during the pandemic, to identify the most effective communication channels and improvement areas in order to increase efficiency.

Furthermore, the consequences of the new ways of working during the pandemic period drove to a transformation within the whole organization – where the impact of digital and technology innovation is combined with the execution of activities, as well as the way employee interact with one another (internally & externally). An interview with the HR Business Partner representative supported us on finding out more insights on the whole concept driven by the values of business agility, where the main 3 pillars are represented by digital subsurface, digital rig of the future and real-time digital oilfield, off 3 being enabled by digital office of the future – aiming to have everything one click away, and digital ways of working-with the purpose of doing more with the people.

The theoretical framework of the article is based on the impact on new ways of working during the pandemic period and which elements of the oil & gas changing industry determined changing the expectations from employees. The analysis of the elements influencing the new ways of working during the pandemic period is based on statistical methods, therefore, this is considered quantitative research. The qualitative research includes the literature review about the transition period when the business goes virtual, leading in the VUCA word and importance of health while working from home.

Keywords

Introduction

Wuhan, China is the first location where COVID 19 was first identified and the pandemic started in December 2019. The pandemic context developed with an incredible speed, thus on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) has officially called pandemic (Hui et al., 2020).

Before start of the COVID 19 pandemic most organizations had not adopted the work from home way of working. Employees needed to work from their office on a daily business and only few companies implemented this flexible way of working as a pilot, specially in the IT services. Once the COVID 19 pandemic started, social distancing was one of the most popular measures to minimize the risk of infection. Thus, because working from home can reduce the infection rates and aims to decrease the economic costs of confinement, it became a suitable measure which has been implemented immediately.

The work from home as a new way of working may have potential benefits, but also risks (Errichiello and Pianese 2016; Anka et al., 2020; Choudhury et al., 2020; Graves and Karabayeva 2020; Yawson, 2020). When considering the main difficulties during the pandemic, keeping the balance between work and private life, in an environment where the household members are combined with the professional life might be challenging. Not only the companies switched to the work from home activity, but also schools started to teach remotely during the pandemic and this has been mirrored as one of the biggest challenges of the employees during the pandemic (Bulut and Reziyamu 2021; Chawla et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021; Vargas-Llave, 2020).

In the present article we will present the effects of the pandemic and how the imposed now ways of working – focusing on the work from home setup has impacted the whole organizational setup.

1. The consequences of the pandemic on new ways of working

In the present article, we will present the consequences of the pandemic on new ways of working, which are the key elements with negative impact when it comes to Coronavirus restrictions and how this is reflected in the transformation process of the whole organization. The research was conducted within the HR Corporate departments of a European oil & gas company, in January 2021, aiming to hear the voice of the employees in order to identify the improvement areas and adapt the whole business concept to the new working environment.

The survey has been distributed online, in January 2021, to pulse check the HR employee's satisfaction level after one year of pandemic, working almost exclusively from home. The survey contented was designed as simple as possible, focusing on 3 main areas: employee impact, team impact and overall satisfaction level. The survey addressed to the employees covered the Net Promoter Score representative question, with the possibility of a unique answer on a scale from 1-10 ("On a scale from 1 to 10, to when extend do you agree to the following statement: I am completely satisfied by the new ways of working during the pandemic") (Reichheld, 2003), 3 ranking questions measuring the employees satisfaction level when it comes to leader support, measures at work locations and effectiveness of working from home, 3 ranking questions measuring effectiveness of working completely virtual, partially virtual or sending office / field / plant, but also single choice questions, aiming to identify the elements negatively impacting working from home during pandemic, the most popular communication channels and improvement areas while working from home or when returning to the office. The target group was HR headquarter department, where 86 employees, out of a total of 128 responded to the survey. The 67% response rate was high, reflecting the fact that such surveys are appreciated by employees. In addition, the high response rate is a proof that transparency, open communication, and feedback are main pillars when it comes to the fundaments of the organization.

