

A Shift from Cubicles to Couches

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ABSTRACT

A cross-sectional, online survey was conducted in June 2020 to understand the perceptions of those who work from home (WFH). A questionnaire using Google Forms was sent across to employees of different age groups, job sectors and of various places. Queries included comfort, stress, change in work and family hours, online meetings, disrupting, most convenient and irritating factors of WFH, feeling of social isolation and missing of work-team activities. Of 72 respondents, 79% were men, 60% were above 40 years and two-thirds were in supervisory role. One in two are comfortable and relaxed with WFH. More than 60% reported increase in work hours. Family time has increased to all those who had working hours reduced. No-travel was the most convenient factor for one-third, while 'increased work hours' was the most irritating factor for 35%. Lack of proper infrastructure, privacy, family responsibilities and mindset were the main disruptions. Comfort-Stress factors did not vary significantly with age, gender, number of children and job level. Change in work hours, change in family time, infrastructure, privacy, balance between work-home responsibilities in addition to missing team activities, social isolation were the factors of significance for comfort and stress. Given proper infrastructure, more privacy and regulated working hours, WFH can be more comfortable and stress-free. A study with larger sample size would provide comparable data across factors. Conducting organizational level surveys across its employees in WFH could reveal more insights to help decide on cost cutting, output quality and revised compensation structures.

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INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has brought many short and long-term changes in human life and work-from-home (WFH) is one among them. Few MNCs and some reputed

organisations have already implemented WFH, though not at large scale. The current pandemic lockdown situation has further provided most of the IT and various other sectors the possibility to WFH to most of their employees. IT companies such as HCL, Infosys, Tech Mahindra, Kissflow and Microsoft have announced that 90% of their employees will WFH permanently. Increased productivity, lesser cost, employee's adaptability to WFH could all be the presumed factors behind this move. According to WFH save time, increases productivity, finishes targets on time and also helps the employees to give time for their personal life. This sudden but inevitable change has brought in more challenges that are debatable. Various studies, online surveys and e-articles are published almost daily analysing the current scenario of WFH from various per-

spectives. However, the employee’s perspective on the comfortability of this emerging change is still largely unknown.

This cross-sectional, online, opinion survey of various employees who are currently WFH due to Covid-19 lockdown is an attempt to understand the possibilities and challenges on this new trend from the employees’ personal perspective.

Data collection

A multiple-choice questionnaire using Google Forms was sent to the investigator’s contacts in the third week of June 2020, requesting them to share it to their contacts who were WFH. In addition to demographic data, included in the questionnaire are comfort, stress, family time, disruptions in WFH, coping up of work-family responsibilities, online meetings, most convenient factor and most irritating factors of WFH, missing of work team activities, socially isolation feeling and resuming office after lock down. Comfort and stress factors of WFH were enquired as one of the following: comfortable, not comfortable at all, stressed or relaxed. Reported job title and nature of job were categorised during analysis as administrative (top), executory (middle) and supervisory/operative (junior management) [1]. Responses received within three days since the questionnaire was sent were included in this study.

Data were analyzed using SPSS (v17.0) software. Categorical data were presented as frequencies and percentages. Numerical data were presented as means and standard deviation. Chi-square test was used to assess the statistical significance of the association between categorical variables. p-values of less than 0.05 were considered as statistically significant.

RESULTS

A total of 72 people WFH have answered within three days since the questionnaire was sent out. The mean age of the participants is 42 years (standard deviation 8.6 years) ranging 19 years and 63 years Table 1.

Comfort and Stress

WFH as comfortable was reported by 58% whereas 42% found it not comfortable at all. Among those ‘uncomfortable’, 93.3% were also stressed. The association between comfort and feeling stress, as shown in the Table 2 is statistically significant.

The comfort and stress factors were further categorised as ‘comfort & relaxed’ 51.4% (n=37), ‘comfort or stressed’ 9.7% (n=7) and ‘No comfort &

stressed’ 38.9% (n=28). Among those who were not comfortable at all and stressed have maximum of 2 kids.

