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Shifting from Remote to In-person Work: Employees' Performance and Attitudes

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Abstract: The transition back to on-site work environments after an extended period of remote employment due to the lockdowns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by coronavirus disease 2019 has significantly affected the daily lives and work habits of employees. This study aimed to explore these changes by conducting interviews with individuals who were hired during the pandemic and shifted from home-based work arrangements back to a traditional workplace setting. The findings of this research elucidate that a majority of employees experienced anxiety regarding this transition, noting substantial alterations in their work routines and responsibilities. Additionally, the results highlight a pronounced need for an adjustment period, alongside the provision of comprehensive support through training and development programs by their employing organizations, to facilitate optimal work performance and productivity.

Keywords: *Telework, virtual working, pandemic, social identity, office work, Covid-19.*

Introduction

The global landscape changed drastically by the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupting lifestyles, businesses, and educational institutions worldwide (Gautam & Sharma, 2020). Governments around the world have implemented lockdowns and strict measures, in efforts to deal with the widespread of the virus and limit exposure among individuals (Federal Council of Switzerland, 2020). As a result, businesses were compelled to close their physical location and transition to remote work which became prevalent across different industries and regions. Approximately 35.2% of the workforce in the United States shifted to remote work arrangements., and the proportion. of remote work increased by 17% in both Europe and Japan (Okubo, 2020; Saltiel, 2020). This deviation from the traditional setup of the physical work environment to remote work introduced new challenges to organizations such as changes in tasks, schedules, work mode, and interactions (Kramer & Kramer. K, 2020). Although the pandemic has come to an end, individuals and organizations are still navigating through its implications and the changes it introduced to the work environment (Kniffin et al., 2021).

There have been many research papers on remote work, virtual work, and working from home, in addition to the workers' experience during the pandemic. Researchers have questioned the implications of remote working on employees by attempting to identify specific work implications resulting from remote work (Awada et al., 2021; Edelmann et al., 2021; Narayanamurthy & Tortorella, 2021; Feleen et al., 2021). The results were mixed with some

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identifying positive effects while other found negative ones. For example, a paper by Narayanamurthy & Tortorella, 2021 studied the implications on 109 service workers during COVID-19 and concluded that remote work during the pandemic had increased employees' performance and did not affect their sense of job security (Narayanamurthy & Tortorella, 2021). On the other hand, research has also identified challenges of remote work some related to employees' feelings and attitudes and others related to the requirements of remote work (Feleen et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2021; Matli, W., 2020; Spilker & Breaugh, 2021). For instance, in one study felling of isolation, and lack of motivation, and constant disruptions during their working hours where among the main challenges faced by employees working from home (Parker et al., 2021). Moreover, researchers looked into the variations of the benefits and challenges of remote work, taking into account the diverse organizational and individual employees characteristics during the pandemic (Parent-Lamarche, 2022). However, since COVID-19 is relatively new, the theoretical exploration of its implications is still in its early stages. The research papers present diverse or conflicting findings findings related to the advantages and challenges related to remot working. There is also a lack of research on the experience of employees who were forced to work from home during the pandemic, specifically those who started remotely and have to transition back to an office environment; and the impact it has on them. Additionally, although many organizations and institutions witnessed an advantage in remote work such as commute cost reductions and continued either a complete or a hybrid method of work according to previous work, there is limited research in understanding the long-term impact of working remotely on employees (Kniffin et al., 2021). In an aim to bridge the gap and add to the available literature in the fields of remote and hybrid work environments, we carried out qualitative study for this research in order to comprehend the changes in feelings and performance among employees who had undergone this transition in Saudi Arabia. The research will help in studying remote working impact on workers. In Addition, a deeper understanding of the challenges employees face as a result of changes in their work setting and the impact it has on them will help in developing a better perspective of the work dynamics within organizations. Previous research showed that job satisfaction and stress is affected by employees' precipitation of organizational support and training (Zumrah et al, 2017). Thus, this paper will also aid organizations in understanding the importance of developing measures and programs to improve new employees' experience and optimize their performance when integrating them back into the workplace.

