

A Study on Engaging Employee Through Virtual Work Place

V.MANJU PRIYA

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

APOLLO ARTS AND SCIENCE COLLEGE, CHENNAI GUDUVANCHERY

ABSTRACT

In the new normal created by the COVID-19 pandemic many businesses have made arrangements for a remote work culture. Due to this pandemic, there is greater shift from traditional work environment to the virtual environment. The reason for this research is to understand the impact of virtual workplace on employee productivity. The shift raises the need for developing a new employee commitment strategy which can help even in post-pandemic era.. Trends were analyzed and strategy is deployed which helps in understanding the engagement and working on performance measurement.

Keywords: Virtual Workplace (VW), Employee productivity, Employee Engagement, Performance Level, Work from home (WFH), Work from office (WFO)

I. INTRODUCTION

The Virtual Workplace (VW) today represents a new facing organizations and policymakers in both developed and developing countries. The VW can be generally described as an embryonic area of academic study, particularly in developing countries like India.

Working from Home [WFH] has been rising for years, as more occupations use computers and telecommunications, more people have reliable home Internet connections, and more families have both parents working full time. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this process by forcing a large fraction of the global workforce to switch to WFH at least temporarily. Compared to Working from the Office [WFO], WFH has the potential to reduce commute time, provide more flexible working hours, increase job satisfaction, and improve work-life balance. However, little is yet known about some of the more fundamental consequences of WFH, including its effects on productivity and which factors play a role in making WFH more or less productive than WFO.

More than 70% of U.S. employees are not engaged in their work. Researcher defined engaged employees as those who are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work, team members, and workplace. The data that Gallup has collected over the last 17 years has shown a steady decline in the workplace engagement of employees in organizations across the United States (Adkins, 2015).

Parallel to the decline in the culture of engagement, organizations are experiencing rapid growth in their remote/telecommuting work. Working remotely has become more the norm for organizations than the exception. Almost 80% of IT employee working in Chennai are at WFH. Organizational culture experts have called this increase in remote work a culture of engagement, that is, a work environment where the leaders create a culture defined by meaningful work, deep employee engagement, Job and organizational fit, and strong authentic leadership. With this rapid growth and expansion of remote working options, organizational leaders have grown increasingly concerned about their ability to build, manage, and maintain a workplace culture of engagement with employees who they never physically see in the office space.

II. RESEARCHERS PERSPECTIVE

Employee engagement:

Employee engagement is the work-oriented engagement of the employee with a positive and cheerful attitude towards the organization's work, workplace, and work culture. It is a practice, which tries to get better than the employee's average productivity through various engaging activities and atmosphere that the organization provides to the employee. The three main pillars which influence employee engagement are work, workplace, and work culture. With the change in the workplace for the IT sector post COVID-19, it is crucial to transform existing policies to strategically enhance employee engagement.

Virtual working environment:

It is not a physical workplace simulation but a workbench with all the requirements necessary for the work. It does not have a physical presence, but employees are connected via the internet or intranet. The primary purpose of its introduction in the market was to make employees collaborate from various geographies on the same platform.

(I) PROBLEM STATEMENT

Work from home is here to stay and not leaving anytime soon. It may be because of the current pandemic situation, many businesses have made arrangements for a remote work culture in a very short period, but the pandemic also accelerated the existing trends toward more flexible workarrangements, especially for the millennials, who value the freedom to shift between work and life as they see fit. Work from home can cut down on the cost and lost time of long commutes, for both the organization as well as the employees. But there are some issues or rather challenges which came into the picture because of a sudden shift in work culture which certainly needs to be faced by an organization as soon as possible, to prevent any ill impact on the employees or their work.

(II) OBJECTIVE

- To analyze the aspects that can play major roles in keeping employees engaged in the virtual working environment.
- To analyze the industry trending practices especially through virtual working environment
- To understand the impact on productivity, benefits to employees through virtual working environment

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section contains the method design for gathering necessary data and information for analysis to address the research objectives and questions. The method design for the collection of data and information is document analysis.

As the research is qualitative, it is important to take Industry experts' input along with document analysis. The experts' input is taken through a structured interview to gather information about the industry relevant to the research for analysis.

