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The Influence of Covid – 19 on Virtual Employee Management Practices by Organisations: An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

In the mid of 2020, the COVID– 19 disease began rapidly disrupting lives, economies, and workplaces and continues to do so. It was when the disease was brought in a global debacle it forced the world to go into complete lockdown with strict government guidelines of social distancing. The pandemic resulted in the loss of jobs and high rate of unemployment. The COVID – 19 plagues forced organizations to make rigorous changes to the workplace leading to complete chaos to employee and employer experience. One of the most drastic changes was “Work from Home”. The human resource management department was forced to come up with new strategies to face the challenges of remote working. Scholars including Snell et al. (2002) and Ulrich et al. (2017) have argued the relevance of a strategic HR approach

during such challenging times as essential in ensuring institutional competitiveness. Accordingly, institutions turned their attention to virtual employee management (VEM) as an alternative to the traditional system of employment management. According to Henderson et al. (2016), at the time, the adoption of Virtual Employee Management becomes mandatory to facilitate collaboration across isolated employees and stakeholders. Virtual Employee Management is co-dependent groups who work from the comfort of their places with the help of virtual tools or apps like Zoom, Skype and Google meet to communicate work. The major responsibility lies in making productive ‘remote teams’ a crucial challenge for human resource managers. A survey was conducted on 50 employees and lecturers from esteemed universities by providing them a questionnaire. Remote team leaders’ constant hurdles were managing projects, lack of team communication technology issues at home, geographical and cultural barriers. The virtual employee faced core challenges such as overworking after work, maximizing productivity, overcoming distractions and staying motivated. This paper is an empirical paper presenting the problems being faced in virtual employee management by the influence of COVID -19 in general and

provides strategies to overcome them to face this epidemic.

Keywords: *Rigorous, Strategic, Strategies, virtual teams, Unemployment and Workplace.*

INTRODUCTION

Virtual employee management is the effective leadership, direction and control by virtual managers to lead remote teams. It is the use of virtual management tools like zoom, skype in order to function face to face communication of a number of virtual teams from different geographical locations.

The global pandemic in 2020 has jolted many industries bringing the global economy downhill. The objectives of organizations are not only making high sales but ensure safety of their workforce. The virus made the human resource management to stretch its boundaries beyond the traditional practices and ensure a workforce who can function both healthy and mentally. The human resource policies have now transcended to face the new normal.

As the advent of technology took place within the workforce, the need to face a huge competition has risen due to which organizations have raised the bar for virtual teams to widen their boundaries and function beyond their limits.

VIRTUAL MANAGEMENT FACTORS

- 1. Loyalty and Leader Efficiency:**
A virtual team leader plays a pivotal role in ensuring smooth functioning of its teams. This can be done only when the leader is well planned and managed to lead the team virtually. For this reason alone, virtual leader must well organize and forecast its objectives at the first meeting with the remote team. By doing so it can create a sense of trust and make the virtual employees accountable enough for their task.
- 2. Participation and Control:** The team leader must itself be participative in completing the tasks. When the task is just given to the team due to no face-to-face communication the control can be less. Which is why a virtual team leader must keep track of its employees by constant emails, phone calls, weekly meetings? This can make employees more responsible and conscious enough in completing the task.
- 3. Virtuality:** It is important to consider that virtual teams are different from normal physically present teams. The few factors that lead to top virtuality can be by a virtual leader –
 - a) Good communication

- b) Geographical location of virtual employees
- c) Virtual organization and cultural diversity of the remote teams by allowing them to open and accepting their situations.

4. Management Decisions: Decision making can be another factor in making virtual teams effective, as they lead to completing the business objectives. In this manner the virtual leader must take steps by keeping track of its team.

VIRTUAL MANAGEMENT PROCESS

1. **Planning:** The first step in virtual management process must be to plan the entire objective that can be to expand the market, cost-cutting or to face the stiff competition. Management planning during this face must be maximize recruitment and selection process, task blueprint, identify the tool to be used for virtual meetings, geographical location. For optimizing personnel selection, it can opt for the already existing employees by providing the

appropriate training and form the team.