Literature Review

This research part critically evaluates the body of extant literature pertaining to the onboarding process, the impact of remote working arrangements, and the phenomenon of employees returning to physical office spaces following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Onboarding Process during the Pandemic

Koleda et al. (2022) conceptualize onboarding as encompassing organizational socialization, new hire performance, new employee integration processes, and the development of self-confidence. This aligns with the broader understanding of onboarding as a set of practices aimed at facilitating a new employee's smooth and rapid adaptation to both the social and professional aspects of their new role (Koleda et al., 2022). However, the increasing adoption of digital tools and virtual work arrangements due to the COVID-19 pandemic presents new challenges and opportunities for onboarding. As noted by Kvist & Dalstål Gershagen (2021), the sustained rise in remote work practices calls for innovative approaches to effectively onboard employees in this virtual landscape. While traditional in-person methods may not be feasible, organizations must find new ways to achieve the key areas outlined by Koleda et al. This might involve utilizing online training modules, virtual team-building activities, and dedicated mentorship programs designed for the remote environment. Limited research exists

regarding the specific challenges of onboarding new employees remotely during the pandemic. Goodermote (2020) argues that such individuals may require additional support, potentially in the form of rehabilitation programs, to learn their tasks and achieve job satisfaction effectively. However, the current literature on this topic remains scarce. One relevant study by Booker et al. (2022) utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection techniques from 56 newly hired staff to investigate their experiences with remote onboarding. Their findings indicate that the existing onboarding process for these employees leaned heavily on institutionalized procedures rather than personalized approaches. Drawing on these findings, Booker et al. (2022) propose that organizations consider adopting a hybrid approach, combining elements of both institutional and individual strategies, to optimize onboarding for remote employees.

Remote Work vs. Office Work

Telework, also known as working from home or remote work, is when employees carry out their tasks remotely rather than in a conventional office setting (Masuda et al., 2017). The widespread adoption of advanced technologies, communication tools, and high-speed Internet has facilitated the rise of telework arrangements (Feleen et al., 2021). During the 2020 lockdown, a significant portion of the workforce in developed economies transitioned to remote work. Across Australia, France, and the United Kingdom, nearly half (47%) of employees engaged in telework (Ker et al., 2021). This change in work modality have led to several implications. Research conducted in India suggests that some employees achieve a better work-life balance and greater job satisfaction due to the flexibility and time saved by avoiding traffic congestion associated with commuting to a central office (Feleen et al., 2021). Similar findings have been reported in other regions, with studies indicating that telework can result in better work-life balance, flexible work schedules, and higher job satisfaction, as well as potential productivity gains (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2021). Additionally, telework can provide individuals with more time for personal pursuits and creative self-expression (Jaiswal & Arun, 2020). Also, it presents the potential for enhanced financial and temporal efficiencies as demonstrated by a decrease in the frequency of business travel and external meetings. Furthermore, it may foster an environment conducive to elevated employee satisfaction, and loyalty, and attract talents residing in geographically distant areas, as documented in research by Edelmann et al., (2021). Despite possessing limited prior experience with telework during enforced lockdown measures, empirical research suggests a significant employee preference for increased remote work opportunities in the future (Edelmann et al., 2021). While the perceived benefits of telework are evident, several key challenges persist. Maintaining focus and motivation can be difficult in a non-traditional work environment, potentially leading to decreased productivity. Additionally, communication barriers with colleagues can arise due to the lack of physical co-presence, impacting collaboration and information sharing. Furthermore, concerns about job security and advancement opportunities may surface for teleworkers, potentially stemming from reduced visibility within organizational structures (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2021). According to researchers, Masuda et al. (2017) and Wang et al. (2023), individual characteristics like work experience and job role, as well as the broader industry context, can influence the effectiveness and experience of telecommuting. While a nearly universal desire for telework is predicted, the prevailing model is envisioned as a hybrid, combining remote and in-office work (Edelmann et al., 2021). This signifies a potential shift in terminology, as the broader concept of 'hybrid work' might supersede the narrower 'telework' label. The future of telework is envisioned as not merely an option but a strategic necessity. Businesses will integrate telework into their organizational and digital strategies, recognizing its potential to enhance productivity, employee satisfaction, and competitiveness (Edelmann et al., 2021). However, evidence suggests a growing preference for hybrid work models compared to fully remote arrangements (Vyas, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed

how people work, with a significant shift towards remote work impacting the future of the physical office space. Although there are advantages to working remotely, such more flexibility, it may necessitate a reconceptualization of the office's role (Smets, 2021).

The Impact of Remote Working on Employees' Performance

Drawing on the research of Qu and Yan (2022), the study sheds light on the multifaceted impact of working from home (WFH) on job performance. Their findings suggest a nuanced relationship, where WFH enhances job quality. A significant majority of employees reported experiencing minimal disruptions to their work, enabling them to complete projects and adhere to deadlines with relative ease (Parker et al., 2021). The emergence of remote work has caused a blurring of the boundaries between the personal and professional domains, affecting leisure time and converting homes into hybrid offices (Garzillo et al., 2022). While offering flexibility, successful remote work demands dedication and structure (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). This paper investigates the difficulties of working remotely, highlighting the need for effective boundary setting. The potential benefits are acknowledged, including increased comfort and reduced distractions. However, concerns regarding complacency and time management are addressed, emphasizing the importance of strong self-motivation and resource provision from organizations (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). Ultimately, remote work, when implemented strategically and with appropriate support, can contribute to positive organizational outcomes; however, ensuring employee knowledge, skillsets, and motivation remains crucial for success (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020).

