

# PANDEMIC DISRUPTIONS AND THE IMPERATIVES OF VIRTUAL WORK CHANNELS

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## **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stay-at-home orders have led to significant changes in the way people work. One of these changes involves increased use of virtual work channels as a means of communicating or holding work meetings. Today's organizations have to remain alert and adaptive to unforeseen events, such as external crises, which create increased uncertainty among their workforce and pose immediate threats to the organizations' performance and viability. With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, organizations suddenly have to navigate the unprecedented and thereby find new solutions to challenges arising across many areas of their operations. Educational institutions, offices, factories and markets were closed as a result of the lockdown measures imposed by several governments. To ensure that business operations continued, a work from home policy was implemented by most organizations. This enabled everyone do their work while maintaining social distancing. Despite the changes, this pandemic is teaching the organizations as well as their business managers a lot of lessons. The present, extreme cases of requisite physical distancing need not imply equivalent increases in psychological distance, and also offer firms some insight into the unanticipated benefits of a virtual workforce – a type of workforce that, quite possibly, will influence the 'new normal' of the post-COVID world. The purpose of this paper to examine the imperatives of virtual work channels as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Work from Home Policy, Disruptions, Virtual Work

## **Introduction**

As information and communication technologies (ICTs) have advanced in their capabilities, and especially with the greater availability of high-speed internet, remote working (also referred to as teleworking, telecommuting, distributed work, or flexible work arrangements; Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015) has grown in its use as a new mode of work in the past several decades. Remote working is defined as “a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, the worker has no personal contact with co-workers there, but is able to communicate with them using technology” (Wang, Liu, Qian and Parker, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in mass production shutdowns and supply chain disruptions causing global ripple effects across all economic sectors in a manner that was never expected. It is projected that the spread of the disease will have serious humanitarian challenges to the countries of the world and especially Africa and Nigeria in particular. Economically, the effects have already been felt as demand for Africa's raw materials and commodities in global market has declined and Africa's access to industrial components and manufactured goods from other regions of the world has been

hampered. This is causing further uncertainty in a continent already grappling with widespread geopolitical and economic instability (Morné *et al.*, cited in Oruonye & Ahmed, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stay-at-home orders have led to significant changes in the way people work. One of these changes involves increased use of video conferencing as a means of communicating or holding work meetings. Zoom, for instance, had 10million daily meeting participants in December 2019, but by April 2020, that number had risen to over 300 million (Evans, 2020). Other video conferencing platforms, such as Google Meet™ and Microsoft Teams, have also experienced significant increases in daily participants (Peters, 2020; Thorp-Lancaster, 2020). Furthermore, it is likely that the use of videoconferencing will continue long after the pandemic ends, as Gartner predicts that only 25% of business meetings will take place in-person by 2024 (Standaert, Muylle, & Basu 2021).

Prior to COVID-19, most workers had little remote working experience; nor were they or their organizations prepared for supporting this practice. Now, the unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has required millions of people across the world into being remote workers, inadvertently leading to a de facto global experiment of remote working (Kniffin *et al.*, 2020). Remote working has become the “new normal,” almost overnight.

Employees’ use of video conferencing and other advanced computer communication tools within their work groups has dramatically increased since the beginning of the pandemic. While groups and teams have communicated at some level of virtuality (e.g., phone, email, text) for years, the vast number of employees who now work outside of the office has led to fundamental changes in working and the work group. Video conferencing is no longer limited to a subset of employees in highly technical or international organizations. We now have a critical mass of “normal” employees working remotely who must use advanced computer communication to work (Blanchard, 2021).

### **Literature Review**

As the world is currently being ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, nations are grappling with how to contain the spread and limit its effect

within their borders (Obiakor, 2020). The government has used different measures to control the spread of the virus and these include the closure of airports, schools, market places, and worship centers among others. The closure by the Federal Government of Nigeria started on 30 March 2020 with Federal Capital Territory, Lagos, and Ogun States having the first share being the first states with the COVID-19 cases in the country (Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, 2020).

These closures, while essential, are having negative ripple effects across all sectors and segments of the country (Obiakor, 2020). Micro and small businesses experienced a larger decline in business activity compared to medium and large firms (Lakuma, Sunday, Sserunjogi, Kahunde & Munyambonera, 2020). This may be because a number of the micro and small businesses in the country stopped operations for a while due to their helplessness to undertake preventive health measures like ensuring physical distancing, providing sanitizers, water, and soap for customers’ use. (Lakuma *et al.*, 2020). The economic deceleration in Nigeria was caused by a mixture of falling oil prices in the world market and the ripple economic effect from the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only led to a fall in the demand for oil products but also stopped economic activities from taking place when social distancing policies were enforced (Ozili, 2020).