Queries regarding change in ‘Work hours’ and change in ‘Family time’ has 3 options. ‘No Change’, ‘Limited/Reduced’ and ‘Unlimited/Increased’. Nearly two-thirds reported increase in work hours while nearly 60% reported increase in family time. The demographic distribution of those with increased work hours is similar to that of overall and thereby not significant, with 81% men, 42.6% are above 45 years of age and 66% are in junior management. Following Figure 1 shows the distribution of change in work hours as well the change in family time.

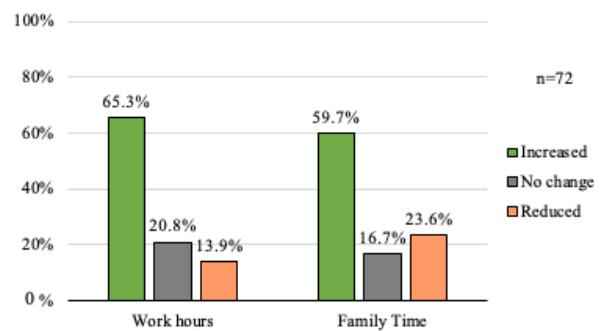


Figure 1: Change in work hours and change in family time

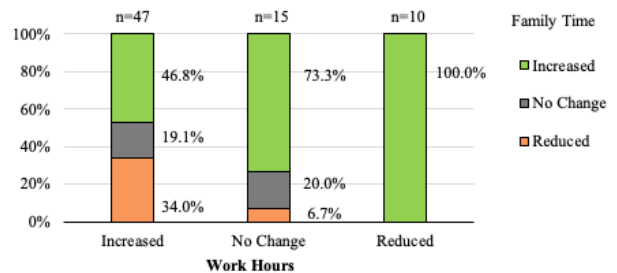


Figure 2: Work hours against family hours

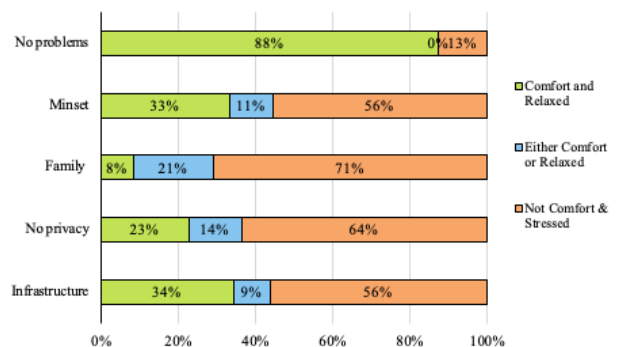


Figure 3: Disruptions at home against comfort

But ‘Change in family time’ is statistically signif-

Table 1: Demography

	n =72	(%)
Age group		
19-30	9	12.5%
31-40	20	27.8%
41-45	17	23.6%
46-63	26	36.1%
Gender		
Male	57	79.2%
Female	15	20.8%
Number of Children		
No children	15	20.8%
One child	21	29.2%
Two children	34	47.2%
Three children	2	2.8%
Job level		
Supervisory	46	63.9%
Executory	15	20.8%
Administrators	11	15.3%

Table 2: Comfort against Stress

Work From Home is	WFH makes me feel...		Total (n=72)
	Relaxed (n=39)	Stressed (n=33)	
Comfortable (n=42)	88.1%	11.9%	100 %
Not comfortable (n=30)	6.7%	93.3%	100 %
Total (n=72)	54.2%	45.8%	100 %

Table 3: Disruptions at WFH

Disruptions	n	(%)
1. Lack of Proper Infrastructures (Power fluctuations, internet connectivity problems etc.)	32	44.4%
2. No privacy at Home	22	30.6%
3. Family members/responsibilities	24	33.3%
4. Mindset	18	25.0%

icantly associated with ‘Change in work hours’ (p=0.01) as following Figure 2 depicts the relationship.