The method design for the analysis of data and information is thematic analysis to determine and compare the employees' productivity and level of engagement with the organization in the IT sector when they work from home. In this paper, we will conduct exploratory research for the understanding of employee engagement in the virtual environment.

The research is flexible, versatile, interactive, and helps us understand the underlying opinions and motivation in the new normal created by the covid pandemic. It also helps us uncover the new potential parameters that are not been tapped and provide a more insightful exposure to problems to develop ideas.

This qualitative research, by both working on primary data as well as exploring secondary data, will be a key to map the engagement levels.

IV. STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

The researchers interacted with industry experts to get insight into virtual workplaces and new trends emerging from them. The researchers asked them about: View on the virtual workplace, performance comparison (offline vs. online workplace), employee perception of virtual workplace, problems faced by employees in the virtual workplace, employee feedback on this new working environment, and how to make virtual workplace more employee. The questions that were asked were an attempt to underst friendly and engaged and the virtual workplace practices at firms to make it more employeefriendly. Based on the responses, this paper tries to formulate a strategy to enhance the level of employee engagement.

V. INSIGHTS FROM INDUSTRY: AN ANALYSIS

When we interviewed expert s from different organizations about their experience with working on virtual environment considering different parameters (appendix attached below), we get different opinions, but a general perception is that the new virtual work culture has an impact on the mental level. **Virtual workplace has reduced their movement, interaction, expression, and development.**

When we **compare virtual workplace and traditional workplace**, we find that in traditional work environment, facetoface interaction and collaboration is there, which makes it more effective. Virtual work environment doesn't feel like an actual office work environment, which makes it sometimes difficult to adjust, especially when working from home mentally.

When we asked the expert regarding the **performance and productivity of employees** working in a virtual environment, we observed that different jobs have different outcomes. For jobs that are more programmed and structured, like coding or in the IT sector, performance and productivity have increased, if not constant, from the company's perspective as the employees are available for the tasks anytime. .For the IT sector, the work is not that much affected by the pandemic; only the work culture sees the change. Initially, employees were enthusiastic about work from home, but they got bored at home with time. Employees could play games, go to cafes or just gossip during their breaks but now, they do their jobs or doze off during their breaks. According to an internal survey at the company, it was found out that the employees who are parents or

are stable with their current jobs have more likability towards work from home than singles or people who want to learn and grow.

For jobs, which need **creativity and consultation** from different verticals, have faced productivity challenges. Although achieved through virtual calls, their coordination is achieved through virtual calls, but an expression of ideas is yet to find the traditional match. The employee often turn off their mic and camera due to home disturbances and avoid speaking and contributing until it is very important. This has made even creative task monotonous.

The employee engagement at a virtual workplace is largely influenced by the **employee's family equations** while working from home. People who are unmarried and are living at home working at an abrupt work shift find it monotonous and challenging working for hours. But there are few who are happy with the virtual workplace because they are getting more time to spend with family. But what remains common for all employees is that they want to change in work culture, like the hybrid model is a good option, where it is optional for employees to work from home or office.

According to the experts, one of the employees' major concerns is associated with their **work life balance**. Because the concept of work from home is practically new for most of the employees, they are trying to do their best, but employees are facing difficulty in maintaining equilibrium between their work life or career and their family or social life at an individual level. It is not that they don't know about the problem; it is just that, they don't know how to handle or solve it. With time, the employees may get adjusted to this kind of work culture, but it is also a responsibility of the organization to support their employees in adapting to work from home while maintaining work life balance.

For **learning and growth** of employees at the virtual workplace, companies in IT Industry are taking major steps to provide the employees necessary resources and materials online, but it is not that engaging or effective in case of most of the companies. Which can slow down the employees' growth rate instead of boosting it and may become sheer wastage of capital and resources, if not done properly.

Traditionally, the very important notices were displayed at the company's Notice board physically, but now daily employees are getting those critical notices along with hundreds of other company mails. Even if an employee knows that he would be getting an important mail, he would have to search for it in the mail inbox, and if he/she is not aware of the information about the notice, he/she may not get to know about it.