### **COVID -19 and Virtual Work Virtual Teams**

Virtual teams refer to the geographically distributed collaborations that rely on technology to communicate and cooperate (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Leung *et al.* (2020) suggest that an emerging response from the COVID-19 is hybrid working arrangements, that is, spilt time between the workplace and home. This may see more discussion on work/life integration as distinct from work/life balance. It will also mean that both existing and new virtual teams may need to repurpose work processes rather than recreate existing processes in the hybrid arrangements. Virtual teams are teams in which multiple members are situated in different geographical locations and are dependent highly on the use of technology for inter-member communication (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson 1998). In most cases virtual teams are set up by the organization to solve key issues such as: constructing an ideal range of human resources to

encourage cross-boundary collaboration (Ebrahim, Ahmed & Taha, 2009) and building teams that can address location-specific needs (Ford, Piccolo, & Ford 2017). However, this pandemic and the need for organizations to create work environments that are physically safe for their workforce has increased the demand for virtual workspaces that have forced employees to work from home. According to data collected through a survey conducted in May of 2020 that focused on understanding how COVID-19 has impacted the US workforce, it was found that about 35.2% of workers had to switch to working from home due to the pandemic (Brynjolfsson, Horton, Ozimek, Rock, Sharma & TuYe, 2020). In addition to that, it was found that 15% were already working remotely before the pandemic therefore, indicating that about half of the overall US workforce is now working remotely (Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2020).

As Mak and Kozlowski (2019) observed before the pandemic, “Virtual teams ... are growing in number and importance.” Rather than assume uniformity in virtual team characteristics, though, it is valuable to recognize that “team virtuality” is a multi-facted concept and encompasses multiple dimensions including the geographical distribution of team members and the relative amounts of (a)synchronous e-communication (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). Indeed, a nuanced conceptualizing of virtuality – as a continuous variable, given that teams are not simply either face-to-face or virtual – has already been developed (Mak & Kozlowski, 2019) and should prove helpful for future researchers who work to classify the myriad forms of virtual teamwork that have been thrust on workers via COVID-19.

Increased team virtuality as a result of COVID-19 may also affect helping and prosocial behavior. While physical distancing among co-workers may reduce helping behaviors in the near term, we know that people should be bolder to request help from others since people do tend to be more willing to help, and give better-quality help, than we usually assume (Newark, Bohns, & Flynn, 2017), perhaps especially during crises. Normal impediments to requesting help center on the feeling that it can be uncomfortable, awkward, and embarrassing (Bohns & Flynn, 2010), but “best practices” in helping can assist help-seekers in overcoming these psychological barriers by maintaining personal privacy (Cleavenger & Munyon, 2017), reducing stigmatization (Ben-

Porath, 2002), and instilling hope that things will get better once help is received (McDermott, et al., 2017).

As COVID-19 has accelerated the expansion of virtual teams, it will be valuable for researchers to track and study innovations that may enable such teams to function optimally. For example, the intersection of remote work with a global crisis brings up questions of how emotions, such as anxiety and stress, can best be communicated and regulated in the unique setting of virtually connected work where social and emotional cues are relatively limited (Lindebaum, Geddes & Jordan, 2018). On the other hand, there are prior studies showing that teams operating online tend to be more effective at brainstorming than face-to-face teams (DeRosa, Smith, & Hantula, 2007) at the same time that research focusing on individual performance has shown that remotely-interacting teammates appear to miss the creative benefits that can flow from frequent face-to-face interactions (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). The rapid growth in virtual teams offers an opportunity to examine new questions as well as develop interventions to help improve teamwork in virtual settings; and, in that pursuit, close attention needs to be paid to the multidimensional ways in which virtuality varies among remote teams (Mak & Kozlowski, 2019).