When asked to choose between multiple options of disruptions at work such as lack of proper infrastructures, no privacy, family disturbances, and mindset, one-third reported they don’t have any disruptions at all in WFH. Interestingly, among these, 41.7% were above 40 years of age and 79.2% were men, 54.2% were having only one kid and 62.5% were in the junior management. Table 3

On the effect of disruptions at WFH on the comfort

level, all but mindset factor are significantly associated with comfort. Inadequate infrastructure, no privacy and family responsibilities seem to play a major role for uncomf ort and stress and when rectified, WFH could improve comfort and relaxed levels for the employees. Figure 3

Online meetings were manageable for 55.6 % and very good and cost effective for 18 % and 8 % of people respectively. Only 13 of 72 felt it was either boring or not good as board room meetings.

Most Convenient & Most Irritating Factors

The distribution of open-ended responses for the

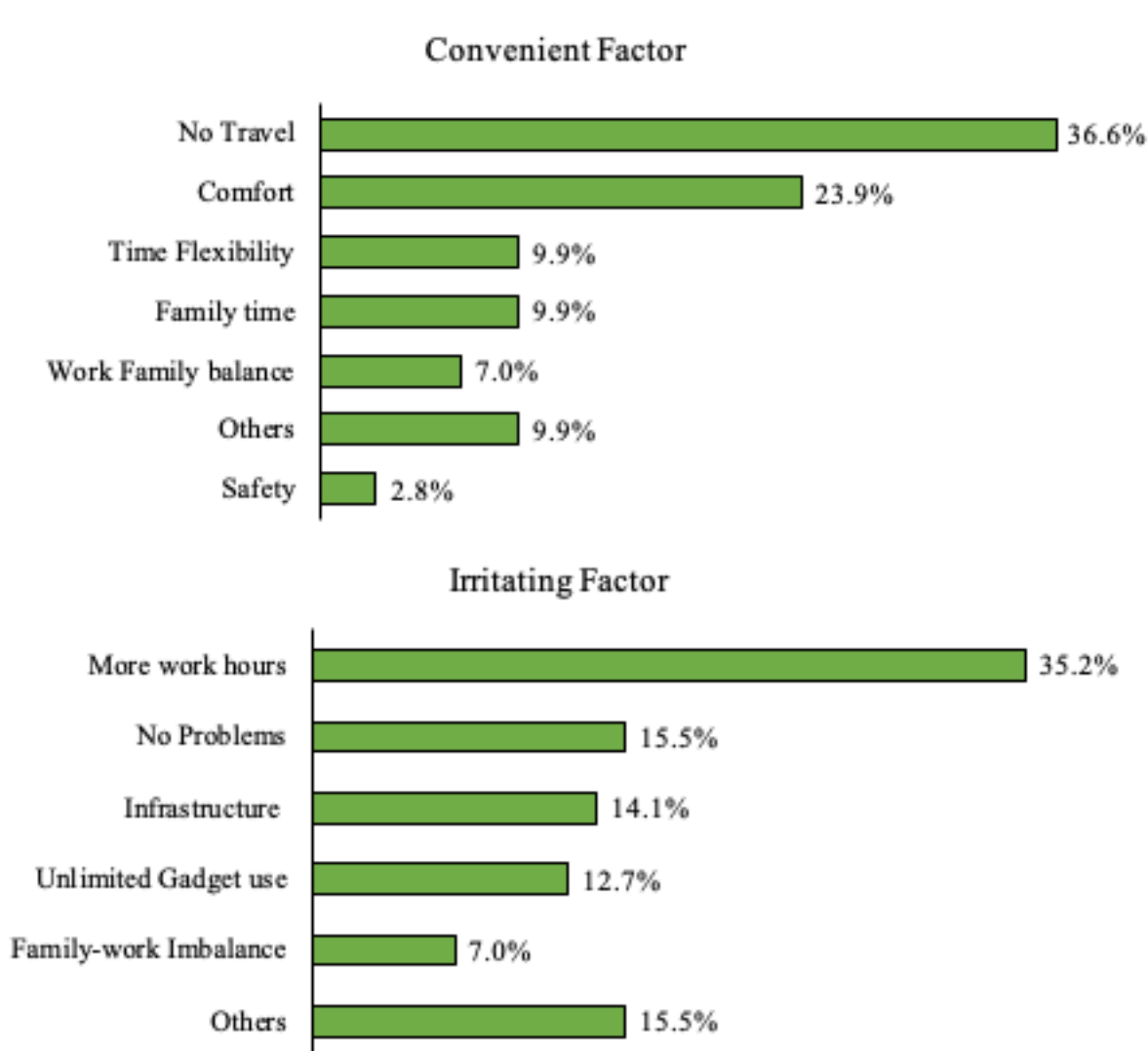


Figure 4: Convenient and irritating factors of WFH

most-convenient and most-irritating factors are shown in the following Figure 4. Over one-third found no-travel as convenient and working more hours as irritating aspects of WFH.