It's important to acknowledge the potential negative impact of telework on employees, particularly concerning isolation. This issue arises primarily due to the limited or absent of face-to-face interactions inherent in remote working settings. As research by Busch et al (2011) highlights, the dearth of in-person contact can trigger sentiments of social isolation and loneliness, which can have a major impact on workers' productivity and well-being. Fayzieva et al. (2020) stated that the implementation of telework arrangements exhibits a positive association with employee labor productivity and organizational effectiveness; however, this association is conditional upon performance evaluation being centered on outcomes rather than activities. Therefore, working from home requires selecting the most suitable employees and training them to increase productivity and the quality of their work (Kramer & Kramer. K, 2020)

Remote working appears to positively impact employees' performance because individual employee variation is less vulnerable to workplace conditions and depends more on the employee's traits, such as adaptability and intrinsic motivation (Narayanamurthy & Tortorella, 2021). Similar results by Mutiganda et al. (2022) show that the magnitude of individual performance variability under telework arrangements was significantly influenced by both employee-specific traits and the organizational context of telework implementation.

Returning to Office after COVID-19

Ussery et al. investigated the attitudes of extrovert employees towards returning to office work, exploring potential gender differences. Utilizing an online survey (n=273), their study identified a marginally positive association between extroversion and enthusiasm for workplace return. Additionally, they found that males generally displayed greater eagerness compared to females. Interestingly, the results also suggested that work-life balance held greater importance for both extroverts and introverts than full-time work arrangements This highlights the need for employers to adopt innovative approaches to ensure employee satisfaction in the evolving work landscape (Ussery et al.). Gualano et al. (2022) reported that accessing necessary job tools and resources, coupled with having a suitable workspace, facilitated a smooth return-to-work transition for over 75% of employees primarily working from their home state. Furthermore, their findings revealed a significant association between younger age and return-to-work experience. Smets (2021) proposes that, beyond mere task

completion, the future office will function as a hub for facilitating innovation, fostering collaboration, and satiating the inherent human need for social connection. Additionally, the office might retain its value in its ability to project prestige and cultivate a sense of corporate identity, even if physical presence becomes less frequent. According to Brower (2021), Reintegration into the physical workplace environment offers potential benefits beyond those solely accruing to employers, extending to the well-being and professional development of employees. This propinquity fosters connection, involvement, and a feeling of inclusion within the workforce. It addresses the inherent human need for social interaction and shared purpose, facilitating the development of a cohesive unit aligned toward common goals. Furthermore, such reintegration presents an opportunity for employees to fulfill their positive obligation to the collective, actively contributing their talents and expertise to strengthen the organizational culture and cultivate meaningful relationships with colleagues (Brower, 2021). Drawing upon a study conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan (UM), Ybarra et al. (2008) suggest that frequent interactions with others, such as talking, socializing, and connecting, can lead to improved cognitive performance. Researchers hypothesize that this enhancement arises from the mental processes involved in social interactions, including listening, empathizing, thinking critically, and responding effectively. Such types of activities promote critical thinking skills development and cognitive engagement. In addition, the research looks at how social interaction may affect teamwork and individual performance. Based on the findings of the UM study, it is plausible to suggest that positive social experiences within a team can contribute to enhanced individual performance. The collaborative nature of teamwork fosters communication, knowledge sharing, and mutual support, which can ultimately lead to increased productivity and improved outcomes. (Ybarra et al., 2008) Similarly, findings of study published in the Journal of Labor Economics revealed a positive performance spillover effect, where individual team member success was associated with subsequent improvements in the performance of their colleagues (Arcidiacono et al., 2017)

In this paper, the following research question is addressed: How does the shift from remote to office work influence employees' perceived feelings and performance?

Method

Research Design and Sampling

The research purpose is to document the change in employees' performance and feelings due to the transition from remote to in-person work following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Saudi Arabia. Participants were 23 years or older and working in Saudi Arabia. The method of collecting data was online interviews because of the different locations of each participant. The research period allocated for participant recruitment, conducting online interviews, and data collection proved adequate. This success stemmed from meticulous organization of each online session, ensuring smooth execution. The first interview commenced on October 5th, 2022, and the final interview concluded on December 22nd, 2022. Participant availability and convenience were prioritized throughout the scheduling process. Effective time management and strategic planning facilitated the successful acquisition of valuable data for the study. The first part of the interview comprised demographic questions, including gender, age, and city. The subsequent part was about the influence of shifting from remote work to working in the office and their opinion about it. In formulating the interview questions, including demographic inquiries and those directly related to the subject matter, we relied on our personal perspectives. Through a discerning selection process, we ensured that the chosen questions were particularly resonant with the topic under investigation. This approach enabled us to craft inquiries that were not only relevant but also imbued with insights, thereby enhancing the overall quality and depth of our research endeavor. The questions that were asked in the interviews are, how old are you? In which city do you live? What's the industry you are working in? How long have you worked remotely? How long have you been working in the office? What did you feel when