### **Remote Working**

While COVID-19 abruptly upended normal work routines, it also caused an acceleration of trends that were already underway involving the migration of work to online or virtual environments. A key difference when considering research on practices such as Work from Home (WFH) prior to the pandemic, though, is that WFH was previously often responsive to employee preferences but COVID-19 forced many into Mandatory Work from Home (MWFH). Work from Home (WFH). A Gartner (2020) survey of 229 Human Resources (HR) departments showed that approximately one-half of the companies had more than 80% of their employees working from home during early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic – and estimated substantial long-term increases for remote work after the pandemic. The need for millions of workers to WFH in response to COVID-19 has accelerated recent remote work trends facilitated by the rise of connectivity and communication technologies. While “remote work” is a broader category since it can include

Work From Anywhere (i.e., not necessarily home), we do know that some – such as professionals who need to perform complex tasks that require little interaction with peers – actually prefer and are more productive if they WFH (Allen, Cho, & Meier, 2014). Yet as large numbers of workers are forced to work from home, many face challenges due to such fundamental issues as not having space in one's home to attend to work. Employees who live with others also face a larger set of challenges than those who live alone since they need to navigate others' space as well (see later section on Family Status).

Given the likelihood that COVID-19 will accelerate trends towards WFH past the immediate impacts of the pandemic (Gartner, 2020), it is clear that the variable ways in which people work outside of traditional workplace settings will warrant growing amounts of attention for both research and practice. Future research should examine whether and how the COVID-19 quarantines that required millions to work from home affected work productivity, creativity, and innovation. Given that the quarantine period entailed a literal window into the homes of co-workers as well as subordinates and superiors, research is also needed to examine the implications of WFH for topics such as motivation and authenticity at work, particularly when it becomes normal again to work in co-located workplace settings.

Independent from challenges that individuals can face when WFH, it is also notable that (a) the reluctance of many employers to adopt WFH before COVID-19 stemmed from a perceived lack of control that employers would have over employees who were out-of-sight and –reach and (b) there is ample reason to expect that new modes of surveillance will accompany various WFH arrangements. Indeed, even before COVID-19, employers were adopting and developing technologies to monitor employees' whereabouts (e.g., with sociometric sensors) (Bhave, Teo & Dalal, 2020). Although managing-by-walking-around is not feasible when people are working remotely, the rapidly expanded usage of videoconferencing has allowed for virtual sight-lines. Yet these virtual sight-lines are fraught with a risk: they can increase perceived stress through continuous monitoring and feelings of privacy invasion. There is also evidence that such remote and automated monitoring can increase the

centralization of management and (in the absence of countervailing action) likely contribute to an adverse dampening of creativity among employees working in lower organizational levels (Nell, Foss, Klein & Schmitt, 2020).

### **Use of Video Conferencing for Workplace Meetings**

While there is a growing body of literature on virtual teams (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017; Gibbs et al., 2017) and the use of videoconferencing in education (Correia, Liu & Xu, 2020) and medicine (Fatehi Armfield, Dimitrijevic & Gray, 2014), our focus is specifically on the use of videoconferencing for business meetings (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, GoTo Meeting, Skype for Business). To date, research has examined the capabilities supported by videoconferencing and other meeting modes (e.g., face to face, audio conferencing), as well as the effectiveness of various meeting modes in achieving certain meeting objectives. For example, in comparison to face-to-face meetings, videoconferencing does not allow for life-size presence in a shared space, the transmission of haptic (touch) or olfactory (scent) cues (Standaert, Muylle & Basu, 2016).

Research has also examined participant engagement and multitasking behavior during videoconference meetings. For example, Kuzminykh and Rintel (2020b) found participants reported feeling lower motivation to engage both behaviorally and cognitively when participating in a meeting remotely versus face to face. Participants also noted that turning one's video on or off was a crucial signal of engagement, with camera on signalling high engagement and camera off indicating low engagement. Cao, Duan and Gan (2021) found multitasking to be a common behavior in videoconference meetings, with about 30% of meetings involving email multitasking. Many participants (32%) noted they were more likely to multitask when the video camera and microphone were turned off. Their findings also revealed that multi-tasking was more likely to occur during meetings that are large, long in duration, scheduled during the morning, regularly recurring, and perceived as less relevant. In terms of outcomes, while some participants (15%) mentioned that multi-tasking in meetings increased their productivity, a greater number (36%) mentioned negative outcomes, including losing track of meeting content (where the content was important), increased mental

fatigue, and being perceived by others as rude, impolite, or disrespectful.