2. **Formation of Virtual Team:**

When the initial step is done it is important that the virtual team must have a visual meet beforehand where the goal clarity and tasks are shown. These can be termed as the “kick-off” meetings where manger must take the initiative to first know its team and make them more participative. This visual presentation and communication are necessary for efficient functioning of remote teams in the long run.

3. **Direction and Control:**

As the virtual team is launched it is very important the virtual leader must follow up with the activities of the team. Critical points to maintain will be communication, employee’s motivation, time to time meetings and knowledge management. Good way to control virtual employees can be by constant motivation and incentives.

4. **Team Up growth:**

Up growth means virtual teams must be developed in a manner that they become flexible and adaptable to changes in the market. The best example can be the global pandemic where the need for

virtual teams increased for companies leading to constant training and development of their virtual teams of existing employees as remote work was the best option available.

5. **Disbanding:** In the final phase, the achievement is recognized and the team members are re-integrated into their home companies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **Tronco(2001)** in his study mentioned virtual management comes with many challenges. He concluded that the bigger challenges to make virtual teams work is communication and appraisal.
- **Gabel and Mansfield (2003)**, both Associate Professors of Legal Studies, Risk Management and Insurance Department in their article have stated that they studied many American companies and came to the conclusion that virtual employee management do not consider challenges like compensation laws, medical leaves, are not clearly stated for virtual employees.
- **Dean (2002)** in his article stated that other virtual employee challenge apart from communication, appraisal are taxes. He stated that equal taxation policies must be designed for virtual employee and employer when both are functioning from other geographic locations.
- **Pearlson and Saunders (2001)** in their article discuss that telecommunication has both effect on structure and dynamism. They came up with solutions for virtual managers to survive challenge of telecommunication which are. First is to accept the challenge of virtual work, second to have clarity with virtual employees, third virtual manager must take out the time to communicate with the employee virtually and lastly manager must see that the previous options must not repeat again and become more flexible and dynamic to keep a productive workforce.
- **Kowalski (2006)** in his article stated that the best solutions for making a remote team work is the effective communication, constant support and utmost trust from the virtual managers at all levels of organizations.
- **Robinson (2009)** in his article suggested that the virtual managers must be more flexible and dynamic

during turbulent times by giving goal clarity, active participation and make sure that the employees have the correct tools and materials to deal with the changing times.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To Study the Influence of COVID-19 on employer and employees in general
- To identify the Challenges of virtual employee management and how to overcome them
- To discuss the strategies for virtual employee management post COVID-19.

COVID-19 AND VIRTUAL EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

As the global pandemic took place in 2020, businesses start functioning in the new normal that is remote working. Human resources management has a pivotal role in bringing in new strategies to overcome the challenges faced in work from home.

Research conducted by Ways and Working (2011) reported a 13% decrease in work from an office between 2009 - 2011. Eventually, 30% of the workforce will go virtual by 2020.

The pandemic led to the optimal use of a hybrid workforce allowing the digital transformation of collaborative platforms and electronic communicating tools. Major commercial industries reacted to the best need available at their disposal to ensure the safety of their employees and keep constant efficiency and productivity. Virtual employee management came out as the best alternative to face this epidemic.

Work from home statistics reports –

- 55% of organizations internationally take up hybrid work
- 18% work from home on a full-time basis.
- Nearly 77% of employees become productive due to flexible working hours.
- Up to \$11000 can be saved annually by companies for employees that are part-time remote workers.
- 37% of remote workers are effective when they take breaks between work hours
- By 2028 remote working will become the solution by almost 73% of the workforce becoming virtual teams.
- Young employers want a percentage of their employees to work remotely.

These remote work statistics show that virtual management did exist and the pandemic gave these practices a boost to answer this situation. Virtual employee management practices help the organization to cut costs, save time, flexibility. The impact of COVID – 19 on these practices has just paved the way to flourish virtual teams.

Although several companies were into remote working before the pandemic hit, it is now the new normal. The traditional work techniques have been overcome by active virtual employee management practice – a key to face this pandemic.

A report released by the US Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labour Statistics showed that 4.7 million citizens were into remote work even before the pandemic happened.

Managing virtual teams is like leading a band – you work on the different parts to complete one whole in the same way remote teams are not an impossible mark but comes with their challenges.