7,88
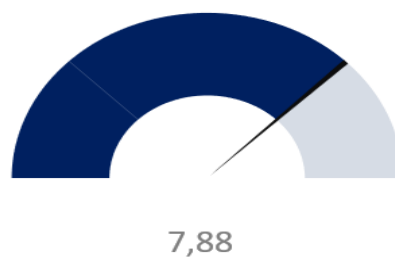
Figure no. 1. Net Promoter Score for working from home
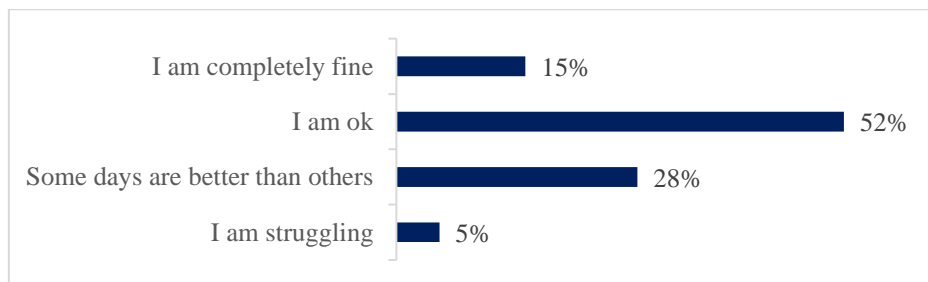*Source: authors' data processing study*

During the pandemic 92% of the HR department worked completely virtual, only 8% of the team working partially virtual. The switch from working from office to working exclusively from home was abrupt, being determined by the emergency of the Corona pandemic.
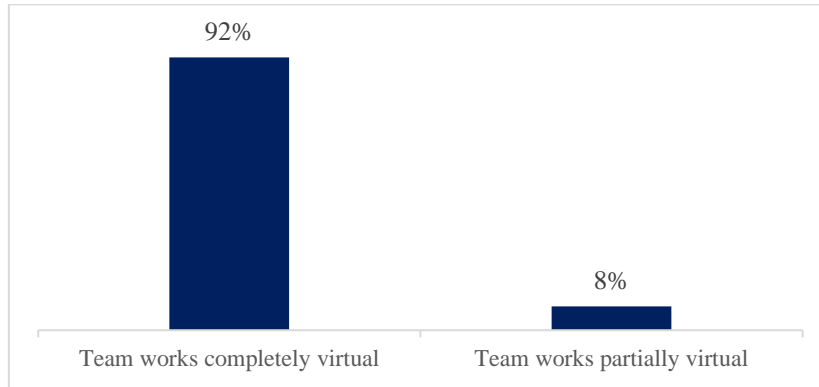
Figure no. 2. Status split on way of working
Source: authors' data processing study

When deep diving into the results of the survey, 52% of the respondents stated that "they are ok" with the current situation. 28% of respondents had a mix of feeling, saying that "some days are better then other", reflecting that they were still struggling from time to tome with adapting to the new work from home way of working. The extremes of the responses were in a low percentage, only 5% declaring that they "are struggling" during the pandemic work from home, while 15% where "completely fine" with the new working setup. During the pandemic period, many employees struggled with stress, sleeping disorders, burnout, anxiety, demotivation and even lack of sense on what they do (Bulut and Reziyamu 2021). Thus, the overall calculated Net Promoter Score was high – 7.88. Employees who scored 9-10 ratings had the highest recommendation rates and are named "Promoters". The "Passives" being satisfied, but not loyal- gave scores between 7-8 and employees with ratings between 0-6 were called "Detractors". The Net Promoter Score is defined as the difference between the percentage of promoters and the percentage of detractors. Thus, we can conclude that even if the work from home way of working was not planned, the employees welcomed this change and adapted fast.

