

Productive Innovation or Disruptive Irritation: An Exploration of Stakeholder Perspective on Remote Work in the Institutes of Higher learning in Zimbabwe (A Case of Midlands State University)

الابتكار الإنتاجي أو التهيج التخريبي: استكشاف منظورات أصحاب المصلحة حول العمل عن بعد في معاهد التعليم العالي في زيمبابوي. حالة جامعة ولاية ميدلاندرز

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الابتكار الإنتاجي أو التهييج التخريبي: استكشاف منظور أصحاب المصلحة حول العمل عن بعد في معاهد التعليم العالي في زيمبابوي (حالة جامعة ولاية ميدلاندرز)

Abstract:

Objective: The major objective of this study was to establish whether remote work was yielding positive results in the Institutions of higher learning. In order to achieve the major objective, the study explored the advantages of remote work and the challenges that are associated with remote work. Furthermore, the study explored some intervention mechanisms that may be can be implemented to support remote work.

Method: In order to achieve the research objectives, the study adopted the qualitative study, using a case study design. Convenience sampling methods was adopted to come up with a sample of 45 participants that would be interviewed. Face to face interviews were conducted using semi-structured interviews.

Result: After data collection and analysis, the study results showed that remote work enables employee flexibility, employee autonomy, increased employee productivity as well as cost savings. The results of the study also showed that remote work also comes with its own challenges such as isolation, role conflict and technological challenges. Furthermore, the study found that there are some intervention mechanisms that can be employed to support remote working in the institutions of higher learning. The intervention mechanisms include training, technological infrastructure, data access and mental health care.

Conclusion: Conclusions from the study indicate that remote work is viable and beneficial at MSU. However, the study also established that remote work has its own challenges. The study concluded that the challenges can be mitigated by some intervention mechanisms.

Keywords: *academic staff; COVID-19; flexibility; higher education; remote work.*

المخلص:

الأهداف: كان الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو تحديد ما إذا كان العمل عن بعد يحقق نتائج إيجابية في مؤسسات التعليم العالي. ومن أجل تحقيق الهدف الرئيسي، استكشفت الدراسة مزايا العمل عن بعد والتحديات المرتبطة بالعمل عن بعد. علاوة على ذلك، استكشفت الدراسة بعض آليات التدخل التي يمكن تنفيذها لدعم العمل عن بعد.

المنهجية: لتحقيق أهداف الدراسة اعتمدت الدراسة النوعية باستخدام تصميم دراسة حالة، تم اعتماد طرق أخذ العينات الملائمة للتوصل إلى عينة من 45 مشاركاً ستم مقابلتهم. أجريت المقابلات وجهًا لوجه باستخدام مقابلات شبه منظمة.

النتائج: بعد جمع البيانات وتحليلها، أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن العمل عن بعد يتيح مرونة الموظف واستقلالية الموظف وزيادة إنتاجية الموظفين بالإضافة إلى توفير التكاليف. كما أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن العمل عن بعد يأتي أيضًا مع تحدياته الخاصة مثل العزلة وتضارب الأدوار والتحديات التكنولوجية. علاوة على ذلك، وجدت الدراسة أن هناك بعض آليات التدخل التي يمكن توظيفها لدعم العمل عن بعد في مؤسسات التعليم العالي. وتشمل آليات التدخل التدريب والبنية التحتية التكنولوجية والوصول إلى البيانات ورعاية الصحة العقلية.

الخلاصة: تشير استنتاجات الدراسة إلى أن العمل عن بعد قابل للتطبيق ومفيد في جامعة ولاية ميشيغان. ومع ذلك، أثبتت الدراسة أيضًا أن العمل عن بعد له تحدياته الخاصة. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أنه يمكن التخفيف من حدة التحديات من خلال بعض آليات التدخل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أعضاء هيئة التدريس: COVID-19؛ المرونة؛ التعليم العالي؛ العمل عن بعد.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major disruptor of the global economy and society, affecting various sectors and industries. One of the most affected sectors is the institute of higher learning, which faced unprecedented challenges in delivering quality teaching and learning amid lockdowns and social distancing measures. To cope with these challenges, many higher education institutions (HEIs) adopted remote work as a means of ensuring operational continuity and employee safety. Remote work has been rightly explained as a scenario whereby employees fulfil their contractual obligations at the comfort of their homes using artificial intelligence and modern technology (Oxford English Dictionary). It has been widely labelled as teleworking, telecommuting and or working from home (WFH) due to its flexible home approach in the world of work.