Due to the pandemic, virtual managers are facing a threat they have never seen before. 50% of the workplace has gone remote on the bright side covid 19 pandemic has brought an optimum solution to learn virtual management skills.

The key elements for virtual teams to become successful virtual managers'

important practices must be to gain faith, ensure commitment for effective employee engagement.

It is been reported that before the pandemic, 16% of workspace were virtual managers making the virtual employee managers upgrade their practices to lead an efficient hybrid team.

VIRTUAL TEAM STATISTICS FROM 2020-2021

- i. Due to the pandemic nearly 80% of the global workforce transferred to remote work (Meluso et al., 2020)
- ii. Zoom was rated as the app most used during the lockdown by different organizations (Clutch.io, 2020)
- iii. 64% of companies report that remote work has come here to stay even after the pandemic ends (Meluso et al., 2020)
- iv. 97% of organization prefer video conferencing as a major tool for efficient remote working (Bloomberg Law, 2020)
- v. 75% of business reported that remote work made them more efficient and productive (Meluso et al., 2020)
- vi. 91% of companies are using desktop apps to conduct virtual meetings (Bloomberg Law, 2020)

- vii. Nearly 25% of employees are now suggesting remote work because of its flexibility and comfort (GitLab, 2020)
- viii. At present 12% of the employees are entirely in remote work by functioning in specific time zone set by their organizations (GitLab, 2020)
- ix. 56% of virtual employees say that because of remote work there is major participation in decision making and problem solving of organization (GitLab, 2020)
- x. Due to pandemic nearly 83% of physically challenged employees were able to work in a remote setup (GitLab, 2020)
- xi. The up to mark virtual team traits has been recorded as – share information (19%), collaborative (18%), proactively engaged (17%) (Culture Wizard, 2018)
- xii. It has been reported that 22% of employees have received training for virtual organization (Culture Wizard, 2018)

CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Remote teams allow managers to construct teams beyond their dimensions, whereas for employees it offers the independence

and transparency to achieve work-life balance, but to maintain a perfect virtual team comes with-it ever-changing challenges. The pandemic gave rise to these challenges in a higher percentage.

To begin with, some challenges of virtual management can be a lack of transparency and physical presence in an organization (McKenna & Green, 2002). (Finholt&Sproull, 1990) said that the group identity of various virtual teams is a challenge for virtual leaders. They said in their study that virtual teams face the challenge of authority and responsibility as there is less disclosure of information. One of the other challenges in maintaining a virtual team is communication. If teams are not structured without giving clarity about who is responsible to whom it affects the productivity of an organization. One of the major practices which are lacked in successful virtual teams is the use of the right communication tools. During the lockdown majority of employees suggested that when tasks are mentioned clear follow-up is not done leading to fallout in productivity. A major reason why many industries went downhill during the pandemic. According to Bjorn and Ngwenyama(2009) stated that communication of remote teams fails because of two most important reason which is culture and climate of the company caused due to geographical

locations. The constant failure can be because of misinterpretation of words by managers or sometimes employees. Another challenge, especially during the lockdown which was seen, was a lack of faith, loyalty, and accountability in employers and employees. This took place due to fear of losing the job, lack of clarity of tasks on part of a virtual leader.

Challenges faced by Employer	Challenges faced by Employees
Managing projects	Overworking or unplugging after work
Lack of team communication	Maximizing productivity
Technological issues at home	Overcoming distractions
Geographical and cultural barriers	Staying motivated
Maintain leadership	Lack of job security and responsibility
Lack of trust and accountability of employees	Lack of training of virtual tools
Choosing the appropriate virtual tools	Fear of participation

OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS TO VIRTUAL MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

When considering managing remote teams it is must be known that virtual teams are more than just groups who complete tasks but are a social group. Regardless of the communication tools used to bind the virtual teams, it is important to remember that the transparency and quality of information must be communicated in a

structured manner to achieve the tasks of the organizations. No virtual team can survive work from home if the information is not synergized by the virtual managers. For this reason, the quality of information must lead with a combination of trust, loyalty, faith, training, follow-up planning to have a successful hybrid group.