Figure no. 3. Employees status with pandemic situations
Source: authors' data processing study

When analyzing the employee impact, they survey focused on 3 main areas: management support, measures at work location and effectiveness of working from home. For this section of the survey, respondents were invited to rank their satisfaction level by granting 1-5 starts for each category. The highest score was registered by the effectiveness of working from home, having a total of 4,58/5. The findings of the research indicate that working from home effectiveness is improved by personal and family well-being but reduces when it comes to environmental and resource constraints. When employees experience higher effectiveness while working from home, they develop a preference for this new way of working and aim to continue working from home even after the pandemic. However, when asking feedback on team effectiveness at team level when working completely virtual, the registered score is 4,24/5. On the other side, the team effectiveness when working partially virtual was evaluated at 4,71/5. Thus, the results proof that the best individual effectiveness level is not affected when working from home. In the same time, the best setup for team overall effectiveness is when employees work partially virtual.

Figure no. 4. Effectiveness split on way of working
Source: authors' data processing study

Facing the pandemic waves forces the organizations to adapt working locations and increase the health security measures. Health and Security are considered a priority, specially in oil and gas organizations and aim to reduce as much as possible working accidents. Thus, implementing preventive measures was treated as a priority being physical or social distancing. New regulations and measures were designed to ensure the health and security of employees working from office during the pandemic. Ventilation system of indoor spaces has been upgraded, rules on social distancing, coughs and sneezes, hand washing, keeping unwashed hands away from face, usage of masks in common working spaces were implemented once the pandemic alert status was declared by authorities. Implementing all those measures gave employee confidence that they are save when joining the office. Separately from health, security and infrastructure changes imposed by the pandemic, the switch from working from office to working from home has successful with a consistent effort of IT support. Ensuring the virtual private network (VPN) infrastructure to sustain the continuity of business activity was successfully fulfilled and contributed to the effectiveness of working from home. Thus, a score of 4,5/5 was calculated when it came to satisfaction with measures at work location.

The pain-point of the elements ranked by the employees is represented by the lower satisfaction level with leader's support, scoring 4,33/5. The impact of supportive leadership is key during crisis periods. We can conclude that organizational leadership group was not prepared for such a change and left space for improvement when it comes to creating a clear list of priorities. Once with the pandemic crisis, the oil & gas industry was strongly affected by the oil & gas price volatility, competitor pressure for efficiency, country specific challenges and green demand from stakeholders. Business changes are always mirrored in the HR activity. Thus, many project have been put on hold, priorities changes and new improvement areas were identified – such as developing a digital signature flow, obtaining digital signature authorization, developing a paperless organization, focus on digitalization and simplification and support business to redesign the whole organization from a process-oriented approach to value change orientation.

Satisfaction with leader support	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆	4,33
Satisfaction with measures at work location	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆	4,5
Effectiveness of working from home	★ ★ ★ ★ ☆	4,58

Figure no. 5. Satisfaction score while working from home
Source: authors' data processing study

The continuous learning is one of the key elements which contribute to a successful leadership in the new reality. We identified three main areas which might be improved by specific courses, supporting leaders to manage their teams' betters, especially during periods lead by that many changes. First area is how to support the virtual way of working. Courses on how managers can support remote employees, how to manage virtual teams, how to lead successful teams when everyone is remote or which technology is best to be used while working remote are essential to support the team to adapt to the new work from home setup and integrated the team better in the digital environment. Leading in the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world is essential during crisis periods. The leaders need to be trained how to make their teams more agile, creative, united and how to lead the change. In addition to the first two mentioned areas, the health element should always be put on the first place. Leaders need to be prepared on how to support their team from a mental health perspective while working from home. Managing stress and leading with emotional intelligence is essential for the overall team effectiveness.

The elements which highly impacted employees during the pandemic working from home were represented by the school restrictions (23%), family members – e.g., job loss, illness, long term separation (20%), travel restrictions (17%), IT restrictions (9%) and others (12%). However, 19% of respondents considered that there was no negative impact influenced by the Coronavirus during working from home.