While remote work has been practiced for decades in some fields and regions, its widespread adoption in the African institutes of higher learning has been relatively low until recent as accelerated by the pandemic. According to Chikuni (2020) 74% of academics worldwide reported working remotely during the pandemic, compared to only 14% before. However, the survey also found that remote work was not equally accessible or feasible across different countries, disciplines, and career stages (Chikuni, 2020). Moreover, remote work posed various challenges for academic staff, such as increased workload, reduced productivity, communication difficulties, isolation, and work-life imbalance.

As the pandemic subsided followed by the advancement in vaccination programmes, many HEIs have reconsidered the continued implementation of remote working in the post-pandemic era. Its reconsideration has significant implications on business sustainability due to the associated opportunities and risks on academic staff and institutions. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the feasibility and sustainability of remote work in higher education from multiple perspectives.

This paper aims to address this gap by presenting a comprehensive case study conducted at Midlands State University (MSU) in Zimbabwe. MSU is one of the largest public universities in Zimbabwe, with over 23,000 students and 1,200 academic staff (MSU website). The university offers various programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels across nine faculties (MSU website) MSU was among the first HEIs in Zimbabwe to adopt remote work during the pandemic, using various online platforms and tools to facilitate teaching and learning (Chikuni, 2020)

The paper explores the experiences and perceptions of MSU lecturers regarding remote work during and after the pandemic. The paper also examines the advantages and challenges of remote work for MSU lecturers, as well as the factors influencing its practicality and desirability. Based on the findings, the paper proposes several recommendations for enhancing remote work effectiveness and satisfaction at MSU. The paper contributes to the literature on remote work in higher education by offering insights from a developing country context.

2 Literature Review

The literature review provides an overview of the existing research on remote work in general and in higher education specifically. The review covers four main themes: (1) definitions and types of remote work; (2) drivers and barriers of remote work adoption; (3) benefits and drawbacks of remote work for employees and employers; (4) best practices and challenges of remote work implementation.

2.1 Definitions and Types of Remote Work

Remote work is a broad term that encompasses various forms of work arrangements that involve physical separation between employees and their workplaces (Sokolic, 2022). Remote work can be classified according to different dimensions, such as frequency (how often employees work remotely), location (where employees work remotely), autonomy (how much control employees have over their schedules), synchronicity (how much coordination is required with other employees), technology (what tools are used to support remote work), and formality (how official or unofficial the remote work policy is (Sokolic, 2020).

One of the most common types of remote work is working from home (WFH), which involves employees performing their tasks from their residences or nearby locations (Chiguvu & Bakani, 2023). WFH can be either full-time or part-time, depending on the proportion of time spent at home versus the office. Another type of remote work is telecommuting, which refers to employees working from locations other than their homes or

offices, such as coffee shops, libraries, or co-working spaces (Vartianen, 2022). Telecommuting can be either regular or occasional, depending on the frequency and predictability of the remote work schedule. A third type of remote work is virtual work, which involves employees working in geographically dispersed teams that rely on information and communication technologies (ICTs) to collaborate and coordinate (Adamovic et al., 2022). Virtual work can be either synchronous or asynchronous, depending on the degree of temporal alignment among team members.

Remote work can also be distinguished from other related concepts, such as flexible work and mobile work. Flexible work refers to any work arrangement that deviates from the traditional norm of fixed hours and location, such as flextime, compressed workweek, or job sharing (Ray & Pana-Crayn, 2021). Mobile work refers to any work arrangement that involves frequent travel or movement across different locations, such as sales, consulting, or fieldwork (Hislop & Axtell, 2021). While remote work can be considered a form of flexible work and mobile work, not all flexible work and mobile work arrangements are remote work.

