Multiple Perspectives of Working From Home: Lessons Learned During the Pandemic

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the varied experiences of professionals working from home in eight different countries (Asia, Australia, Brazil, and the USA) during the COVID-19 pandemic. In-depth structured open-ended interviews (10) were conducted using online video calls in 2022. Most people shifted to working from home (WFH) during the lockdown. The participants responded differently to this new working norm, reporting different productivity levels and distractions. Participants in IT departments experienced heavy workloads and long working hours. Many organizations transitioned from traditional to digital work methods as they found new ways to meet organizational goals. Some respondents preferred the hybrid working mode after the lockdown ended, while two preferred working entirely from home and four working entirely onsite. One participant moved his IT department to remote work to save office leasing costs as his employees preferred WFH after the pandemic. Some businesses were negatively impacted, and one restaurant closed permanently. This study provided valuable insights from the participants' WFH experiences and their post-pandemic working preferences.

Keywords: *Remote work, telework, working from home*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic generated a major disruption causing complex personal and social changes in the lives of people and businesses around the globe (Alrikabi & Jasim, 2021; Chinvararak et al., 2022; Kniffin et al., 2021). Employees and their families were forced to deal with severe uncertainty that negatively affected their physical and mental health (Chinvararak et al., 2022; White, 2021). Millions of people all over the world had to switch to working remotely/telework (Kniffin et al., 2021), which was no longer an option but a "compulsory requirement or a mandatory order" (Wang et al., p. 18, 2021; White, 2021) and was popularly dubbed as the "new normal" (Wang et al., 2021; White, 2021). Shocked with the rapid transition of working from the office to working from home (WFH) (Högberg, 2022), employees and organizations alike were suddenly plunged into the unfamiliar without any preparation or warning (Bloom, 2020). Organizations were in a completely new and unknown environment where they had no significant experience or understanding of WFH operations and the complexities that came with it (Chow et al., 2022; Ngotngamwong, 2023). They had to learn suddenly and work hard towards reorganizing their operations and strategies to accommodate remote working (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020). Financial security and the fear of losing jobs were major concerns for employees, since pay cuts and layoffs accompanied the pandemic (Monster, 2020; Parker et al, 2020), while employers' concerns were on productivity and achieving business success during the sudden disruption (Monster, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to explore the WFH experiences of working professionals from multiple industries who resided in different countries. It provides readers with deeper insights into the real-life experiences of those whose lives were disrupted and how they adapted to these changes. This study offers valuable insights gathered from 10 participants with unique backgrounds, ultimately contributing to an enriched and holistic understanding of WFH experiences during the pandemic. These insights not only expand the existing body of knowledge about remote work, but also serve as a significant resource for the future. What can these experiences and strategies teach businesses and employees about more productive methods of work in the present and the future?

Literature Review
Work-From-Home

Work-From-Home, also termed as "'telework,' 'telecommuting,' 'remote working,' 'e-work' and 'virtual work' (Sullivan, 2003, as cited in Green et al., 2020, p. 5), is supported by the utilization of information and communication technology at one or more offsite locations such as the employees' homes, satellite offices, or coworking spaces (Offstein et al., 2010). Working remotely was not widely practiced prior to the pandemic (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018), and was commonly practiced only in certain industries (Statistics NZ, 2019) or by highly skilled professionals with a high level of autonomy, such as managers or IT specialists (Milasi et al., 2021; Statistics NZ, 2019). It was a completely new working experience for most employees (Singha & Sivarethinamohan, 2021) who were forced to go through many stark changes in their working practices (Hunter, 2020).

Both workers and organizations had very little experience and were completely unprepared for this huge change, and organizations were unprepared to provide the necessary support (Wang et al., 2021). Moreover, there were no contingency plans to cope with this sudden development (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020). By providing continuous online training and learning, the IT know-how of employees was gradually improved. They became better equipped to manage a challenging workplace (Hunter, 2020) that relied heavily on digital technologies in a virtual work environment (Orth & Schuldis, 2021). Employees learnt how to adapt to the new normal by "attending meetings through videoconferencing, creating virtual workflows and exploring new software to replace physical processes" (White, 2021, p. 16). Many WFH employees hardly took any vacation time during the pandemic (Monster, 2020), which easily led to unsustainable stress and sometimes resulted in burnout (White, 2021). Some who worked longer hours were fully absorbed in their work, and lost track of time as they were more focused in a quiet environment that was devoid of workplace noise and social interactions. Thus, overwork was an issue with some who lost track of time, while others had no such problem. Some took more breaks during the day, while others were so absorbed in their work that they neglected break times. Allowing schedule flexibility gave employees the opportunity to plan their schedules so that they could spend time with families. Many were able to start and end work earlier (Chow et al., 2022). Although some organizations maintained the same work schedules, others saw increases in the number of hours worked.