To make efficient hybrid teams it is important to have a proper synergy of activities and deal with the necessary support to the virtual teams not only in terms of tasks or work but also psychologically to achieve high productivity from the employees.

Kimball in 1997 suggested few tips that virtual managers can follow to boost employee engagement and productivity. These rules can be addressed in the context of the current lockdown for flourishing virtual teams.

1. **Goal:** virtual managers must see that the already set up virtual teams are goal-oriented with the flexible objectives of the organization. They must see to it that frequent meetings are attended for giving a sense of purpose to its employees.
2. **Job Roles:** it is necessary for virtual managers that a detailed structure is made defining clearly the roles and tasks and the employees and leaders to whom they are accountable and

responsible. During the current pandemic, it is reported that the virtual teams exclusively failed to manage various virtual teams leading to exert pressure on remote employees. These happened due to commanding the tasks rather than doing a good follow-up.

3. **Virtual Organization Culture:** the growing culture of remote work must be understood by companies and must frame their policies according to it as virtual work has come to stay for a long period. The use of electronic tools and applications must be first trained to employees and make them aware of it by designing a follow-up plan. By growing such a culture teams can flourish productively if there is more transparency.
4. **Discussion:** leaders must look up questions, suggestions of their team members to present clarity and ensure efficiency.
5. **Frequency:** the managers must ensure that their teams must entirely be involved in the activities and must-see that no team member is left behind. There must be the same pace in the tasks associated with the team.
6. **Entry and Re-entry:** when new members are onboarded to the

team, they are part of a team that is already expertise in that area of the organization. For this reason, it is the firm duty of HR to look after the new members by constant face-to-face meetings and sending out feedback forms for suggestions. Proper virtual orientation must be done by making the current employees ask for suggestions and ensure their participation.

STRATEGIES FOR PRODUCTIVE VIRTUAL TEAMS

The new strategies can be as followed to face the new normal of the workforce for both virtual employees and managers

1. **Train the Virtual Team:** a virtual manager's primary goal must be to ensure that their members are well aware of the tools and technology being used for virtual meetings. There might be members like senior employees who have never experienced remote work before partial resources must be to equip the employees with this and lead the virtual team.
2. **Accept Failure:** a majority of the organizations failed during the pandemic because of their lack of resources and budget to face the

new normal. The hardest hit were the restaurant, entertainment, and flight industries. They accepted their failures and remodelled their companies by switching online.

3. **The flow of Communication:** The State of Remote Work reports that in the year 2020 failed flow of communication and participation was the reason for the lack of productivity in the virtual teams. The virtual managers for this must first identify the size of the team, age group, cultures, and values. Look for daily check-ins or log-ins of the teams with the software if the team size is big. Using only emails and telephone calls will not help video meetings must be taken in a large percentage.
4. **Build Connections.** Workers that are used to being anchored by a shared office space may struggle with a sense of belonging when they are forced to work remotely. You can help bridge the distance by being intentional about relationship-building. This might mean allowing time at the beginning of a call to find out how an employee is doing personally or asking questions related to a shared common interest.

5. **Define your expectations.** Your employees must know exactly what is expected of them as remote workers.

Areas of consideration include:

- **Work Schedule:** Are there set hours? If so, what are they? If the schedule is flexible, are there specific times the employee needs to be available for calls or meetings?
- **Communication:** How frequently do you expect an employee to check in with you? Which method of communication should be used for what situations? How quickly should employees respond to emails or phone calls?
- **Processes:** Are there any changes in processes now that the employee is remote? For example, what is the protocol for making decisions if a team member is not available? Will project management be handled differently?

VIRTUAL MANAGERS STRATEGIES TO LEAD HYBRID WORKFORCE

- Ensure employees that the team is working on the new goals and if any salary layoffs and reductions

happen treat them with transparency.

- Be available for your virtual teams regularly despite other schedules.
- Working remote is alone a big challenge for the team to understand how you can support them and support them psychologically.
- Be transparent and have full disclosure of your activities.
- Take suggestions and ensure team participation by not just letting them brag but tell them to have face-to-face communication virtually if any clarification is needed.
- Visual presentation and screen sharing must be constantly used to ensure transparency of your tasks and objectives.

