

Assessing the Impact of the Work from Home Phenomena on Employee Productivity in Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI), Zambia During the COVID-19 Pandemic



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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 prompted major changes to social life leading to lockdowns and organisations having employees work from home to ensure social distancing. Between 2020 and 2021, the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI) implemented the work-from-home policy. A study was conducted to determine the impact of CHAI's work-from-home policy on employee productivity. A questionnaire adapted from previous studies was used to collect quantitative data from all 51 CHAI employees in the district who worked at CHAI during the COVID-19 pandemic. A Google link was sent to their email addresses and mobile phones; 40 responded, representing a 78% response rate. The study found that working from home positively influenced employee productivity with most respondents 16 (40%) and 13 (32.5%) strongly agreeing that it was more effective to work from home during the pandemic. 18 respondents (45%) agreed, and 18 respondents (45%) strongly agreed that they worked longer hours and completed tasks more quickly from home as opposed to in an office. Household characteristics had a significant correlation with productivity. Designated workspace ($p=0.007$) and comfortable furniture ($p=0.021$) while the number of people in the household had ($p=0.018$). Organisational support through the provision of equipment by the organisation ($p=0.042$) and easy access to work documents ($p=0.043$) was significantly associated with employee productivity. The study concluded that employees' productivity was positively impacted by working from home. Household characteristics equally had a significant impact on productivity as did organisational support. All three independent variables had a significant impact on remote work productivity during COVID-19. The findings of this study confirmed the null hypotheses that the work from home directive did increase employee productivity. As part of organisational support for their employees, the study recommends that organisation develop a contingency plan and encourage training and skill development that gives employees familiarity with digital tools. Employees should also ensure that their homes are comfortable for remote working. Implications of the study findings underscore the importance of organisational adaptability in planning for flexible working policies. Providing the resources required for employees to work remotely and prioritizing employee mental wellness.

KEYWORDS: Work from Home, COVID-19, Household Characteristics, Organisational Support.

1. INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus. Human-to-human transmission cases were first reported in the Chinese province of Wuhan in December 2019. Before long, the viral infection spread fast to most parts of the world. This led to a world pandemic with almost all countries around the globe reporting confirmed cases by March 2020. The World Health Organisation (WHO) in March 2020 declared the outbreak a pandemic prompting countries across the globe to take preventative measures to avoid its spread. (Churches Health Association of Zambia, 2020). Upon this declaration, many countries restricted the movement of people within countries and from one country to another.

In Zambia, the government announced restrictions on huge gatherings and ordered the closure of schools, colleges, and universities after the first two cases were reported on the 18th of March 2020 (Simulundu, et al., 2020). The pandemic drastically changed how humans live, from work to communication, and socialization. Social distancing guidelines put forth by governments and public health officials across the globe resulted in schools and business closures that left many people confused with having to cope with the level of unprecedented changes. (Li, et al., 2020) Various corporations amongst them Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) followed suit by temporarily closing operations, upon realizing that the status quo was not changing anytime

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soon. This study considered the impact on productivity when Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI) employees worked from home because the organisation had implemented the initiative fully. CHAI is an international organisation that supports the Ministry of Health in implementing health programs across Zambia. During the pandemic, it had a workforce of 50 employees. The sudden change in the work environment was a new experience that unearthed varying reactions ranging from excitement to hopelessness. The concept of working from home brought about a new phenomenon, especially in Zambia, where workers have been accustomed to daily commuting between home and work.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Working from home was not common among Zambian organisations such as CHAI before the pandemic in 2019, most of the literature reviewed was conducted in the post-COVID-19 era. (Matenga & Hichambwa, 2022) said that the government issued stay-at-home appeals and ordered non-essential workers to work from home and others to work on a rational basis. A few studies have been conducted on measuring the impact when employees worked from. One such study conducted by (Siampondo & Mweemba, 2023) revealed several key findings, some organisations effectively managed the transition to remote work and invested in appropriate technology and training, and reported positive outcomes. The outbreak gave organisations such as CHAI little time to adjust how they monitored employee productivity while they worked from home. Were the employees productive while they worked from home? Despite recent research on employee productivity at work, there was little research into how employees in Zambia had worked from home and remained productive amidst the pandemic. During the pandemic, how did employees adjust their home environment while working so that they could work as if they were in the office? Did reduced collaboration with office colleagues affect their output? Did organisations provide adequate support for employees to be productive? Did household characteristics affect employee productivity? To answer these questions, this research paper assessed employee productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zambia as there has been little research that had been conducted during the pandemic to assess employee productivity while they worked from home. Organisations and employees alike will be able to use the findings from this research to inform future working from home decisions.