In general, singles experienced more benefits than couples, and those with families and children had a more difficult time. Men were reported to have a better work-life balance than women, who devoted more time to household duties and their children (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020). Self-discipline was a powerful individual factor/personal trait during remote working. Those with high levels of self-discipline were reported to have completed their tasks more efficiently, while still being able to maintain a good work-family balance. Employees with less self-discipline, on the other hand, were less productive and experienced procrastination and cyberloafing, an indication of self-control failure (Wang et al., 2020).

Negative Impacts of WFH

The pandemic negatively impacted economies, worldwide individual lifestyles, physical health, and more importantly, employees' mental health; common problems included anxiety, depression, distress, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Xiong, et al., 2020). Some professions, particularly individuals working in Health Care, experienced extended working hours which led to anxiety, burnout, and PTSD (Amanullah & Shankar, 2020; Tan et al., 2020). Many were ergonomically challenged, without suitable work chairs or adjustable work surfaces, and spent long hours at undesirable work positions (White, 2021). This contributed to a significant rise in musculoskeletal complaints, along with new aches and pains, particularly in the back, neck, and shoulders (Bevan et al., 2020). The WFH arrangement proved to be a very isolating experience (Lopez-Leon et al., 2020), and remote workers suffered from emotional exhaustion (Vander Elst et al., 2017). Such a development could be helped through organizational social support platforms to boost social interaction among employees (Wang et al., 2020).

Benefits of WFH

The WFH experience was not entirely bad. Literature published prior the pandemic pointed out that "WFH is beneficial for employee wellbeing and performance, and organizational outcomes, notably productivity, retention, and business continuity in times of disruption" (Green et al., 2020, p. 5). Looking from the positive side of physical and mental wellbeing, WFH saved traveling time, allowed longer sleeping hours, and provided a healthier work life balance as employees could spend time with their families, exercise, cook, and walk their dogs (Chow et al., 2022). The WFH experience was positively related to "higher job satisfaction and performance, lower work-family conflict, and lower turnover propensity," along with an "increase in the worker's perceived autonomy afforded by WFH" (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007 as cited in Green et al., 2020, p. 5). Relying heavily on digital communication, information sharing was not only more effective but easier, as team members were more approachable and available digitally by email or phone. Moreover, digital meetings were more efficient, punctual, and effective as more meetings could be scheduled within a day (Chow et al., 2022). On a more personal level, it opened opportunities for individual self-development, reskilling, and employability improvements (Hunter, 2020). The shift from paper to digital documents (Lopez-Leon et al., 2020) is more environmentally friendly and sustainable, while less traveling not only reduced traffic congestion, but is also good for the environment (Mello, 2007; Siha & Monroe, 2006, as cited in Green et al., 2020). The WFH change also conferred financial benefits with savings on transportation expenses such as gas, tickets, tolls, transport cards, and food and beverages (Chow et al., 2022; Saho et al., 2021). While organizations incurred less capital costs for leasing office spaces, WFH had a negative impact on real estate companies (Atkyns et al., 2002; Mello, 2007, as cited in Green et al., 2020).

Challenges of Working from Home

Home-based work has many challenges. Although it had been practiced on a much smaller scale prior to the pandemic, it was very different on a global scale. Four main remote work challenges were identified in a Chinese study and included "work-home interference, ineffective communication, procrastination, and loneliness." "Four virtual work characteristics" further modifying these challenges were "social support, job autonomy, monitoring, and workload," as well as self-discipline (Wang et al., 2020, p. 16). Relying almost entirely on digital communication during the new normal was a practice that sometimes led to communication problems, which resulted in low productivity (Wang et al., 2020). Virtual meetings were particularly challenging as communication and engagement were difficult with large groups, especially when some members dominated meetings and when many people were conversing at the same time. The missing social aspect meant lost opportunities for networking, social interaction, feedback, performance management, team help, and support.