you were shifting from remote to office work? Did you notice any change in your performance through this shift? If yes, what was it? Did you adapt to the changes easily? If yes, what helped you? Did the nature of duties you were accountable to do remotely differ when you started working in the office? Was there any kind of training provided by the company to prepare you to work in the office?

We selected participants through one primary method, personal contact, which included a family friend and colleague. We conducted structured interviews with fourteen employees. Participants did not receive any compensation for participating. Some employees who were interviewed showed support and helped researchers to find more participants. Participants received a concise summary of the study's objectives through the interview invitation. Verbal informed consent was obtained to record all interviews for accurate data collection and subsequent transcription. Interviews lasted approximately 10 minutes, and participant anonymity was assured throughout the research process. All audio recordings were deleted following transcription to ensure participant confidentiality.

Informants

This study consists of 14 professionals (ten female, four male) with individuals aged between 23 and 28 years. For this study, the age group of 23 to 28 was chosen due to a number of characteristics, including professional experience and career stage. Individuals within this age bracket typically represent those in the initial phases of their professional journey. This cohort is particularly pertinent for investigating the effects of transitioning from remote to in-person work, given the greater adaptability and flexibility characteristic of individuals embarking on their careers. Moreover, this age group is often characterized by a heightened proficiency in technology, owing to their familiarity with digital tools. Other age ranges were excluded to ensure a sufficient focus on the sample that will provide the most value to the study. They all experienced working remotely because of the lockdown and shifted to in-person work after the pandemic outbreak ended. In our research, securing an appropriate sample size proved challenging due to the difficulty in finding participants who met our criteria. Given the qualitative nature of the study, we accepted a smaller sample size to prioritize in-depth analysis over statistical representation, reflecting the exploratory nature of our research. With 14 participants, our sample size may seem small, but it was sufficient for our study goals, especially given that we hit data saturation where we started to hear the same themes repeatedly in the interviews. The phrase "data saturation" comes from the grounded theory approach to qualitative research, which was initially developed in the 1960s by sociologists Glaser and Strauss Due to Saudi Arabia's rapid government interventions and widespread adoption of technology, a large number of occupations were completely shifted into remote work during COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, Saudi Arabia offers an ideal context for examining the shift from remote work to office work after COVID-19 pandemic because it offers insights into its implications for the employees from various aspects. The research cohort comprised individuals representing various industries, with a pronounced emphasis on the petrochemicals and utilities sectors. This deliberate focus aligns with Saudi Arabia's prominent involvement in these industries. The following cities are where research participants reside: Jubail (N=7), Riyadh (N=1), Dammam (N=3), Khobar (N=2), and Khamis Mushait (N=1). More details about participants (involving assumed names) are mentioned in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of participants.

Assumed names	Age	Work Sector	City	Remote work*	Office work**

Susan	24	Human Resources	Jubail	2 months	2 months
Deem	26	Cyber Security	Jubail	7 months	7 months
Nouf	24	Utility services	Jubail	0.5 month	5 months
Norah	25	Oil and gas	Khobar	1 month	6 months
Njood	23	Info. Technology	Riyadh	3 months	15 months
Sarah	24	Utility services	Dammam	6 months	3 months
Shahad	26	Chemicals	Khamis Mushait	8 months	6 months
Mona	25	Utility services	Jubail	2 months	4 months
Maryam	25	Education	Jubail	3 months	6 months
Reem	25	Education	Jubail	12 months	4 months
Eid	28	Petrochemicals	Jubail	15 months	30 months
Salem	27	Project management	Khobar	12 months	24 months
Fahad	27	Chemicals	Dammam	4 months	30 months
Faisal	27	Finance	Dammam	6 months	30 months

*Remote work duration; **Office work duration.