‘Others’ in the ‘Most convenient factors of WFH’ included: Cost cutting, Stress free, Worksheets, Lack of physical work etc., Whereas ‘Others’ in the ‘Most irritating factor of WFH’ are: No direct interaction, Not like professional, Sitting in a place for hours, Trust issues, Queries solving, Site work etc. While 76.4% missed their work-team activities, half of the respondents felt socially isolated and 58.3% were happy to resume office after lockdown.

The following factors play a statistically significant role in ‘Comfort factor’.

1. Increase in work hours
2. Increase in Family time

3. Inadequate infrastructures, Lack of Privacy, family responsibilities
4. Missing team activities
5. Feeling of social isolation

DISCUSSION

Tracey Crosbie and Jeanne Moore (2004) [2] welcomes the current emphasis on work-life balance also adds that creating a balance between work and home life is certainly a goal worth pursuing.

Cath Sullivan (2012) [3] suggests that remote working is not necessarily detrimental to productivity and may have the capacity to improve it. Our study attempts to identify the factors relating to comfort and stress due to WFH from the employees’ perspective. Also provides evidence on the association

between increased working hours and reduced family time and its impact on the comfort and stress. Provided also is the distribution of convenient and irritating factors of WFH. Sample for this study was collected within a short span of time (three days) as the decision and definition for WFH is rapidly changing day-by-day among institutions and organizations. Respondents are from various organisations of different places which could possibly contributed to the variation in the responses. Cinni K.R et al., (2019) [4] on their study based on issues related to WFH found that all demographic variables like age, marital status, family size and experience and job position are independent with WFH. But their study has homogenous population of Kerala IT sector employees. Such organization based studies with subjects of more homogenous work nature may prove more useful in decision making.

Dr.Shareena P & Mahammad Shahid (2020) [5] states that respondents working from home will be willing to work if they are having good and supportive environment to WFH. Virtual meetings and conferences are replacing board room meetings in a very fast pace. Juggling between audio or video conferences are slowly settling down. Day by day people are trying and adopting themselves to various online meeting applications. A better clear defined demarcation of work-life time can be framed and followed. Crosbie, Tracey & Moore, Jeanne. (2004) [2] states that flexibility in using the time helps balance the responsibilities and hence work-life balance to be evaluated and monitored.

Cinni K R, et al., (2019) concludes that WFH increases quality of work and increases loyalty, reduces mental and physical stress, saves time, money and energy. Perks and salary package changes due to WFH and their effects on the comfort and stress levels were not considered in this study. Despite these shortcomings, the findings of this study could help design and analyze similar larger studies.

CONCLUSION

This study finds comfort and stress-free situation among respondents who WFH during this pandemic. Though WFH is debatable and more insights are required to deal with the pros and cons, this setup is now convenient at this pandemic situation. Detailed comparison studies on 'Stress psychology' and 'Productivity' factors of company can be done at individual organization level to check whether this comfort and stress factors has a direct impact on the output of the organization as a whole or not. Such studies may help to plan and implement tai-

lored improvements for WFH. More than half of the respondents were happy to resume office after lockdown could be an indication that it could be a boredom in the long run to be in the typical environment throughout the day and year. Interestingly, over half of the respondents in this study felt socially isolated and missed work team activities. Ongoing Covid lockdown could also possibly influence these. With right regulation in work hours, balancing work-home responsibilities and proper infrastructures can be considered as a comfortable, stress-free WFH lifestyle. To have clarity in decision, more institutional based longitudinal studies on this topic may reveal the actual perceptions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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