Other complications were IT related such as Internet access, bandwidth issues, and sharing drives and printers (Chow et al., 2022). Engagement in non-work related activities such as social media and long breaks led to procrastination and missed deadlines. Supervisor monitoring, such as daily reports, turning on cameras, and clocking in and out was positively received, as it helped workers to focus on their tasks and avoid procrastination (Wang et al., 2020). Productivity was another challenge with the clash of home and work life, the absence of the family connections, and a lack of tools needed to work (Monster, 2020). Employees who resided with their families faced family life distractions and encountered difficulties focusing on their work at home, which affected work effectiveness (Wang et al., 2020; White, 2021). This was a problem particularly for parents with children, as they had to simultaneously work and take care of their children (Chow et al., 2022; Park et al., 2020), leading to exhaustion (Wang et al., 2020). The separation between work and home was borderless for some, and having home access to a laptop tempted some to keep working, which ultimately resulted in a high workload being experienced from early morning to late evenings (Chow et al., 2022).

Leadership Challenges with WFH

Leaders found the pandemic extremely challenging for, like their employees, they had to informally learn from experience how to respond to tremendous changes when they were suddenly thrown into unusual and threatening circumstances (Högberg, 2022). This quick adaptation meant that traditional leadership methods were no longer effective or adequate in the WFH scenarios (Bell et al., 2019; Contreras et al., 2020). This forced them to "reframe their leadership role and how they 'did' leadership" (Bjørkelo, 2018, as cited in Högberg, 2022, p. 14), which resulted in them coming up with a new leadership style appropriate during the pandemic (Högberg, 2022). Leaders had to learn how to manage from home, while attending and managing what seemed like endless virtual meetings. High levels of stress and anxiety made it difficult for leaders to focus and be productive during the first few months of WFH (Sutton, 2020). Leading from home was complicated as managers no longer had access to face-to-face communication, corridor informal conversations, and "reading" their co-workers. This forced them to communicate, manage, and "learn new ways of approaching and interacting with their co-workers," (Högberg, 2022, p. 12). Successful WFH implementation requires open-minded leaders who "explore, support, and adjust to alternative ways of working." The WFH enforced experiment offered "a significant learning opportunity for organizations to evaluate what 'worked' and what did not, and in what ways WFH could be best managed to benefit both workers and organizations" (Green et al., 2020, p. 12).

Insights from WFH After the Pandemic

The WFH model proved to be a success, and flexible work practices continued to be used after the pandemic (Singha & Sivarethinamohan, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). The crisis may be over, but the impacts of the pandemic on work practices are highly evident, and many organizations continue to allow new ways of working (Orth, & Schuldis, 2021) as they refine operations, leadership practices, and leader-follower interactions (Högberg, 2022). Moving back to the office after WFH needs to be well-managed, as some find it stressful and threatening physically and mentally as they have to relearn some coping skills (Green et al., 2020).

In a study conducted by Chow et al. (2022), over 90% of participants expressed a strong desire to continue with WFH in the future as it fostered a better work life balance. Moreover, flexible work options, such as WFH or hybrid arrangements are excellent recruitment strategies for attracting skilled employees (Chow et al., 2022). Some post-pandemic jobs may become permanently remote (Sytch & Greer, 2020), and many who experienced WFH appreciated the benefits and desired it to continue in some form (Green et al., 2020) as deduced from comments such as "people do not feel compelled to return to the office," or simply said, they "have no plans to work in an office full-time" (Saran, 2021, p. 15). For such a transition to be successful, organizations will have to "implement formalized WFH policies that consider work-home boundary management support, role clarity, workload, performance indicators, technical support, facilitation of co-worker networking, and training for managers" (Chow et al., 2022, p. 9). The future is uncertain, and WFH may become a necessity in a future disaster or pandemic (Chow et al., 2022).

Objectives and Research Questions

Organizations found themselves suddenly moving from traditional onsite work to WFH to cope with the global crisis. As reactions to these new arrangements differed among industries and professions, a study of participants' experiences was deemed interesting and worthy of investigation. The objective of this study was to investigate the impact of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic on different professions in different countries. Two research questions guided this study:
1. What were the working experiences of participants' during the lockdown?
2. What were participants' working preferences, along with helpful suggestions to guide future remote workers after the pandemic?