2.2 Drivers and Barriers of Remote Work Adoption

Remote work adoption is influenced by various factors at the individual, organizational, and environmental levels. At the individual level, employees may choose to adopt remote work for various reasons, such as enhancing work-life balance, reducing commuting costs and stress, increasing autonomy and flexibility, improving productivity and performance, or pursuing personal or professional development (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Saurombe et al., 2022). However, employees may also face barriers to adopting remote work, such as lack of trust or support from managers' or colleagues, fear of losing visibility or career opportunities, difficulty in managing boundaries or distractions, or lack of skills or resources to perform remote work effectively (Iwaniuk et al., 2021).

At the organizational level, employers may choose to adopt remote work for various reasons, such as reducing operational costs and environmental impact, attracting and retaining talent, enhancing employee satisfaction and engagement, improving organizational flexibility and resilience, or fostering innovation and diversity (Raj et al., 2023). However, employers may also face barriers to adopting remote work, such as resistance to change or loss of control from managers or employees, difficulty in monitoring or evaluating remote work outcomes, challenges in maintaining communication or collaboration among remote workers or teams, risks of compromising security or quality standards, or legal or regulatory issues related to remote work policies (Al-Alawi et al., 2023).

At the environmental level, remote work adoption is influenced by external factors that affect the availability and desirability of remote work options. These factors include technological developments that enable or facilitate remote work practices, such as broadband internet access, cloud computing services, online learning platforms and video conferencing tools (Sahut & Lissillour, 2023). Consequently, these factors together with the social and economic changes such as globalization and competition, demographic changes and diversity, lifestyle preferences and values, or crises and emergencies have created demand for remote work practices, (Sakvarelidze, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of an environmental factor that had a significant impact on remote work adoption worldwide. The pandemic forced many organisations to implement remote work as a response to lockdowns and social distancing measures imposed by governments to contain the virus spread. The pandemic also accelerated the adoption of digital technologies that supported remote work practices. According to a report by International Labour Organisation (2020), Urbaniec et al. (2022) the pandemic induced a 25-fold increase in the share of workers who worked remotely at least some of the time in China; a 17-fold increase in India; a 10-fold increase in Brazil; a seven-fold increase in Germany; a six-fold increase in Japan; a five-fold increase in the United States; and a four-fold increase in France.

3 Empirical Literature

Remote work has been practiced even before Covid-19, however the trends shifted as a result of Covid-19 (Vartianen, 2021). Similarly, Juarez-Ramirez (2021) explains that remote work has been in practice some years ago, however it become fashionable as a result of Covid-19. Most organisations were forced to adopt remote working to mitigate against the effects of Covid-19 and as a result some regions stood out in as much as the

adoption of remote work was concerned. Of note, a third of those working in the European Union had started using remote work and, in his study, Vartianen (2021) established that out of those practicing remote work the largest numbers were in the Nordic and Benelux countries that included Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, Austria, and Italy. As a productive innovation, Juarez-Ramirez (2021) established that as a result of remote work a notable number of employees experienced positive emotions during remote working and as a result 91% of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied by working from home. Correspondingly Loia and Adinolfi (2021) established that remote working enhances occupational safety and health, flexibility, employee engagement as well as social inclusion as the disabled are likely to benefit from remote work opportunities. However, in as much as organisations and individuals have extracted some benefits from remote work, there are some drawbacks such as work overload as a result of work intensification and disruptions due to continuously changing the work environment which at times might be noisy making it difficult for employees to concentrate (Vartianen, 2021). In addition, Loia and Adinolfi (2021) also discovered that remote work also comes with issues of depression and mental health, technostress where the remote workers are likely to suffer from psychosomatic illness as a result of being continuously exposed to ICT equipment leading to fatigue and irritability as well as isolation. Thus, in as much as remote work has its opportunities there are disadvantages that come along with it and organisations should look at how best they can implement remote work so as to make it a productive innovation.

3.1 Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of higher education institutions to external shocks and disruptions, necessitating a swift transition to remote work practices. However, the feasibility and sustainability of remote work in the post-pandemic era remain unclear, especially in the African context, where technological infrastructure and cultural acceptance are often lacking. This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences and perceptions of academic staff at Midlands State University (MSU), a public university in Zimbabwe, regarding remote work during and after the pandemic.

