

Challenges and Opportunities of Work from Home for Work Life Balance

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The Global Pandemic COVID-19 was unexpected for all of us and made us experience a new world that we had not experienced in the past. The lockdown and social distancing norms to combat COVID forced people to stay at home and work from home (WFH). By mid-April 2020, 59 countries had implemented telework for nonessential publicly employed staff” (ILO brief,2020, P. 1-.2). India witnessed the world's largest nationwide lockdown starting from 25th March,2020 extended till 31st May,2020. The unusual and unexpected working from home of this magnitude was the biggest change and created a paradigm shift in the way we use to live and work. Changes in work and life require more balance than ever before. Where work takes place in the home, there may also be greater spillover from work to non-work life (ILO, 2017). The intersection of paid work and family and/or domestic life within home boundaries with homeschooling due to school closures, accelerated health concerns, increased home and/or child care responsibilities in absence of paid support due to COVID crisis and other personal/ life commitments was a situation never experienced by anyone before. The collective experience of going through a common crisis adds to the questioning of how one can strive for balance in life and livelihoods. “With the increased need to work from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, greater attention will be needed to address the possible implications of working from home on work-life balance.....” (ILO brief ,2020, p.6). Given this dynamic environment, more and more professionals today look for a better work–life balance.

Work life Balance (WLB) is an important concept for all. The concept has stemmed from the requirement of fulfilling conflicting but equally important demands of different life domains within a time frame satisfactory. People at work are often mentally present at home and during family time, they are busy with their work and ultimately fail to justify either domain. Concern for work-life balance and the impacts of imbalance on personal and professional lives have continuously gained interest among researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Some are of the opinion that work life balance can never be achieved as one has to forgo something to achieve another, to others it seems that working from home has the potential to solve work life balance issues to some extent and according to Putri & Amran (2020) higher application of WFH leads to higher WLB of an employee. WFH is the need of the hour to combat the present pandemic and may become “ new normal” which will require new rules of working. If an increasing number of workers will work from home in future, it is important to understand their requirements for and experiences of work-life balance. WFH has its own issues and challenges which need to be addressed.

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Physical & Infrastructural Demands

To work from home, one needs to ensure that I have a proper office set-up at home almost similar to my office to get into the working mood with all required equipment to be equally efficient. Moreover, having a dedicated work space and laptops for all earning members in a family that too at the same office hours within small houses and limited space is quite difficult. It may force them to work odd hours of the day which makes it difficult for one to differentiate between personal and professional time. It means, bringing an office to our home may require a new kind of home architecture where “office place” may be mandatory for one to get an offer for a job which gives a new meaning of “home”. According to Yogi Sriram, former head of Group HR and now an advisor at Larsen & Toubro, an engineering and information technology (IT) conglomerate in Mumbai, “many employees may not welcome permanent WFH due to the challenge of the physical infrastructure at home” (SHRM,2020), still personal comfort is an obvious advantage of the home environment.

Digital Connectedness

While working from home differentiating between personal and professional time by using digital technologies is a big challenge. Advancements of information and communications technology have enabled employees to remain in contact at all hours of the day and night and make them available to work anytime. This “always on culture” leads employees to be constantly “on call” to answer work communications such as e-mail, and as a result work-life balance becomes fragmented (Kossek , 2016). In fact, due to digital connectedness home e-workers found themselves to work over hours and unable to fully disengage from work which can lead to increased work family conflicts. This unplugging after work is their biggest challenge with homeworking. While working from home employees are digitally connected to each other but poor face to face interactions with peers may lead to feelings of isolation, stress ,unhappiness (Hill et al.,1998) and undoubtedly affects one’s social life adversely. Moreover, spending long hours in front of computer systems or smart phones is also not good for health which ultimately affects all life domains. But how far it is right to blame technology for work life imbalance when in this digital era, use of technology both for personal and paid work is actually unavoidable. Everyday compelling pressure of technical enhancement, capacity building and skill development requirements for job effectiveness in a competitive environment will certainly have pressing demands for it. To overcome, one needs to learn where to draw a line and how to separate their lives and livelihoods on one hand and how to integrate technology and life to balance personal and professional domains in the digital age on the other. In fact, technological innovations have made our work and life simpler and easy.

Time Flexibility

WFH is not free from distractions and disturbances. Sometimes frequent interruptions by children, family members, friends and neighbours while working at home make it difficult to draw the line between work life and home life because boundaries are blurred. McCormick (1992) found that over 70 percent felt increased stress from having to

deal with family responsibilities during work hours. Consequently, combining work and family obligations has become one of the most important challenges for home based teleworkers. But, it is also argued that work from home offers flexibility to decide when and how the work is to be done, how to allocate time, attention and energy resources (Allen et al.,2013) to fulfill different role responsibilities. It provides freedom to employees to control pace and timing of work (Powell and Craig, 2015) in more individually efficient ways, allows them to take care of their personal and family needs, to take care of their children and other dependents, to be available for their dear ones and to spend quality time with them. It enables them to strengthen their family relationships especially with their children. It also provides reasonable autonomy to spare some “me “time, to continue pursuing their personal and professional aspirations, thereby helping them to combine the dual role of personal and family commitments satisfactory and positively impacting their WLB. Practically WFH provides the flexibility that a traditional office can't. In fact, WFH is no less than a blessing for working parents especially mothers in particular.

Travel Time Saved

The best thing about WFH is that people do not have to rush to their workplace. Technological innovations has made it possible to reach the office within no time without stucking in traffic jams which is no less than a blessing. Undoubtedly it leads to significant savings in travel time and expenses, prevents from mental stress of reaching the workplace on time and of course from fatigue. It seems now more time and energy is at one's disposal for health, family, leisure, pleasure, and other non-work activities for which one has to otherwise struggle for on daily basis , ultimately contributes to WLB but at same time, employees are expected to utilize saved commuting time by extending their working hours which may impinge on their non-work time. Still, many may not mind working over hours from the comfort of their home.

Another Dimension

Additionally, the outbreak of COVID-19 posed many fresh challenges that are expected to have far reaching consequences. The challenge in a country like India is the additional dependents care burden facing specially the working women in absence of paid domestic helpers/care takers. Moreover, role play as teachers by parents by attending online classes with young children contributes to role conflict. It would be easier and less stressful to It will be interesting to see the size and type of family, people will prefer in times to come and its impact on WLB , maybe joint families will become the new trend to get support for WFH with shared home responsibilities or the demand for paid domestic help will increase. An attempt to manage multiple roles satisfactorily both by men and women demands more balance between life and livelihoods.

Time to Balance

Undoubtedly, WFH is beneficial for employees as they can remain employed in their livelihood, yet also enjoy all the comforts and benefits of being at home. Changing the home into the work place additionally provides the important option of justifying their role in the family. It helps working mothers in particular in fulfilling their prime

responsibilities of child care and development without any guilt. It sounds promising for WLB due to zero travel time, flexibility and perceived autonomy it offers but usually brings with itself an overworking culture. In absence of specific working hours or a dedicated work space at home, it can be difficult for employees to end the day's work and unplugging after work is the biggest challenge with homeworking which undermines the gains of working from home in terms of work-life balance and nourish work-life conflicts. It all adds up to a quest for balance, one needs to learn how to restrict ourselves to office hours, find ways to be focused and effective on the job while working from home and on the other hand, it is required to search means to stay connected with dear ones so our professional life does not overlap with personal life.

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