Methodology

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted people from all walks of life world-wide, and since their experiences were deemed worth exploring, a qualitative phenomenology research methodology was selected for the study. This allowed the various reactions of participants had towards working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic to be investigated.

According to Creswell (2015), three to 10 participants represent the recommended sample size in a phenomenology qualitative research, therefore, 10 participants were selected to participate in the study. Moreover, in order to gain a broader perspective of what was happening in various countries as WFH became a worldwide phenomenon, participants from different countries and professions, most of whom worked in service businesses, were approached. Convenience sampling was used in this study, as the participants were from the researchers' professional and personal networks who were willing to share their WFH experiences. The participants were contacted, their informed consent to participate in the study was obtained, and an e-survey was sent out to collect demographic information via Google forms.

Video call interviews were conducted via Messenger and LINE platforms for about 30 to 45 min over a period of five months from May to September 2022. A structured open-ended interview protocol covered the following topics: (a) the impacts of the pandemic on the organization; (b) working during the pandemic; (c) feelings about working during the pandemic; (d) the impacts of WFH on productivity; and (e) working preferences after the pandemic. The in-depth interviews provided insights "into the world of participants" who described "their perceptions and reactions … to their experiences in detail" (Fraenkel et al., 2019, p. 388). Studying the multiple perceptions of the said phenomenon, as experienced by different participants, enabled common themes to be identified (Fraenkel et al., 2019).

Results

The participants' profiles are outlined in Table 1. The percentage of participants who switched jobs during the pandemic was 40% while the remainder continued in their jobs.

Table 1 *Participant Profiles*

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Industry	Residence	Age Range
P1	Thai	Male	IT	Thailand	46–50
P2	Cambodian	Male	Advertising	Cambodia	21–25
P3	Myanmar	Female	Banking	Myanmar	26–30
P4	Australian	Female	Public Hospital	Australia	36–40
P5	Thai	Male	Video Production	Thailand	26–30
P6	Brazilian	Male	IT Startup	Brazil	36–40
P7	Thai	Female	Audit	U.S.A.	26–30
P8	Vietnamese	Female	Plastic	Thailand	31–35
P9	Vietnamese	Male	Hospitality	Singapore	31–35
P10	Thai	Male	Travel/Tech	U.S.A.	26–30

The process of data analysis, as the recorded interview data, was coded on Excel spreadsheets. Clusters from similar codes were then combined into categories and eventually grouped into three different major themes as shown in Table 2. These included (a) Theme 1: The Impact of Working from Home on Employees and Organizations; (b) Theme 2: Working from Home and Its Effects on Productivity; and Theme 3: Working Preferences after the Pandemic.

Table 2 *Summary of Themes*

Theme	Description of Sub-Themes
Theme 1. Impact of Working from Home on Employees and Organizations	1. Transitioning to Digital Platforms 2. Positive Impacts on Virtual Operations 3. Negative Impacts on In-Person Operations
Theme 2. Working from Home and Its Effects on Productivity	1. More Work but Better Productivity 2. Struggles in Adapting to Online/Hybrid Work 3. Little/No Work and Decreased Productivity
Theme 3. Working Preferences after the Pandemic	1. Hybrid Mode a More Popular Choice 2. Reasons for Remote Work Preferences 3. Reasons for In-Person Work Preferences

Theme 1: Impact of Working from Home on Employees and Organizations

Shutdowns and mandatory remote work had a variety of impacts on organizations. Not surprisingly, the type of business and nature of work processes were important factors that moderated the intensity of these impacts. Some participants found it necessary to overhaul most business operations, while others encountered hardly any impact on their duties. While most businesses suffered during the pandemic, a few actually had more work and prospered in spite of it.