Findings

This study explored the influence of transitioning from remote to workplace settings on participants' performance and behaviour. The research question initially focused on capturing participants' subjective experiences during this shift. This led to the first key area of investigation, understanding their emotional and psychological responses to the change in the work environment. Thematic analysis guided the data analysis process. The steps involved were researchers listened to the recorded interviews and meticulously reviewed transcripts to acquire a thorough comprehension of the data. Then data segments deemed relevant and

significant were assigned codes. Examples included "Positive Feelings", "Negative Feelings", and "Efficiency and Flexibility". After coding, researchers sought patterns and merged related codes. For instance, "Positive" and "Negative" codes were combined into "Employees' Feelings Regarding the Shift," with subcategories encompassing both positive and negative aspects. The positive category was further divided into subcategories of "Social," "Professional," and "Human Nature." Similarly, "Efficiency and Flexibility" were merged into the broader theme "Employees' Performance," with subcategories of "Efficiency", "Distraction" and "Flexibility" as shown in **Figure 1.** Themes were reviewed for accuracy in representing the data. Next, a narrative was constructed around the identified themes, supported by interview quotes and examples. Finally, the study's findings were written up.

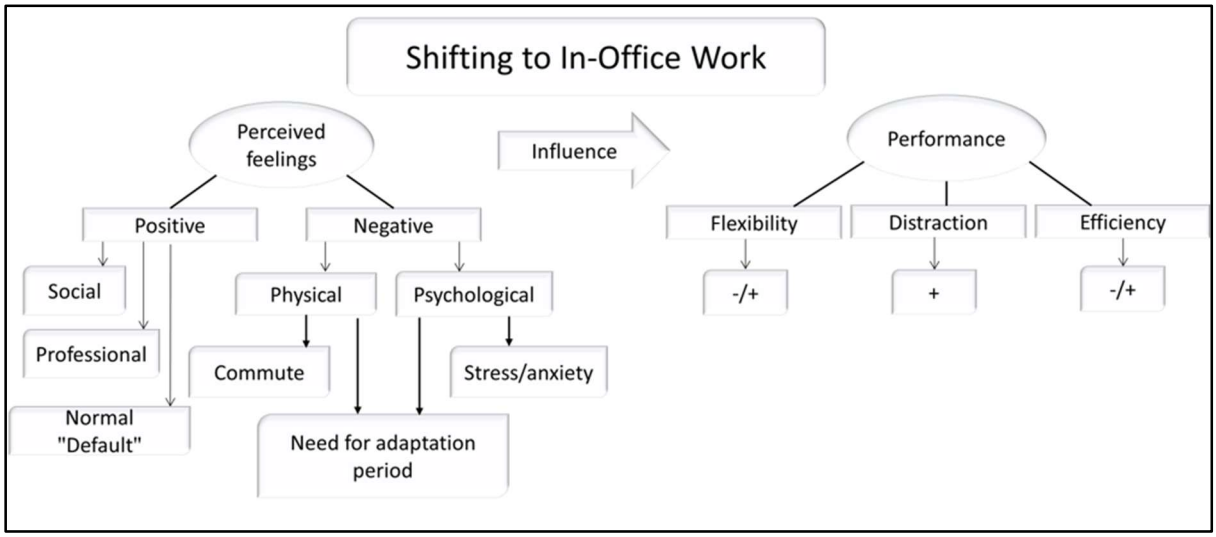

Figure 1*. Shifting back to work in Office Classification*

Employees' Feelings Regarding the Shift

Positive feelings

We identified three subcategories: social, professional, and human nature.

Social. Prosocial feelings are those associated with interacting positively with others (Eslinger et al., 2021). A majority of participants reported experiencing positive emotions, such as excitement and serenity, attributing them to the perceived need for a change that would enhance their work motivation and deepen their understanding of their job roles. Additionally, they expressed a desire to re-immerse themselves in the work environment through face-to-face interactions. Deem said: "In the office, it is not only about work but also about socializing." Nouf expressed her feelings and said, "Excited about the new experience and meeting the people I had worked with.". Also, she added: "Working in the office has many advantages too. The most important is getting involved in the employee community." (Nouf). Another participant shared a similar feeling: "The motivating work environment and nice people I am working with made adapting to the new situation easier." (Maryam). Also, Susan said: "When I started working in the office, I can go and talk to the employees and talk to my managers face to face." She added: "I can participate in... Let's say.. events. I can go and see the activities in the company. I can go to my manager and have some discussions." (Susan). Sarah explained that her "teamwork and professional working environment" helped her adapt quickly to this change.