1.2 Specific objectives

1. To determine if working from home affected employee productivity.
2. To establish if household characteristics affected employee productivity when Working from Home.
3. To ascertain if organisational support affected employee productivity when Working from Home.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly changed the social life of people. It disrupted the social and economic systems of the world with every country impacted. The only way to stop the spread of the pandemic was to stop all social activities in the affected countries for an indefinite period while more sustainable measures were being devised. Working from home was a new experience for most people. (Dubey & Trpathi, 2020) examined the sentiments of people regarding working from home, and indicated that the concept was taken positively by people. (Bloom, et al., 2015) Working from home led to a 13% performance increase, of which 9% was from working more minutes per shift and 4% was from more calls per minute. (Awadaa, et al., 2021) Productivity was positively influenced by better mental and physical health statuses, having a teenager, increased communication with coworkers and having a dedicated room for work. (Bao, et al., 2020) conducted a quantitative study and showed that working from home had both positive and negative impacts on developer productivity, in addition, they concluded that productivity varied for different developers. (Novitasari, et al., 2020) concluded in their research that work-family conflict had a negative and significant effect on the worker's performance in the packaging industry. (Bloom, et al., 2015) wrote that "we are working alongside our kids, in unsuitable spaces, with no choice and no in-office days". "This will create a productivity disaster for firms." This contrasted with some earlier publications he had co-authored that extolled the benefits of working from home.

2.1 Related Literature

2.1.1 Working from Home on Employee Productivity

Numerous studies across the globe systematically claimed that characteristics of the physical office environment can have a notable effect on the behaviour, perceptions and productivity of employees. (Amofa, et al., 2016) assessed the performance of employees and concluded that the physical office environment affected the performance of employees. Their research showed that elements of the physical office environment had both positive and negative associations with employee productivity (Rahman & Arif, 2020), they cited the boundary theory to help understand the challenges associated with working from home, absent in traditional work environments. Adam Grants' Nick Bloom experiment showed that if call center workers work from home, they

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are 13% more productive. People who no longer dealt with lengthy commutes had more time to devote to family and work-life balance (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020)

Research results from a study conducted in Bangladesh by (Kazi & Zahir, 2020), revealed that 40 % of the participants were fairly satisfied with working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic as it came with flexibility which was the main factor in satisfaction. (Galanti, et al., 2021) investigated if work from home related job demands and job resources were related to remote work productivity and work engagement as well as stress.

2.1.2 Impact of Household Characteristics on Employee Productivity

Household characteristics include the number of people per household and their ages, the furniture, and workspaces available. During the pandemic, millions of people had to work from home, this temporarily broke the distinction between private and work life regardless of the employees' age or sex. In their article. (Galanti, et al., 2021) argued that family-work conflict can be an issue that may potentially affect both women and men when working from home. Work commitments may interfere with family commitments. The paper estimated the share of jobs that could be performed at home in 23 Latin American and Caribbean countries as well as examined the workers' characteristics associated with such jobs. They found that the share of individuals who were able to work from home varied from 7% in Guatemala to 16% in the Bahamas. Households that had partners and children (especially if they are still in their childhood) engaged in work and school activities and confined by the COVID-19 restrictions were most likely to encounter challenges in balancing work-family time. The findings from the research confirm that working from home can present not only productivity challenges but also characteristics of the worker's household.