Health problems caused by the COVID 19 pandemic, but also by the work from home may be associated with severe back pain, muscle pain, illness, lack of exercises, isolation when one of the family members got sick (Carnevale and Hatak 2020)
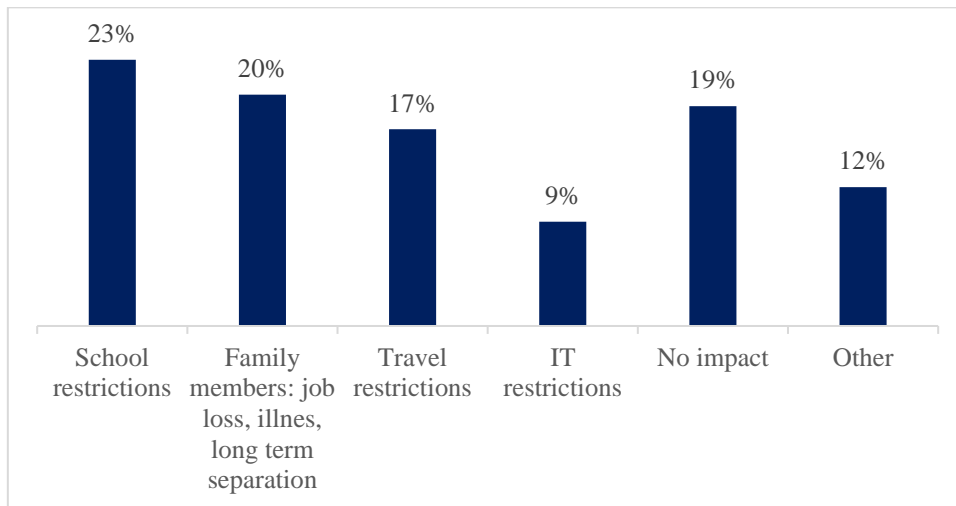
Figure no. 6. Pandemic restrictions with negative impact
Source: authors' data processing study

Under the effectiveness umbrella we analyzed also the most effective communication channels. The emails continue to be the most popular communication channel, being preferred by over 34% of respondents. The organization intranet page occurred on the second place in the top employees' preferences (29%), followed by the announcements via line managers (24%). Executive board webcasts (7%) and other communication channels were at the button of employees preferred communication channels.
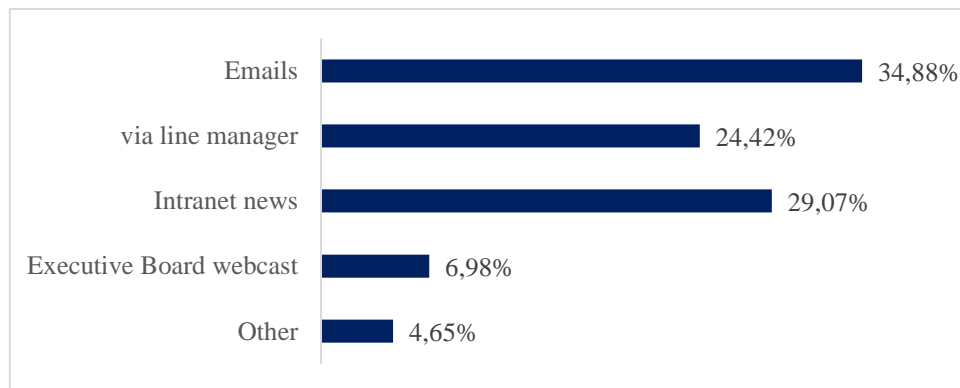
Figure no. 7. Communication channels effectiveness
Source: authors' data processing study

Overall, the working from home setup was appreciated by the employees and the business activity has not been affected by this change. However, the identified improvement areas for the work from home situation were home support, financial support (e.g., granting a monthly lump sum to cover additional utilities costs), more transparency on companies' strategy to return to office, need to develop a save time strategy (too many meetings, no meeting / online detox opportunity). When returning to the office, the employees' expectation is to benefit of a certain number of works from home days, get more flexibility when it comes to well-being, get support for managing hybrid meetings.