Two other recent studies focused specifically on the challenges and outcomes of the increased use of videoconferencing systems due to forced work from-home mandates during COVID-19. Applying Gibson's (1977) affordance theory perspective, Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai and Bendz (2020) used interview data to identify the positive and negative effects of technology on team collaboration. Their results suggest that videoconferencing provided a social affordance or the opportunity to communicate with others and share ideas. However, while virtual meetings were generally welcomed by individuals living alone who craved social contact, working parents complained more of Zoom fatigue and having too many meetings or perceiving meetings as intrusive, with some noting increased role conflict due to the blurring of work-life boundaries. Similarly, Hacker, vom Brocke, Handali, Otto and Schneider (2020) used an affordance theory perspective to analyze Twitter tweets regarding the use of videoconferencing systems (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Skype, Zoom) during COVID-19. Using text mining, these researchers identified five major affordances and five constraints. For example, the use of videoconferencing allowed users the opportunity to communicate with social groups, engage in shared social activities with family and friends, attend events, pursue hobbies, and consume non-recreational services (e.g., webinars). The constraints included problems with the technology or incompetence in setting up the videoconferencing system, fear of being on camera, Zoom fatigue (being always on), exposing one's private living space, and lacking security (e.g., Zoom bombing).

Yet, for many, the increased use of videoconferencing has been challenging. For example, many users complain of Zoom fatigue or feeling mentally and physically exhausted by video conferencing (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020; Strassman, 2020). This exhaustion is due to several factors, one of which is prolonged direct eye gaze (Bailenson, 2020). In a normal face-to-face meeting, participants spend very little time looking directly into the eyes of one another, whereas in a video conference, individuals are typically staring more intensely at one another for the entire meeting (Strassman, 2020). Another factor is that the images of others on screen can appear too big and too close, triggering increased

brain activity, biochemical changes, and physiological states that are associated with high alert and fight-or-flight (Morris, 2020). This is because the size and proximity of such images can violate our sense of personal space or cause us to subconsciously view them as threatening. Participants may also experience information overload as they attempt to focus on multiple faces at the same time, all in one-inch boxes that often jump from one position on the screen to another as different individuals speak (Morris, 2020). This is complicated by the fact that during virtual meetings, it is not just others' faces that draw the attention of participants, but people or things visible in others' backgrounds as well (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020). The chat function, although useful at times, can also add to participants' information processing load, especially if the content detracts from the meeting (Wiederhold, 2020). Furthermore, seeing one's own self-image can make users hyper-aware of themselves and their appearance, leading to the feeling of self-consciousness and always being on (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020).

Since some videoconferencing platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams) allow team members to instantly connect via video, we recommend future research examine the extent to which these unscheduled videoconferences are perceived as an interruption, leading to increased feelings of fatigue and workload. Finally, many organizations have started to look beyond the pandemic and are being proactive and intentional about determining what their remote work strategy will be going forward. Of concern to many is how they can continue to use videoconferencing as a means of instilling their corporate culture and building trust and cohesion within work groups (Alexander, De Smet & Mysore, 2020).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The need of social distancing gave rise to the concept of "working from home concept (WFH)" for corporate for keeping alive the working spirit of the employees. Work from home (WFH) is where the individuals can do their job from home through massive use of digital platforms. After this pandemic, business trends have completely changed and majority of business activities are performed through mobile, or other digital platforms. Artificial Intelligence, analytics all have changed the way companies used to run and functioning a business. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, in order to keep the

operation going, businesses are forced to move to work from home mode for their employees, wherever possible. There is a huge responsibility for Human Resource managers to maintain the motivation of all employees and make them more productive and efficient. Companies Business managers are still working on this transition of work from home. They have to consider the calmness and mental state of all employees because every employee would not be from the same cities.

Following the above discussions, it is recommended that:

- i. While employees are dealing with a lot of stress and anxiety these days, their leaders and Business managers should give them hope and should promote positive thinking as this will help them in reducing their negative feelings and frustrations. Moreover, they should support employees work life balance and reduce extra work burden as this will help the employees to perform better.
- ii. As a result of the lockdown, a lot of businesses are facing financial problems. Their production, sales and profits are falling and some small businesses cannot afford to pay all of their employees. As a result, they are firing employees and firing someone in these times is traumatic. What important is the fact that this should be conveyed to the employees in such a way as to cause minimum pain and with as much compassion and kindness as possible.
- iii. Leaders and Business managers are considered role models and during this pandemic, they have to demonstrate calm and optimism. They must reframe the pandemic threat as an opportunity for their organization. This will turn an uncertain and unlikely situation into one with hope and positivity as stress can turn out to be good if it is framed constructively (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).
- iv. It is also imperative for organizations to increase their investment in technology to ensure that they have the necessary infrastructure for remote working arrangements. Some of the measures that they must take include issuing laptops to employees so that they can work from home along with reviewing and upgrading the digital system to ensure stable and effective communication and productivity.

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