Professional. The analysis revealed a prevalence of positive sentiment among participants regarding the transition back to physical workspaces, potentially stemming from challenges encountered in understanding their assigned tasks while working remotely. Njood said, "For

remote work, my feeling was so bad; it was totally different than in the workplace." She continued: "Understanding the work and getting benefits from it is almost non-existent. Especially because my major is information technology, it requires being in the workplace and using the company's computer." One participant explained that working from home would not be suitable for her in the long term. Deem said: "I felt relieved, to be honest. It was nice to work at home but not for the long run." Also, she mentioned the ease of separating work and personal life in the office. "if I am in the office, I usually separate work from life, and when you work in the office, it is much easier to adopt that kind of mentality." (Deem). Salem shared the same feeling and said, "Working remotely was only temporary during the pandemic." Susan similarly noted that the home environment could not be transformed into a work environment. She said: "From my experience, I can say that working at home is not very easy." She continued: "In office, I have to do all tasks assigned to me and finish my work. Then, when I leave the company, I can do everything I want to do. Unlike when you work at home, time management is tough." The participant further noted a more efficient transition into a work mindset upon arrival at the physical office compared to the home environment. "You feel like you are more engaged in the work." (Susan). Fahad mentioned the ease of communicating with others to perform the work on time. He said, "Working from the office is better; it is easier to communicate with my colleagues and to deal with other departments and avoid missing any documents or delayed approval from management, so I am feeling better about working from the office."

Human nature. One participant stated the ease of the shift to the workplace. Norah said, "Because normal life is related to being social, returning to the basics is easy and natural."

Negative feelings

The data revealed that a portion of participants experienced negative emotions, encompassing both physical and psychological dimensions. Notably, three participants explicitly mentioned the difficulty of commuting. The shift presented logistical challenges for Sarah due to her residence in a separate city from her workplace. She said, "Since I live in another city, I had to go by bus for a long distance, which made work difficult." Also, Salem shared the same feeling and said, "My preference was always to work remotely from home, so I was not excited to return to work at the office. That is mainly due to wasted time commuting from and to the office." Furthermore, Khalid, experiencing a similar issue, expressed his discontent by sharing his negative feelings and stated, "My feeling was the desire to continue working remotely. I live in Dammam and come to Jubail to work every morning till 3 p.m. I feel exhausted and tired". Several participants emphasized the requirement for time to adapt to the newly implemented routine. Mona said, "It took some time to get used to the new routine." Shahad similarly shared her feelings and said," I faced some problems and a change of routine, but I got used to it quickly." She added: "In the first month. I felt a lack of confidence." (Shahad). Also, Susan said: "In the beginning, I was timid, so day by day, I started to talk with other employees nearby me, so that helped me a lot." Another participant shared her experience and said: "In the beginning, it could be hard, but day by day I adapted to the change by getting involved with people and discussing with them since we all meet together face to face." (Nouf). She expressed concern regarding the potential for inconvenience at office work. She mentioned her "fear of feeling uncomfortable in the workplace." (Nouf). Another participant experienced similar feelings. Norah said: "I felt more stressed because of this change."

Employees' performance

It is well-established that employees' emotional responses to transitioning back to office work can significantly affect how well they perform at work. As evidenced by the present study,

participant feedback can be categorized into three key themes: efficiency, distraction, and flexibility.

Efficiency. A significant portion of participants reported increased efficiency and productivity upon transitioning to a physical workplace environment. Reem said, "Office work was more organized, giving me more flexibility and productivity." Another participant, Sarah said, "The advantages were increasing productivity and efficiency levels." Maryam also felt similarly and said, "My productivity has increased due to the convenient environment". A subset of participants reported an increase in workload upon transitioning to an office work environment. Susan shared her experience and said, "When I work in the office, I have tasks that require more communication with employees". Also, she added, "My team starts to give me more work because I am here, and they notice me (Susan). Njood said, "My tasks in remote work were not clear and so little, but while working in the office, I had more tasks." According to Norah, her time at the office was invariably dedicated to work "In the workplace, you cannot sit in the office doing nothing." (Norah). A participant alluded to a perceived decline in productivity associated with remote work arrangements. Njood said that remote working has a "huge impact on productivity and quality of work in a bad way.

In a sample of 14 participants, three individuals reported experiencing a decline in their work performance when transitioning to an office setting. Nouf said, "I am more productive in working remotely, communicating directly, and introducing my ideas and thoughts." Another participant, Norah said, "I feel more productive remotely because I am less anxious, and therefore, I do my job and more. Remote work is more laid back and relaxing; I do my job and enjoy my free time." Also, Eid said, "When I am home, I work longer periods with better performance."

Distraction. In their responses, participants indicated a perceived enhancement in focus while working in the office environment compared to their home setting. Additionally, they reported a reduced level of workplace distractions when physically present in the office. Susan explained her experience remotely and said, "There are many distractions, and the environment is not suitable for work." due to some factors. She added, "Especially when you have little siblings. It is tough to keep the environment very quiet and focused" (Susan). Mona shared a similar opinion: "Remote work had more procrastination than work in an office." Also, Sarah said, "While working in the office, there is less distraction than working remotely."