Complementary to the above quantitative research on how the pandemic working from home was perceived by the HR employees, we conducted an interview with the Head of HR Business Partner in order to do a deep dive on how the whole business activity of the organization changed during the pandemic. The whole concept driven by the values of business agility, where the main 3 pillars are represented by digital subsurface, digital rig of the future and real-time digital oilfield, off 3 being enabled by digital office of the future – aiming to have everything one click away, and digital ways of working- with the purpose of doing more with the people.

Considering the difficult period faced by the oil & gas industry during the pandemic, the organization took the opportunity to shape the future of the business and drive change forward. The departments became value centers, supporting business to create end-to-end accountability for value by structuring along key exploration and production portfolios. Moreover, the HSSE remained the focus activity to improve quality of business activities while protecting people, the environment, assets and organizations reputation. The

new structure of the whole company brought in focus the results, leading the customer relationship within the organization. This created transparency on ownership over delivery of a product at the required quality and time to that customer.

The organization leveraged digital tools but also a digital mindset to innovate and improve the ways of working. The business departments organized themselves in teams where various experiences and disciplines are combined and work towards a shared objective (product outcome). This can be achieved by developing virtual teams ("project-set-up" with team members from different organizational units) or remote teams (team members from different legal entities / locations and disciplines report to one organizational unit). Thus, the efficient execution is a key element, and the business focuses on work on achieving outcome in the best possible way, continuously optimizing time and resources.

Below a short overview on the differences and benefits of a product-driven organization:

Table no. 1. Differences and benefits of a product-driven organization

	Structural framework	Mode of collaboration	Evaluation of a successful outcome
From Process Orientation	Functional silos delivering discrete technical activities in a sequence Steep hierarchy	People work sequentially and focused on their respective tasks	Focus on technically accurate achievement of process, but not focused on integrated end business result
To Value Chain-orientation	Integrate activities, processes, outcomes: clustering of related activities creating a thread toward a focused objective	People work across disciplines and contribute directly to the outcome	Focus on ultimate business results Objectives (KPIs) based around success of result of all the activities
Benefits	Integrated value chains for our customers	Innovative working environment Enabling agility	Employer by giving accountability Better outcomes

Source: authors' data processing study

The results of the research proof the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic period at an organizational level. The whole organization adapted to the new working conditions from a way of working perspective, but also from a structural framework and collaboration model perspective. Overall, over 52% of the respondents confirmed that they adapted easily to the work from home model. Despite the exclusive or partial virtual working environment, the effectiveness of the employees has not been affected. However, specific pandemic elements, such as school and travel restriction, IT difficulties or illness of family members affected the wellbeing of respondents. When returning to the office, employees expect a flexible company approach, with a working schedule which includes a specific number of days to work from home and support in organizing hybrid meetings.

Conclusions

The pandemic period had a visible impact on the new ways of working and the overall business setup of many organizations. The results of the survey proofed those struggling employees are less satisfied with leaders' support, compared to ones who are all right of completely fine. Thus, indicating further support might be required. This also reflects in a lower net promoter score. School restriction have had the largest negative impact on employees who are struggling. One of the most popular proposed improvement measures was the consistent request for support with electricity, internet and office equipment. Overall, working from home worked during the pandemic period. All respondents were doing it and finding it verry effective, even when an employee is struggling. Additionally, it is the top request for continuing in the future.

The new ways of working during pandemic enabled new business models with the advantage if developing an organization by value, product and end-to-end process rather than function, integrated multidisciplinary teams, enabling agility and integration and fast implementation.

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