Sub-Theme 1.1: Transitioning to digital platforms. Lockdowns in Thailand caused an IT firm's (P1) customers to "engage in digital online mobile banking, online purchases, resulting in a significant jump in customer transactions that required larger servers, database servers, application services while employing the same number of employees." This was also true at a Myanmar bank (P3), where a sudden shift from traditional to mobile banking by both businesses and local customers was extremely taxing. At a public hospital in Australia (P4), the IT department's workload increased substantially because of the need to constantly update COVID patient medication and ward information, while supporting "a lot of tech enhancements with video consultations for patients." A huge transformation occurred in the marketing industry in Cambodia (P2). Firms moved away from marketing through traditional media, such as TV, billboards, concerts, and events to social media platforms, which were well accepted by customers.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Positive impacts on virtual operations. Respondent P7 works in the Public Accounting Industry in the US; she reported that there had been no lost business as "it's a regulatory thing for all companies, big or small, to be audited." She added that the job market was very hot as WFH allowed employees to work from anywhere, and the turnover had been very high. An employee in an IT startup company in Brazil (P6) stated that "the impacts had been very positive with increases in business, and employees were leading a better quality of life as they could reap the benefits of WFH."

Sub-Theme 1.3: Negative impacts on in-person operations. Sales dropped tremendously for Vietnamese factory manager P8, whose firm produced plastic tubes and wires. When the pandemic struck, her country experienced a drastic drop in demand for materials throughout the construction industry. A hospitality consultant who worked in the food industry in Singapore (P9) sadly shared that "my food business was closed down, and it was really difficult to hire foreign food services workers as they had returned back to their countries." Respondent P10, who worked in the travel-tech industry, said that "the lockdowns that meant little or no travel, and hotel and cruise bookings basically died. There were layoffs, a huge cutback in employees, and restructuring." He actually left his company, and returned later when the situation had improved. Another firm that was greatly affected by the pandemic was a movie production company in Thailand (P5) that helped produce foreign movies filmed in Thailand. Fleeing from the complicated and expensive quarantine requirements in Thailand, these customers moved to other destinations with less stringent quarantine requirements.

Theme 2: Working from Home and Its Effects on Productivity

Each participant had a different working experience during the pandemic, with variations in reported levels of productivity and distractions. Most found that their ways of working were transformed; some became even more productive; while others struggled mightily to adapt. A few faced extreme disruptions, and in some cases had no choice but to wait for the pandemic to end.

Sub-Theme 2.1: More work but better productivity. An IT Vice President (P1) started working in a hybrid mode on account of the need to sign documents at the office, but eventually transitioned to 100% WFH once a digital signature system was in place. Video conferences with a 33% increase in attendance replaced onsite meetings, but this also meant longer preparation times and research to answer questions. His greatest challenge was dealing with social loafers, but he greatly enjoyed no longer having to spend 2.5 hours daily travelling to and work in a traffic-clogged city. He could manage his schedule better, immediately approve documents digitally, spend more time following up important matters, and even was able to exercise more regularly. He estimated that his overall productivity increased by 20%.

A Cambodian advertising manager (P2) found his work completely revamped, and had to immediately adapt to new ways of digital marketing. While this was a new and strange experience, it was also fun and interesting at the same time. A work schedule and tracking system helped him "to stay on track and be more productive" despite experiencing difficulties at first. Working up to 17 hours on a daily basis, he found it difficult to relax and maintain a good work-life balance. Though he preferred working onsite, he learnt more about himself through remote work; WFH increased his communication skills and introduced him to new and better ways of working.

The military coup in Myanmar resulted in lockdowns and bank runs, exacerbating service disruptions already set in motion by the pandemic, and led to greatly increased working hours for P3. She had to cope with the sudden transition to digital mobile banking by masses of people, and worked extremely hard to improve the bank's services. She had to come up with "a lot of initiatives to improve the overall banking service to stop deposit run-offs," along with new strategies to retain and attract depositors.

Moving from an educational position to an IT start-up was a very happy transition for P6; it was great to "have a very flexible work schedule that allowed me to work at any time." His work did not really change, as "everyone was already working remotely, and everything was going at exactly the same pace, pre and post pandemic." His only new challenge was a big surge in demand and drastic increase in customers. He found that he could get more done in less time, working whenever he wanted to–even at 10 pm. He would take breaks for swimming and return to work feeling refreshed, which made him more productive.

Sub-Theme 2.2: Struggles in adapting to hybrid/online work. Adapting to new ways of working remotely was a necessity for many. Hybrid work was a pleasant experience for P4, a digital health manager, as she had a better work-life balance with more flexibility and convenience. She enjoyed commuting to work only three days a week, while working the same number of hours and producing the same output in a non-distracting work environment. However, when she had to WFH daily during lockdowns, her workload increased during this very stressful period, and she felt a little depressed.