VIRTUAL EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT POST-COVID- 19

Work from home has become the new normal, regardless of the company's strategic decision or employee's personal choice. Work will function in a different way for many industries. The emerging work from home trends will give various directions. The pandemic forced many small, medium enterprises to have a

sudden shift to remote work even- though it did exist before COVID-19 hit us.

Remote work is still an unanswered question post-COVID-19 because it depends on the nature of business. While this shift was a benefit for many companies it did bring its ripping effects on some industries like the restaurant and airline industries. The adaptability of work from home did bring out many benefits to industries but also has its challenges which can be combated with dynamic virtual management practices and tools. Going further remote work is a key for long-term business continuity where virtual management emerging trends and tools can help both employers and employees to function their performance smoothly. To answer this a well-designed work from the home policy is required. On one end remote work made employees learn a perfect work-life balance which is removing the gap between both of them as home has become the new work environment leading to reduced productivity and team effort and participation. To overcome this virtual manager major employee management practice is employee well-being.

For many companies' virtual management may be a positive approach due to its benefits of cut-cost, protective environment post-COVID-19. Some industries cannot choose to continue

virtual management but adapt to flexible work hours policy leading towards shared workspaces and cooperative team management. The virtual employee management practices made us understand the efficiency of communication, changing productivity routines, and quickly adapt to virtual management tools like zoom, google meet.

A recent survey reported that nearly 77% of industries adopt virtual employee management practices by making their employees work at least three days at home a week.

COVID-19 cannot be the only goal to accept virtual employee management practices, but its scope is wide as it gives ripping advantages to industries of reducing costs, individual member productivity, flexible work environment for remote teams, adapt to the dynamic changes of the market.

Many companies are shifting towards permanent workforce conditions and include more contractual workers in their virtual management policies. As virtual teams will stay for a long time, short-term goals and practices will not help.

METHODOLOGY

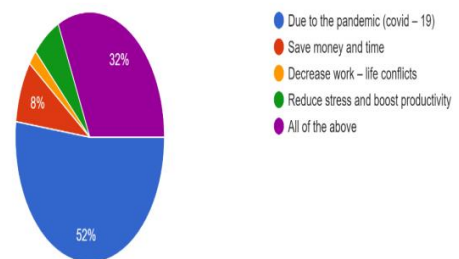
This study was survey research where the data was collected directly from the field. A self-designed questionnaire was used as

a method of obtaining responses from the respondents. The questions were multiple choice questions conducted on 50 respondents, where 25 were college lecturers, other 25 were on the HR team of an esteemed company.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

1. Why did you start working remotely?

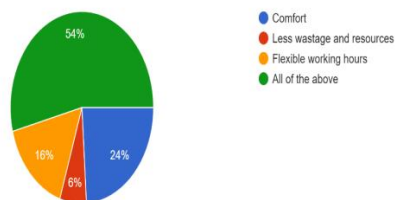
50 responses



The graph states that nearly 52% of respondents started working remotely due to COVID-19 and for other reasons like to save time and money (8%), decrease work life conflicts, reduce stress and boost productivity (32%)

2. What is your favorite part about working remote?

50 responses



The graph states that the favourite part of working remotely by lecturers, managers

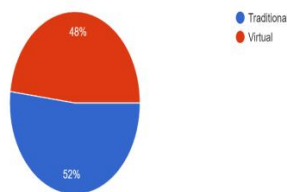
and employees are due to comfort (24%), less wastage of resources (6%), flexible working hours (16%) and 54% agree to all the above reasons.

3) What is your company/college stance on remote work?
50 responses



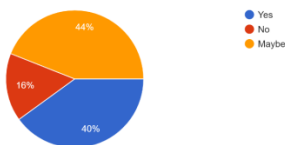
The graph suggests that the company/college employees and lecturers completely work remotely (34%). Nearly 32% works completely remotely

4) Which method of employee management do you prefer?
50 responses



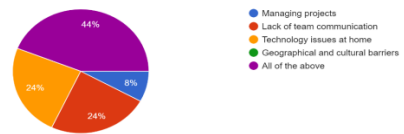
The graph says a majority of employees prefer traditional employee management (52%).