Flexibility. Participants reported a perceived decrease in flexibility associated with a physical work environment. Salem said, "Less productivity since you are only limited to an 8-hour shift. While working from home gives you more flexibility to distribute the tasks during the day/night." Also, Eid shared a similar opinion and said, "At home, I was working a lot and had enough time to do more tasks."

The nature of duties after shifting to the workplace

A near-unanimous consensus among participants indicated that their workload remained consistent following the shift. However, Njood and Shahad deviated from this trend, reporting an increase in the number of tasks they completed while working in the office environment. A participant reported experiencing role ambiguity, indicating a discrepancy between assigned tasks and those actually performed "I did much work that was not in my job description" (Norah).

Training programs provided to the employees

A majority of participants reported not receiving any training upon transitioning back to in-person work. This is evidenced by the statement, "I did not get any training," from participant Norah Said. However, it is important to note that three out of fourteen participants (Deem and Shahad) indicated the company offered a training program. Deem stated, "Yes. There was a training course for those who returned to the office," while Shahad elaborated further, specifying the program's duration by stating, "Yes, it was for three months."

Discussion

This section addresses the consequences of the findings mentioned previously and in what way they complement as well as enhance the body of knowledge in the area.

Although this study focuses on employees who started as remote workers then joined their colleagues going back to work once the pandemic is over, the found results are very similar and affirm previous studies in the field of remote work. A frequent drawback for remote workers is the feelings of isolation and distance from other colleagues (Spilker & Breaugh, 2021), which was found in this study. Earlier findings from Prasad et al. (2020) concluded that isolation, family disturbance, and lack of support from the employer are challenges connected to working remotely (Prasad et al., 2020). Previous research found that although this is one of the most reported challenges, establishing face-to-face communication and other forms of synchronous correspondence significantly reduce this negative emotion (Bell, 2020). Our results show initial negative feelings of changing the work modality, which would then turn into a positive effect in terms of their social interactions, and professional encounters. The data further revealed psychological effects on participants such as stress and anxiety which is an expected result of major life related changes (Bickford, 2005). Prior research in the field found negative psychological effects of remote work on employees such as eating disorders and obesity problems (Białek-Dratwa, 2022) which confirms the adverse psychological impact of remote work modalities. It was also found that shifting to working from home during the pandemic negatively affected the physical and psychological health aspects of individuals (Xiao et al., 2021).

This is not to extenuate the negative effect of remote work, rather to show that the shift back in office could contribute to remote work challenges and solutions. For example, a hybrid workplace could offer the best of both worlds. in which in-person meetings would break the ice and enhance communication, while allowing the flexibility, and commute cost reductions offered by remote work. Another interesting rising phenomenon is the coworking spaces where employees can share a working space that resembles the office and offers the comfort of a cozy environment away from home office distractions. In a study conducted in Germany, the majority of participants favored this kind of working environment (Robelski et al., 2019). It is also significant to state that this study was carried out before COVID-19, and therefore, it is expected that this trend would be increasing after the successful experience of many organizations of remote work during the 2019 pandemic.

Going back to the office, some participants reported changes in flexibility, a need for an adaptation period, and varying levels of efficiency changes. In the highly cited work “Does it matter where you work?...” funded by IBM, the authors found that virtual and home office work presented a compelling business case for organizations to consider compared to the more traditional office setting (Hill et al., 2003). Our results complement the findings of this result in terms of reported issues related to commuting, and reduced flexibility and work-home balance issues. On the other hand, some of our participants reported a positive effect on flexibility, professionalism, and reduced distractions when going back to the office. The result complements research that looked into how working from home affects work-life balance (Palumbo, 2020). Although the findings of our research might sound contradicting, it may be explained through the different backgrounds of each participant depending on their family obligations, home environment, and other social aspects. Therefore, it is important to consider employees’ personal preferences when designing work modalities.

During the Ebola epidemic, a company based in West Africa implemented various training initiatives aimed at enhancing the post-crisis performance across sectors experiencing skill deficiencies (Agrawal et al., 2020). This approach mirrors strategies adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring a consistent organizational objective across different crises: to augment performance and equip employees with the necessary competencies for safe

job execution. Our interviews revealed a prevalent sense of anxiety among employees, attributed to a lack of prior training. To mitigate this, we advocate for the universal adoption of training programs within organizations. Research conducted by The Canadian Mental Health Association, as highlighted by Melanie, corroborates the beneficial impact of such programs on employee well-being. Furthermore, the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), as delineated by Bickford (2005), is structured to offer consulting services to employees, addressing various concerns. Engagement in these programs fosters a workplace environment where employees are well-acquainted with their responsibilities, thereby reducing stress and anxiety levels. This, in turn, catalyzes enhanced performance, often surpassing organizational expectations.

