

Working From Home: Research Plan

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Introduction

Productivity in the home has been a trending topic in many households, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic has displaced many office workers from their cubicles to working remotely from their homes. With home becoming the space where you both work and relax, many office workers might be struggling with finding a way to separate their job and the privacy of their personal lives. The purpose of this study is to assess how office workers are affected by the abrupt transition to working from home as a result of the pandemic and how employers are supporting employees in their new work environments.

This topic is of substantial relevance as many of us were forced to adapt to working remotely from home due to the pandemic. As noted in our secondary research, a study published by large organizational consultancy *Gallup* uncovered that 81% of full-time employees say COVID-19 has disrupted their life a great deal or fair amount and that the percent of employees working from home has increased from 33% to 61% since the start of the pandemic (Harter, 2020).

David Zweig, an organizational behaviour professor at the University of Toronto and advocate for remote working, notes that the pandemic has "ripped a lid off" on flexible working and that working from home is here to stay (MacLeod, 2020). With the growing uncertainty of the future of the office workspace and growing advocacy for flexible working from experts, we want to hear directly from office workers about their experiences working in these new environments and how their employers are supporting them in working from home.

Goals

The goal of our research is to identify the pain points that office workers are experiencing while working from home. To uncover these pain points, we will research three aspects of remote working: these aspects are (1) the worker's feelings of productivity, (2) the significance of the environments where they work (contrasting the experience of working from home versus the office) and (3) the support that employers currently offer to employees to adjust to this new environment.

Productivity

Our goal is to assess if office workers feel like working from home has impacted their productivity.

We will uncover the factors that affect their productivity at home and assess how their productivity has changed since transitioning to working from home.

Work environments

Our goal is to identify the environment-related pain points of full-time office workers who have transitioned from working in an office every day to working from home during the pandemic.

We aim to contrast the workers' experiences in the office versus at home to uncover differences that might affect their mental and physical health.

Employer support

Our goal is to assess the attitudes of full-time office workers who have abruptly transitioned to remote working during the pandemic with regard to the support they have received from their employers to continue their work from home.

We will identify the measures that employers are taking to support their employees through such unprecedented times. Also, we will identify, and propose solutions to, any gaps between employee expectations and employer support. Aspects of employer support that we are exploring include technical, financial, career, wellness, and directional support.

Research questions

Productivity

1. **Perceptions of productivity:** How productive do office workers feel when working from home relative to the office?

Note: Productivity is a measure of work efficiency and is typically calculated by dividing total outputs by total units of input (Chew, 1988). Because we cannot accurately and consistently measure the output of office workers, we instead seek to understand how productive they feel.

2. **Factors impacting productivity:** What factors have affected their productivity from home, if any?

Work environments

1. **Physical environment:** How have office workers modified their physical space at home to accommodate remote working, if at all?
2. **Work-life balance:** How has bringing the office into the home affected workers' work-life balance and daily routines (eating habits, physical activity, hobbies, work-life balance, etc.), if at all?

Employer support

1. **Support received:** In what ways have employers supported office workers in their new working environments (technical, financial, career, wellness, direction, etc.)?
2. **Employer expectations:** How have employers changed work expectations to match the added difficulties faced by workers during the pandemic?

3. **Employee expectations:** How do workers feel about the support that employers are providing during the pandemic to support remote working?

Participants

Characteristics

Participants will be full-time workers who are not self-employed. Prior to the pandemic, they have worked primarily in an office (i.e., at least 80% of the time to capture participants who might have had some minor flexible working arrangements or had to travel to other locations for work). Currently, and for the foreseeable future, they primarily work from home (i.e., at least 60% of the time to capture the experiences of participants who might have been mandated by their employers to come into the office 1-2 times a week) because of their company's policy in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Numbers

For our questionnaire, we aim to have at least 25 respondents. For the interview, we aim to have 8-10 interviewees. Although saturation is typically reached at 50 participants for questionnaires and 8-20 participants for interviews, these numbers consider COVID-19 limitations. These target numbers are based on our social networks and the potential networks that we hope to reach (V. Pandeliev, personal communication, September 28, 2020).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria are the following traits:

1. Full-time employee (working at least 35 hours per week)

We are only studying full-time employees because we want to isolate the effects of working from home on people who have a full workload. Studying part-time employees might skew results because they are not juggling the same volume of work. They might feel less impacted by working from home due to their fewer hours of work.

2. Primary workplace had been a company office (at least 4 out of 5 workdays per week)

We define "office" as an administrative work environment for commercial, professional, or bureaucratic work. We are looking for people who have previously worked in an office for at least 4 out of 5 days of the week. These criteria let us include participants who might have had some flexible working arrangements or have had to travel to other locations for work.