3.2 Research Questions:

The main research question of this study is: **How feasible and sustainable is remote work for MSU lecturers during and post-pandemic era?**

The sub-questions are:

- What are the perceived benefits of remote work for MSU lecturers?
- What are the challenges associated with remote work?
- What strategic interventions are needed to support remote work at MSU?

3.3 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, using a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of remote work at MSU. The study employed purposive and convenience sampling by collecting data from 45 MSU departmental heads and lecturers using questionnaires and face to face interviews respectively. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for about 30 minutes each. The questionnaires were self-administered and consisted of open-ended questions. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting.

4 Results

This section of the study demographically unveils the participants' gender, educational level and years of service. This is subsequently followed by thematic analysis of the benefits and challenges associated with remote working. Notwithstanding the need to proffer recommendations to the discussed demerits.

4.1 Response Rate

The inquiry was successfully carried out and all participants were sampled accordingly. In acknowledgement of the business essence of sustained productivity, the researcher used break and lunch times to administer and collect the research instruments.

Table (1): Demographic Matrix

Gender		Length of Service			Level of education		
Male	Female	2-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11-20 yrs	Degree	Msc	PhD
25	20	20	12	13	6	20	19
56%	44%	44%	27%	29%	13%	42%	44%
100%		100%			100%		

Source: Field survey, 2023

The study findings uncovered that males are more dominant in the institutes of higher learning compared to their female counterparts. There is no gender parity in the corporate world as the participants profiles indicates that only 20 (44%) of the total participants were females whereas their male counterparts constitute the bulk of the participants reaching to 25 (56 %) of the total sampled population.

4.2 Length of service

The study revealed that the bulk of participants had only served in the organization for a period of 2 to 5 years which consists of 44% of the total participants. This is scholarly supported that nowadays organizations experience high labor attrition due to economic meltdown; employees migrate to the neighboring countries in search of greener pastures, most particularly in Zimbabwe given the highly inflationary economy (Ellmer, & Reichel, 2021). Whereas 27% comprised of employees who had served the organization for 6 to 10 years and only 29% consisting of the loyal employees who had stayed with their organizations for 11 to 20 years.

4.3 Educational Background of Participants

About 44% of the participants from the total sampled population were Master's degree holders and were mainly lecturers at Midlands State University. This was followed by the employees with PhDs who consisted 42% of the total sample size who were mainly the departmental heads and a few lecturers whilst only 13% of the participants had first degrees and these were lecturers from the highly technical fields like engineering and electronics.

The researcher employed an inductive thematic content analysis to conceptualize the research findings. Resultantly, several themes and subthemes were formulated which guided the entire analysis using general codes whilst maintaining the anonymity and privacy of the participants identities.

The results of the data analysis revealed four main themes: practicality, benefits, challenges, and interventions. The practicality theme captured the extent to which remote work was feasible and desirable for MSU lecturers, based on their experiences and preferences. The benefits theme highlighted the positive outcomes of remote work for MSU lecturers, such as flexibility, autonomy, productivity, cost savings, and environmental impact. The challenges' theme identified the difficulties and drawbacks of remote work for MSU lecturers, such as communication barriers, isolation, role conflict, work overload, and technological issues. The interventions' theme suggested the strategies and measures needed to support remote work at MSU, such as training, technological infrastructure, data access, mental health care, and work-life balance.

Theme 1: Merits of remote working

Deducing from the participants, remote working appeared to be a productive innovation in the world of work. They cited various reasons which include flexibility and autonomy as key factors which makes remote working favorable.

Subtheme 1: Flexibility

On the question "*What are the key benefits of remote work?*" Participant 1 responded by saying: "Remote working is ideal because it allows us to plan our work schedules to suit our own personal interests". Another participant further alluded that "Teleworking allows us to pursue other streams of income which is highly flexible in approach". As a result, many participants view remote work as ideally flexible. Therefore, the study unraveled that most participants prefer remote working due to its flexibility. As supported by previous scholars

who have cited that one of the most key merits of teleworking is the fact that it promotes flexibility at work which greatly improves employee satisfaction at work (Ellmer, & Reichel, 2021).