With the pandemic, the way of celebrating achievements has changed for the companies. Now, the companies can't have their celebration or company event, where everyone from the company used to gather and interact. The employees even can't have their adventure trips, picnics, team gatherings, team lunch, and other interactive or engaging events that they usually waited for and used to think about. In any virtual company event, only the guests and the event coordinators can speak. The others who don't know each other in the same virtual room can't have personal interaction or conversation with each other was traditionally how people used to interact at an event.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendation

The engagement of an employee at a virtual workplace is a difficult task. The employee-employer interaction through a virtual platform has restricted every nonwork-- related interaction, which earlier engaged employees. Team interaction, team gathering, individual development opportunities have reduced due to which work has become monotonous, boring, non-creative. Those who are happy with this new work culture, also agree to issues of lack of belongingness for work and organization. Work is more like an assignment that needs more interaction and expression for communicating ideas. Companies are working through various programs to make the virtual workplace more engaged, offering games, interactive sessions, video call celebration, and many more. But still, they need to work more so that employee soft skills are used more and more while they work.

1. Virtual Work Environment can become convenient if work life balance can be maintained at employee's level, and company's level, appropriate support to the employees and engagement of the employees is carried out properly, most of the employees would get satisfied.

To increase employee engagement, a company can use a Hybrid model (Phadnis, 2020). The work environment is the combination of a traditional office - based work environment and the virtual work environment. Further, the company can develop a hybrid model on three different bases or based on their combinations.

The three other bases for the Hybrid model are as specified below-

a. They give the employees the option to choose which kind of work environment they are convenient with and want to work in, for the company with their highest performance level.

b. Having a fixed number of employees engaged in both traditional office work environment and virtual work environment on a rotation basis (e.g., 40% employees in traditional office work environment and 60 % virtual work environment) either daily, weekly, monthly, or any other time period, which the company is comfortable with.

c. Based on four degrees, i.e., not satisfactory, satisfactory, good and excellent for performance levels of employees' in the last six months i.e., when employees worked traditionally and in the last six months, when they have worked virtually. A comparison is made to help the company in making the decision to call the employees. A decision would be taken on whether calling employees to traditional office work environment would be advantageous or disadvantageous for the company.

2. An increase in employee-employer interaction and conversation can lead to better communication among them, leading to better employee engagement as familiarity. The employee's inclusiveness with the organization can increase, resulting in internal motivation for the employee, which will encourage him/her to give more effort in his/her work, thus increasing the employee's performance level.

3. Since the team is dispersed worldwide, and can't have team gatherings or celebrate team achievement through a virtual meeting. Casual gatherings for friends in the same city, who are employees of either the same company or different companies can be promoted. Instead of giving the monetary compensation, the companies can provide them special lunch coupons which he/she can utilize with his/her friends who have the same coupon, which is given to them from their company for the same reason. It can be implemented by a tie-up between companies that favours this kind of compensation coupons.

4. Employees' level of engagement can be improved by involving them in the decisions relating to overtime work, as now they are getting more tasks, the moment they complete one task well before the deadline, which makes them feel stressed more. To make it easier to understand, if an employee has to complete a task in 5 days and he/she has achieved it in 3 days, then he/she has to start working on another task 4th day. They are monetarily compensated for that but not asked whether they would like to take a break and continue on the 5th day rather than the 4th day. If it goes on, they may not try to perform better if they are instructed to work, unwillingly, just because of some monetary benefits. Employees may start taking their work messages casually or neglecting them if things are not adequately handled.

5. According to the company's needs, employees now have to work on the weekends as well, and even have lesser break timings, which plays a large part in their worklife imbalance, not keeping both employees' mental and physical health in mind. Now, for the weekends as well, employees have to ask for leaves, frequently. To have all the work completed, well before time, disregarding employees' mental and physical health can reduce employee engagement in the company, which can be beneficial for the companies in the short term but not in the long term. So, a company should provide the employees regular holidays to help them maintain their worklife balance and should only be disturbed, if very urgent work is there, during the holidays, thus increasing the employees' level of engagement.