The findings presented in this work indicate a pronounced general preference among participants for office-based work arrangements. This preference is attributed to the perception that office environments enhance productivity more effectively than remote work settings, primarily due to challenges associated with home and online work modalities. Moreover, office settings are believed to foster greater employee engagement and commitment, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of job responsibilities. This effect is partly due to the visibility of employees to their colleagues, promoting a sense of accountability and encouragement through peer integration into work tasks. These observations are compatible with principles outlined in the Social Identity Theory, as formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory unravels the process by which individuals ascertain their identity through affiliations with various social groups, defined by attributes such as race, gender, nationality, and professional roles. It posits that individuals' self-concept and group identification significantly influence their behaviors, attitudes, and interactions within social contexts. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a strong identification with a work group can lead to favorable social comparisons, in-group favoritism, and the accrual of benefits stemming from group cohesion, social support, and shared values. These elements collectively contribute to an enriched work experience and heightened job satisfaction. Conversely, the remote work paradigm presents substantial challenges in preserving organizational social identity. Physical separation from the workplace can generate feelings of detachment from the organizational culture and diminish interactions with fellow group members. Participants in this study reported difficulties with communication and social interaction in virtual work settings. However, returning to the office mitigated feelings of isolation and detachment from their in-group, thereby fostering a more positive attitude towards their work and reinforcing a sense of belonging. Although the theory was formulated years ago, its facets can help explain employees' reported attitudes in this study. At first glance, one might assume the general premise of the theory leans towards office work. However, the benefits of in-office work can be implemented in any setting, considering that different jobs require different work modalities; for instance, during the pandemic, while some workers were able to work from home, others such as front-line workers had to report to work (Alshaikhmubarak, 2022). Companies can host online social gatherings such as virtual coffee breaks where employees can catch up on non-work-related topics. This can mimic the watercooler conversations of the office environment and help maintain a sense of community. Companies may also consider remote team building activities which may foster a higher sense of belonging and social inclusion. For example, managers can organize online team-building exercises that are fun and engaging, such as virtual escape rooms, online games, or trivia contests. organizations may consider implementing virtual reality in their meetings which is known to enhance self-presence and engagement.

Recently, we have witnessed a significant shift towards remote work paradigms across various organizations, underscoring the several benefits of such arrangements. The transition to remote work has not only been embraced by employees, who appreciate the convenience and comfort of home-based operations, but has also contributed to broader societal objectives. Notably, a

reduction in morning commute congestion and a decrease in carbon emissions have been highlighted as positive externalities, aligning with sustainability goals articulated by entities such as the World Economic Forum (2020). Pioneering this shift, Twitter (recently rebranded as X) set a precedent that was promptly adopted by numerous technology firms, facilitated by the nature of their operations which are amenable to online management and execution (Howington, 2023).

The imperative for environmental sustainability has become a universal concern among organizations worldwide, prompting a reevaluation of conventional work settings. This study's findings reveal that the remote work model offers enhanced flexibility for employees, and is perceived as a less stressful alternative to traditional office-based employment. In light of these insights, it is recommended that corporations provide their workforce, particularly new hires, with the option to engage in remote work in a hybrid or full-time basis, provided their responsibilities can be effectively fulfilled from a home setting. Alternatively, a phased reintegration into physical office spaces should be considered, with a focus on addressing both the professional and psychological well-being of employees and considering their virtual interactions with their peers. This balanced approach not only accommodates individual preferences and needs but also supports the broader objective of fostering sustainable and adaptable work environments.

Limitation

A constraint of this research is the inherent bias of convenience samples. Having a random sample will increase the viability and diversity of the outcomes. Additionally, the larger portion of those involved in this study were women. Having a more gender representative sample will yield better generalizable results.

Conclusion

This research studied the influence of shifting from remote to office work on employees' performance and feelings. After working remotely for a long period, returning to the office undoubtedly impacted the employee's performance and feelings. Our research identified concerns of employees who transfer from home to the workplace. We conducted interviews with employees in Saudi Arabia. The findings showed that most employees were worried because of the change in the environment and nature of the workplace following the transfer. We found that some employees felt positive about being back into the office, while others felt negative. Most of the participants in this study mentioned that they faced changes in their productivity through this shift. they have also expressed a need for organization’s program dedicated to aid in this transition. Additionally, many businesses have recognized the benefits of working remotely since the pandemic. Thus working from home, partially or fully, will likely be a lasting transformation. Implications of the results are discussed under the Social Identity Theory lens where companies are advised to consider implementing virtual events as a strategy to foster enhanced social interactions among employees. This recommendation aligns with the changing nature of the work environment and highlights the importance of leveraging new approaches to enhance organization culture.

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