Also enjoying the flexibility of WFH, an audit manager (P7) could "log on and off whenever I wanted, wake up at 6 am to work, and schedule flexibility in my work hours, while being able to use the restroom, cook, and eat whenever needed." However, "WFH did not accomplish the benefits of listening and talking with each other in the same room to learn and get things done." Having to sit in long online meetings was tiresome, as was trying to get her work done between them. She found it difficult to disconnect from work since her laptop was at home, and felt pressure to continue working if her boss or coworkers were online. She had to "determine how to effectively balance the meetings during work," but having everything available in a digital format was helpful, and she eventually learned how to effectively train new team members. Everyone in her firm was gradually learning how to adapt in spite of the challenges to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

The first month of WFH was fine for P10, a travel professional; but he soon felt bored staying at home all the time. He preferred a hybrid work mode where he could meet people and socialize, and felt that online collaboration was not as effective as working together in the office. Cooking lunch was a major distraction for him and, while his working hours remained the same, food and the freedom to talk with friends on the phone led to a significant decline in his productivity. But things started to improve once the vaccinations were available, and people started returning to their workplaces.

Sub-Theme 2.3: Little to no work and decreased productivity. Life was very difficult for a videographer (P5) when the borders closed, as almost all of his local work for foreign films disappeared overnight. The lack of work left him feeling unmotivated, discouraged, and somewhat depressed. On top of that, his girlfriend decided to leave him after he became jobless. While he was struggling, some of his friends' businesses were flourishing. Eventually one of his friends hired him to do a local advertisement for the first time, which greatly encouraged him. After that, he was able to shoot more local ads while the pandemic dragged on.

Individual P8 managed a plastic factory in Vietnam, but found herself marooned in Thailand during the pandemic. Trying to work with customers online was far from ideal, particularly when facing issues that were difficult to resolve online; she complained that "it took more time compared to working offline." Since she "could not return back to Vietnam due to closed borders, I had to resort to working online and conducting business through my capable assistant in Vietnam." To adapt to the situation, product lines and production runs were reduced.

Unemployed when his food business in Singapore closed, P9 decided to change directions entirely. He completed a Master's degree in hospitality, ventured into an entirely new profession, and opened a consulting business in Singapore for Vietnamese hospitality markets after borders reopened.

Theme 3: Working Preferences after the Pandemic

Sub-Theme 3.1: Hybrid mode a popular choice. Many participants in this study (four out of 10) hoped that hybrid work would be possible in the future. Interestingly, this number included three out of the study's four female participants. A bank manager (P3) loved "the flexibility to do both," while P4, a hospital digital health professional, replied without any hesitation that she would "love to work hybrid so that I don't have to go to the office every day." An audit manager (P7) said that she enjoyed the flexibility of being able to work at home. Spending some time in the workplace would be a necessity, as "it's easier to learn when you are sitting next to someone, as you will be able to talk, learn, and build relationships, which are important in public accounting." Individual P10 (a travel/tech engineer) was also happy with the current hybrid mode, and hoped to continue working that way.

Sub-Theme 3.2: Reasons for remote work preferences. Two participants (both male) mentioned that they would be happy to continue working remotely all the time. An IT manager (P1) preferred 100% remote work, and he was in a position to move his entire department to WFH. This decision helped to reduce his firm's office lease expenses by 50%, and also slashed traveling time and expenses. Everyone would also "have a better quality of life such as waking up later than the usual 5 am." Another IT data analyst (P6) "would love to continue to work in the exact same way, which is 100% remote work."

Sub-Theme 3.3: Reasons for in-person work preferences. The remaining participants (four out of 10) preferred to resume full-time in-person work. This included a videographer (P5) who worked in the movie production industry, and a plastic factory manager (P8) who wanted to resume meeting with customers. Her firm had made many changes in its production processes and had worked around pandemic-causes labor shortages by relying more heavily on automated machinery. The reopening of borders facilitated traveling to and from Vietnam to meet consulting clients (P9). Another participant, who favored returning to the office full-time, was an advertising professional (P2), who found it difficult to fully focus on his work when he was at home.