5) Did you face any challenges as a virtual team leader/member?
50 responses



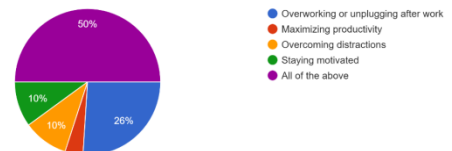
The graph proves that majority of virtual leader faced challenges (44%).

6) Which of the challenges did you face when leading remote teams?
50 responses



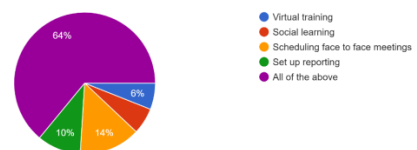
The major challenges faced by virtual leader were managing projects (8%), lack of team communication (24%), technology issues at home (24%), geographical and cultural barriers

7) What challenges did you face as a virtual employee?
50 responses



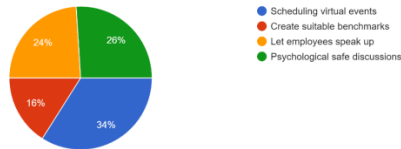
The virtual employee faced challenges like unplugging after work (26%), maximizing productivity, staying motivated (10%), and overcoming distractions (10%).

8) What strategies do you suggest for better efficiency of virtual employees?
50 responses



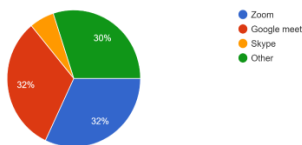
The major strategies suggested by remote employees and lecturers are virtual training (6%), social learning, scheduling face to face meetings (14%), set up reporting (10%).

9) How did the HR department of your company/college overcome the pandemic area of virtual employment?
50 responses



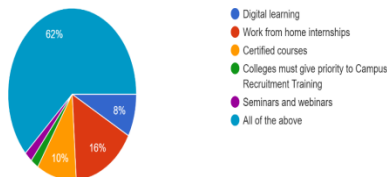
The HR department of the company and colleges are overcoming the pandemic area of virtual employment by scheduling virtual events (34%).

10) Which tools you prefer the most for effective virtual employee management at your work place?
50 responses



The major tools used during the pandemic by company and colleges were zoom (32%) and Google meet (32%).

11) What suggestion will you give for generation - x entering the post pandemic phase as a virtual employee/employer?
50 responses



The suggestions given for becoming a productive virtual employee/employer were digital training, work from home internships (16%), certified courses (10%), colleges must give priority to campus recruitment training, seminars and webinars.

FINDINGS

The findings showed a direct relationship of virtual management practices with

COVID-19. It means that colleges and companies must design excellent strategies to attain efficiency. Tools like Google meet and zoom make virtual managers complete their tasks and objectives more efficiently as a higher percentage of workers are aware of these tools. Another finding is to implement virtual management practices in colleges and as part of training in companies because many managers and lecturers suggested that opting for these practices can bring in efficiency in performance for any industry. These practices are - digital training, work-from-home internships, certified courses. Colleges must give priority to campus recruitment training, seminars, and webinars. A hybrid workforce can function when virtual employee management practices are designed in the manner of changing times of COVID-19.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study focused on how pandemics had an impact on the core practices of virtual employee management. The study showed that remote working was a tool used way before the pandemic. Virtual employees and managers are facing different virtual work challenges. Almost 90% of the world are now considering work from home to cut-cost, ensure flexibility and comfort. The paper

gave a detailed data analysis focusing on the challenges, strategies, tools of virtual employee management practices. The literature review by different authors concluded that virtual employee management does have its challenges virtual leaders can overcome by focusing on the flow of communication of virtual organizations, keep a check on the employment laws and entirely adapt to the changing times of remote working.

Suggestions from the study are as follows: design efficient HR policies, virtual managers must focus on employee participation, engagement. Virtual employee management practice must be to train, ensure the participation of employees and provide knowledge to your virtual teams. The young employees and managers must equip with courses and practical exposure to face the pandemic. Colleges must provide work-from-home internships and courses to understand the perks of remote working. The HR policies designed during the pandemic focused mainly on layoffs, reduced salaries - instead of must be changed to re-hiring and training.

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