2.1.3 Impact of Organisational Support on Employee Productivity

When employees work from home, organisational support is in the form of providing the employees with tools that will enable them to do their work conveniently. (Stevens, 2020) says that there are plenty of ways to keep employees motivated, coordinated, and focused on the goals of what the organisation sets to achieve. He lists some of the tools that help the employees access internet facilities, Office Online suite, and a cloud Drive such as Google Drive to store documents that different users can access. According to the perceived organisational support (POS) theory, employees value POS partly because it meets their needs for approval, esteem, and affiliation, plus provides comfort during times of stress. (Eisenberger, et al., 2016). The push for digital transformation can be likened to organisational support in ensuring that employees who were working from home are given all the necessary resources to lighten the transition to working from home. Virtual platforms and other IT-enabled replaced traditional work practices. Organisations that enhanced their IT capabilities and remotely engaged their employees were in a much better position to not only survive the unprecedented circumstances but to overcome the short- and long-term challenges that came with the pandemic (Savic, 2020). (Jaiswal & Joe, 2020) facilitated research on the impact of working from home on employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Conceptual Framework

The framework for this study was developed based on the review of working from home, considering three factors- working from home, household characteristics and organisational support and how they were linked to employee productivity. Employee productivity was the dependent variable, the researcher postulated that productivity was dependent on working from home, household characteristics of the employee and organisational support. While independent variables were employees working from home, household characteristics and organisational support. These three variables were measured systematically against the dependent variable.

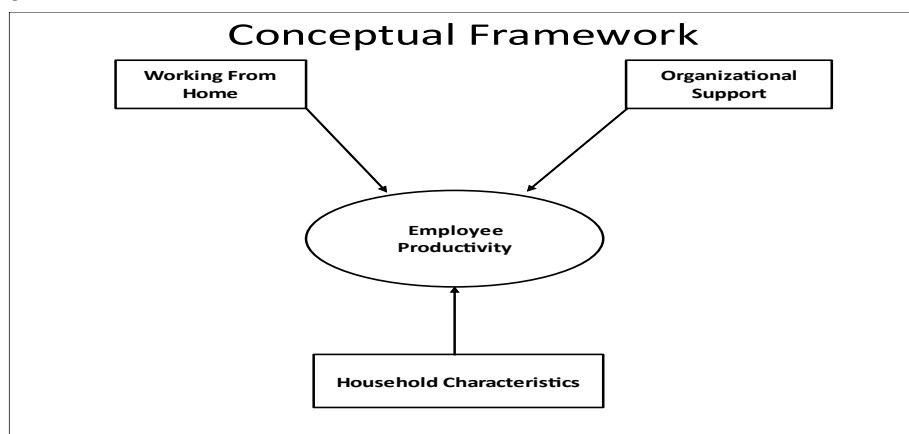


Figure 1 Showing Conceptual Framework

Adapted from (Eisenberger, et al., 2016)

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2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

The researcher considered the theory of Perceived Organisational Support, Theory X and Theory Y, and the Structural Functionalism Theory to help analyze findings on employee productivity and working from home.

2.3.1 Theory of Perceived Organisational Support (POS)

Referencing the Perceived Organisational Support (POS) theory—an employee's perception that the organisation values their contributions and cares about the employee's well-being has been shown to have important benefits for employees and employers. Adapted from the Theoretical model representing relationships, suggested by organisational support theory according to (Eisenberger, et al., 2016). In this framework, employee productivity was affected by the perceived organisational support that an employee receives, supervisory support in executing the tasks given and support from co-workers. The greater the perception of an employee of their organisations' support, the higher the chance that the employee's productivity will be positively impacted.

2.3.2 Theory X and Theory Y

Formulated by Douglas McGregor in 1960. The theory suggests two aspects of human behaviour at work, or two different views of individuals. One is negative, called Theory X, and the other is positive, called Theory Y. Douglas stated that human beings are naturally against working. They must be forced, supervised and governed to work. They also do not want responsibility and prefer to be led by others. (Ahmed & Farooqi, 2020). Bearing in mind Douglas's Theory X, people are lazy and will most likely escape responsibility. For example, if an employee that is constantly supervised by a higher authority was requested to work from home with no supervision he or she will perform poorly. This applied to the situation when COVID-19 broke out and employees were requested to work from home with no supervision. The research sought to establish if employee productivity would be impacted.