3. Primary workplace is now home (at least 4 out of 5 workdays per week)

We are looking for people who work at home for the majority (at least 4 out of 5 days) of the week to ensure that we include the experiences of participants who might have been mandated by their employers to come into the office once per week.

4. COVID-19 pandemic is the reason for working from home

Exclusion criteria are any of the following traits:

1. Freelance employee
2. Primarily worked from home prior to pandemic
3. Not able to speak, read, or write English proficiently

Methodology

We have chosen use a questionnaire to gain a better understanding of participants' attitudes while reaching a broader audience. This method will let us leverage our limited time and resources by providing a large initial pool of data for us to analyze. The disadvantage of questionnaires is that they are structured and do not allow for additional probing on issues.

Interviewing has also been selected to address the mentioned shortcomings of questionnaires. Interviews will allow more depth in understanding of participants' experiences. With a semi-structured interview, there is greater flexibility to further explore issues that interviewees mention. Furthermore, with the COVID-19 pandemic, questionnaires and interviews are safe methods of research to implement while remaining socially distant.

At all times, we will issue consent forms and anonymize participant data. We will store the data in a password-protected system. Participants will have the right to declines questions that are uncomfortable to them. They can withdraw from the study at any point.

Method 1: Questionnaire

One research tool will be an online questionnaire, likely by way of Google Forms. Ideally, it will take no more than 15 minutes to complete. So, a maximum of 30 questions of varying types is the target.

Format

The first section will contain screening questions as well as some multiple-choice and short-answer questions about demographics. We will ask demographic questions to segment the data into subgroups based on factors such as industry types and years with a given company.

The second section will consider the theme of employer support. These questions will be closed-ended, bi-polar (7-point) rating scales to measure how much people value a particular construct (technical support, financial support, career advancement, wellness, company direction) and/or sub-construct (physical health, mental health, and social health are all related to wellness). Follow-up questions will measure their satisfaction with their employers' support in those areas.

The third section will consider the theme of effects and strategies. Besides a self-rating to compare current productivity to prior productivity, most of these questions will be multiple-choice and select-all-that-apply questions that have options for short answers.

Timeline

Phase	Objective	Duration
Content development	Develop questionnaire to answer research questions	Day 1 to Day 25
Building	Build questionnaire with Google Forms	Day 26 to Day 29
Pilot-testing	Pilot-test questionnaire with two participants to identify necessary revisions	Day 30 to Day 33
Revision	Revise questionnaire based on pilot-testing feedback; do internal pilot-testing	Day 33 to Day 43
Deployment	Deploy questionnaire to get responses	Day 44 to Day 50
Analysis	Analyze questionnaire-data to gather insights	Day 50 to Day 58

Deliverables

The results will be primarily quantitative data that can be dynamically presented both numerically and visually (i.e. in graph form) because it is recorded using an online platform such as Google Forms.

Method 2: Interview

Another method will be conducting interviews. The interviews aim to analyze employees' experiences (behaviors and attitudes) about transitioning from office to home. Traditionally, we would conduct interviews in-person. Due to the current situation, we will conduct them virtually using Zoom or by the phone (depending on the participants' convenience). Each interview is expected to last 30 minutes.

Format

- Interviews will have one interviewer and one note-taker.
- Interviews will be semi-structured. They will start with broad questions and move to specific ones.
- Establish rapport: introduce ourselves and the project. Ask participants about their positions and roles.
- Ask about the story of their transition: How long have they been working at home?
- Ask research questions about employer support and working environments.
- Ask follow-up questions if needed.
- Review gathered information and confirm answers.

Timeline

Phase	Objective	Duration
Content development	Develop interview script to answer research questions	Day 1 to Day 25
Recruiting	Contact 10 candidates and 1 backup; Complete pre-screening and obtain written consent Ask for preferred appointments	Day 21 to Day 37
Recruiting, pilot-test	Contact 2 candidates for pilot-testing Complete pre-screening and obtain written consent Ask for preferred appointments	Day 26 to Day 31
Pilot-testing	Conduct pilot-test interviews (remote or in-person)	Day 31 to Day 33
Revision	Revise interview script based on pilot-testing feedback	Day 33 to Day 43
Appointment setting	Email Zoom-interview links for to interviewees Email appointment reminders	Day 44 to Day 47
Interviews	Interview interviewees by Zoom Organize recordings and transcripts	Day 44 to Day 50
Analysis	Analyze interview-data to gather insights	Day 50 to Day 58

Deliverables

Gathered data will be qualitative in nature. It will need analysis and grouping depending on its context.

References

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