Discussion

Accelerated Adoption of Digital Platforms

The compulsory lockdowns brought about a tremendous transformation of organizational operations (Chow et al., 2022; Ngotngamwong, 2023) that produced many good and positive outcomes. The rapid shift from traditional to digital operations (Orth & Schuldis, 2021) during the pandemic, particularly in developing countries like Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam, helped to foster economic development. In the meantime, customer habits moved into a new digital era through a major and sudden shift from traditional shopping and banking arrangements to more efficient and convenient online transactions. Employees found themselves shifting as quickly as possible to increased use of social media and digital platforms to accommodate the needs of customers and colleagues.

Working During the Pandemic

Working during the pandemic was an unforgettable worldwide experience. Companies had to quickly devise new methodologies (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020) and moved operations to digital platforms at a much more rapid pace than before. This revealed that people adapt and learn rapidly in times of crisis, as demonstrated by the sudden shift to new work methodologies to cope with the need to work, live, and function from home during lockdowns (Ngotngamwong, 2023). All of these experiences created vast opportunities for self-development and reskilling to survive and thrive in the "new normal" conditions (Hunter, 2020).

Each participant's working experience during the pandemic was unique, and all were challenged to adapt to the new normal in their own way. These new experiences transformed mindsets and ways of working on a permanent basis. After having a taste of WFH, views of working underwent drastic changes. Companies that allowed the option of hybrid work and/or remote working found it far easier to retain their employees going forward, compared to those that stuck with traditional 100% in person attendance requirement. According to research findings, the high preference of many employees to continue to WFH is an indication that organizations are headed into a different world of WFH in the future (Green et al., 2020; Saran, 2021; Sahoo et al., 2021). However, not every employee or industry can successfully implement hybrid or WFH arrangements, as some departments, positions, and businesses find it unsuitable. From a managerial point of view, acquiring the skills necessary to lead and manage remotely were a challenge, as traditional leadership styles had to be modified to fit into WFH scenarios (Bell et al., 2019; Contreras et al., 2020; Högberg, 2022; Sutton, 2020.

Work-Life Balance

Being able to achieve a better work-life-balance is increasingly important, particularly in the thinking of Generations Y and Z. The WFH or a hybrid approach provided better work-life balance for some than was possible prior to the pandemic (Chow et al., 2022). This new outlook has led to a viewpoint that WFH can lead to a better quality of life. On the other hand, others experienced little or no improvements in work-life balance because they were forced to use the same space to work and live (Chow et al., 2022 and Park et al., 2020), and so their quality of life worsened with increased workloads and longer hours.

Recommendations

Although the pandemic was a worldwide crisis that resulted in compulsory lockdowns and a new normal of working from home for many employees, this study indicated that the outcomes of this crisis were not totally negative. To quickly cope with the lockdown, operational innovations in many businesses were quickly developed. Hence, the pandemic was largely responsible for the introduction of new and more efficient ways of working, resulting in cost savings for many organizations within a short period of three years. Organizations need to continue moving forward and exploring better and more efficient ways of working. The sudden and fast digital shift for individuals, consumers, employees, and organizations as a whole, particularly in developing countries, rapidly narrowed

technology gaps amongst countries. The three pandemic years was a period of learning, adjusting, adapting, and developing. As the gap in technology usage and know-how shortens, it is a good time for countries to work together to align in their digital pace and synchronize as much as they can.

Organizations need to continue learning about new ways of doing things, while embracing flexibility and including their employees in decision-making as they move forward. Firms that allow WFH options might want to offer extra benefits such as paying for wifi, desks, chairs, printers, and other equipment needed to comfortably WFH. As WFH means little or no human socialization, it would be a good idea to plan monthly get-togethers or other activities to build team and organizational spirit. Human Resource Departments should continue to study and improve hybrid and WFH options for the betterment of both employees and organizations.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Study

Working will never be the same again. More and more organizations are realizing the need to turn away from traditional working norms, and adapt to the new trends of working hybrid or transitioning to remote work entirely. For businesses that are able to do this, they will find it easier to retain valuable employees and increase job satisfaction. By operating wisely in this regard, organizations will also be able to reduce expenditures significantly for workspaces and slash utility bills while reducing carbon emissions because of less traveling. Although WFH has existed for many years now, it is a topic that warrants further exploration and study. It is recommended that further studies address the strengths and weaknesses of hybrid work and working from home to investigate what further progress can be made wisely.

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