2.3.3 Structural Functionalism Theory

The theory denotes that two different aspects are of concern in a person's life: emotional life and productive life. The latter denotes part of work life that aids one in creating service or goods while the former is concerned with time spent on family and self. Furthermore, the theory acknowledges the actuality of the essential separation between family and work. Concerning the directive for employees to work from home, this research was intended to find out if the directive to work from home is still held with employees combining work and family life. (Kumar & Janakiram, 2017).

2.4 Gaps in Literature

Most research reviewed was conducted outside the COVID-19 pandemic with varied results. When the pandemic broke out, researchers analyzed the impact of remote working on employee productivity levels from different environments, ranging from America to Europe and Asia. The results for worker productivity varied depending on the factors that were considered, from employer support to household characteristics such as the presence of school-going children. Unavailability of workspace, lack of physical interaction with fellow employees and support from organisations in the form of provision of platforms to enable employees to work with minimum interruptions such as internet bundles, and interactive software like Zoom, Teams, and Google meet. All these research studies were conducted in different setups from Zambia, the researcher did not come across published work that considered the impact of working from home on employee productivity in the context of Zambia and encompassing the aforementioned factors.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was a case study of Clinton Health Access Initiative employees. It used the positivist paradigm similar to (Bonache & Festing, 2020) which demonstrated that a positivist paradigm assumes that things are known by models and relationships among variables. The study used quantitative data after obtaining ethical clearance from the University of Zambia Ethics Committee. Using probabilistic sampling data was collected using an online administered questionnaire as well as through an interview schedule targeting all 51 CHAI employees through a census sampling technique in the Lusaka district. 40 responses were collected using both approaches, and data was transferred to an Excel spreadsheet and saved to Google Drive for easy management. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze quantitative data, and linear regression models were used to investigate the three variables' effects on employee productivity.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Working from Home and Productivity

Most respondents 16(40.0%) agreed and 13(32.5%) strongly agreed that working from home during COVID-19 was more favorable. 18(45%) of participants both agreed and strongly agreed that while working from home they were able to work for longer hours than at the office and had a quicker turnaround time on tasks given to them. Participants who scored higher than 40 points were

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categorized as having a high level of productivity, placing them in the minority (15.0%). Medium-level productivity (20.0%) was defined as those who scored between 30 and 39 points, while poor productivity (65.0%) was defined as those who scored less than 30 points. Despite most of the respondents indicating that they were productive while they worked from home, using a Likert scale, 65% of respondents had a poor level of productivity, 20% had medium and 15% had a high level of productivity.

4.2 Household Characteristics and Employee Productivity

17(42.5%) of respondents agreed that members of their household positively influenced their productivity and 12(30.0%) agreed that their household furniture was conducive for them to work long hours, while 14(35%) did not have a dedicated room for work and 18(45%) did not have a variety of rooms to work from 13(32.5%) of participants disagreed with the question "All members of my household were independent and didn't need my attention while I worked from home." However, 13(32.5%) of participants had a good internet connection while working from home. The results showed that household characteristics positively influenced employees when they worked from home.

4.3 Organisational Support and Employee Productivity

Organisational support factors affecting the level of productivity when working from home. Most of the participants agreed that the organisation provided the necessary equipment to enable working from home 19(47.5%). The organisation also prioritized personal welfare while employees worked from home 21(52.5%). Other results are shown in the table below.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Impact of Working from Home on Employee Productivity

Majority 40% (16) of the employees indicated that working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic was favorable for them. 37.5% (15) were able to deliver on their work targets quicker when working from home than when at the office. 40% (16) were positively influenced when they worked from home while 45% (18) were both able to adapt to working from home and had a quicker turnaround time when they worked from home. The findings from this study were similar to (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020) who found that people who no longer had to deal with lengthy commutes had more time to devote to their family and work-life balance. (Kazi & Zahir, 2020) revealed that 40% of the participants in their study were fairly satisfied with working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic as it came with flexibility which was the main factor in satisfaction.