Subtheme 2: Autonomy

On the question "*What are the key benefits of remote work?*" Participant 11 echoed that: "Remote working helps to enhance our sense of ownership at work. There is no close supervision. I can schedule my tasks with freedom without being micromanaged". Another participant further added on that "Employees at teleworking are free to arrange their priority tasks according to their own interests and thoughts without being tightly supervised". As such, many participants enjoy remote working due to the associated autonomy. Therefore, the study revealed that most participants were in favour of teleworking due to less pressure which comes with tight supervision at the workplace which boosts employee morale. As confirmed by previous scholars that remote working comes with high degree of autonomy and this further boost employee productivity (Gajendran 2020).

Theme 2: Demerits of teleworking

Deducing from the participants, remote working appeared to be a disruptive irritation on the other side of the spectrum. Most employees complained about isolation, work overload and technological glitches (McKinsey, 2019),

Subtheme 1: Isolation

On the question "*What are the key challenges of remote work?*" Participant 15 indicated that: "Remote working has created a great divide in the world of work. It alienates employees and deprives them of the need for association.: Most employees now spend most of their time working from home which denies them the need to physically interact with colleagues Another participant further explained that "Teleworking is negatively disruptive in nature as it promotes loneliness". This is further supported by the past scholars who stated that human beings are social animals which needs constant interaction with other fellow human beings to establish a sense of belonging.

Subtheme 2: Overload

On the question "*What are the key challenges of remote work?*" Participant 19 explained that: "Remote working has actually increased employee workload which has further compromised the quality of work produced from teleworking". Employees are forced to even work during odd hours which has worsened the plight. Another participant further stated that "Teleworking is negatively affected by continued technical glitches in from of poor network connectivity and power cuts which compels employees to have back log and even extended hours of work leading to work overload and high work-related stress. Employees are always behind the schedule in terms of meeting set targets which greatly disrupts their wellbeing leading to hypertension and stress.

5 Analysis

According to the research findings, lecturers are experiencing severe challenges such as workload with remote working which affects their wellbeing which is similar to what (Kryscynski, Reeves, Stice-Lusvardi, Ulrich, & Russell, 2018 envisaged). These findings concur with the recent studies in remote working which states that the chief inhibiting factor to fully embrace teleworking by employees is the increased work load and isolation associated with this work model. This greatly affects their effectiveness and efficiency at work leading to compromised productivity. As a result, lecturers are faced with compromised working environments coupled by work alienation and stressful conditions. It is equally important to also acknowledge the lighter side of remote work which entails flexibility and autonomy. This has led to employee perceiving remote work as the most favorable work model in the 21st century. As the remote work model is relatively new in the world of work, it is equally essential to be aware of its merits and demerits when adopting it in the corporate world so that it is fairly adopted with minimum implications on business continuity. Employees have a great sense of ownership when exposed to remote work. As they are in charge of scheduling their task and planning their duties according to their won flexible times. It enables them to become their own supervisors.

The analysis of the results showed that remote work was feasible and sustainable for MSU lecturers in the post-pandemic era, provided that adequate resources and policies were in place. The results also indicated that remote work had both advantages and disadvantages for MSU lecturers, depending on their individual and contextual factors. The results further revealed that MSU lecturers had mixed perceptions of remote work,

ranging from positive to negative, reflecting their diverse experiences and expectations. The results finally suggested that strategic interventions were essential to enhance the effectiveness and satisfaction of remote work at MSU.

6 Conclusion

This study explored the feasibility and sustainability of remote work for MSU lecturers during and in the post-pandemic era. The study found that remote work was a viable and beneficial option for higher education institutions in Africa, but also posed various challenges that required careful attention and management. The study also found that MSU lecturers had varied perceptions of remote work, influenced by their personal and professional characteristics. The study recommended several interventions to support remote work at MSU, such as training, technological infrastructure, data access, mental health care, and work-life balance. The study contributed to the literature on remote work in the African context and offered implications for organizational decision-making and future research.

According to Kaur & Fink, (2020), isolation and high workload are the two key challenges associated with remote work. Participants confirmed that alienation and a feeling of lack of belonging was the chief outcome of remote work. The research further discovered that lack of adequate resources further worsened the ill implementation of remote work in the institutes of higher learning. Furthermore, high workload has also compromised the quality of work produced in remote working.

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