5.2 Impact of Household Characteristics on Employee Productivity

In this study, having conducive furniture ($p=0.021$) and having a dedicated room for work ($p=0.007$) significantly correlated with higher productivity. Participants who found their furniture suitable for long work hours were more productive. A similar study by (Guler, et al., 2021) that the home environment strongly dictates productivity. Dedicated workspaces are universally recognized as crucial for minimizing distractions and creating psychological boundaries between work and personal life. (Wang, et al., 2021) which found that employees without dedicated workspaces faced higher distractions, which reduced efficiency. The number of people in the household positively influenced productivity ($p=0.018$) contrasts with Western contexts, in a study by (Chung, et al., 2023) that household disruptions negatively impacted productivity, especially in nuclear family setups where caregiving roles were concentrated. In line with the structural functionalism theory, this study established that employees were able to separate their emotional lives from their productive lives and were productive even amidst their households.

5.3 Impact of Organisational Support on Employee Productivity

The provision of necessary equipment was significantly associated with higher productivity ($p=0.042$), employees with adequate tools performed better in their tasks. Similar studies highlighted that access to IT gadgets was critical in maintaining productivity during remote work (Spurk & Straub, 2020). Easy access to organisational documents was also significantly associated with higher productivity ($p=0.043$). This underscored the importance of digital transformation in maintaining workflow continuity. A study by (Kramer & Kramer, 2020) emphasized the importance of digitalization, with centralized document repositories enabling seamless collaboration during remote work. Flexible scheduling had a limited impact on productivity and was not statistically significant in its association ($p=0.105$). This deviated from broader literature, where flexibility is often seen as pivotal as shown in the study by (Carillo, et al., 2020) which found that flexible hours during COVID-19 helped employees manage stress and adapt to remote work challenges. Welfare prioritization was appreciated by employees (52.5%) but was not significantly correlated with productivity ($p=0.193$). A contrasting study by (Wang, et al., 2021) showed that organisations prioritizing employee well-being saw higher engagement and sustained productivity levels. Tools enabling communication with colleagues were provided (47.5%), but their impact on productivity was insignificant ($p=0.305$). In a study by (Carillo, et al., 2020) effective communication platforms like Zoom, or Teams were critical for maintaining collaboration and productivity during remote work. The findings from this study were in

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line with the Theory of Perceived Organisational Support (POS) postulated by (Eisenberger, et al., 2016), that employee productivity was affected by the perceived organisational support that an employee receives from the organisation, supervisory support and support from co-workers.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study assessed the impact of the work from home phenomena on employees at CHAI during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three conceptual frameworks were reviewed and three hypotheses were developed. Analysis of the independent variables; working from home, household characteristics and organisational support indicated that all three positively influenced employee productivity while employees worked from home. All three null hypotheses were confirmed, and they are consistent with previous research conducted under similar conditions.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings from the study and comparisons with other studies, the following are recommendations proposed to improve employee's productivity when working from home.

6.2.1 Working from home

Organisations should prepare for future crises by developing a contingency plan for future crises. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for organisations to have policies that allow employees to work from home and have in place mechanisms of tracking these employees' productivity.

6.2.2 Organisational Support

Organisations should promote training and skill development that provides familiarity with digital tools as part of organisational support to their employees. They should equally create an inclusive feedback loop by establishing regular feedback mechanisms such as surveys or suggestion boxes to identify employee concerns. As part of organisational support, organisations need to also focus on mental health and well-being by offering virtual counselling sessions and employee assistance programs for COVID-19-exacerbated stress and mental health challenges.

6.2.3 Household Characteristics

Employees should also ensure that their households are conducive for remote working and that they get the necessary support from other members of the household. Household features such as furniture and dedicated rooms to work from are important to influence productivity.

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