





The perceived influence of remote working on specific human resource management outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic



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Orientation: Remote work recently gained traction globally due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, however, not all companies promptly adapted to this.

Research purpose: The study investigated the perceived influence of working remotely on employee productivity and performance management in South Africa.

Motivation for the study: The ambivalent trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-term accompanying impacts have rendered research topics around the subject pertinent.

Research approach, design, and method: A quantitative research approach was employed, and the sample population included remote workers within three South African provinces, between the ages of 18 and 65. The sampling method employed was purposive sampling with a complementary snowball sampling approach.

Main findings: The results revealed that respondents preferred working remotely, as this was more convenient and cost efficient for them. However, respondents indicated that remote working caused them to work in isolation and longer hours than in the office to prove their productivity to their line managers and employers, thus impeding their social life.

Practical/managerial implications: HR professionals should develop different policies aligned with remote work and restructure business operations in a way that aligns work responsibilities with the online working environment, as respondents felt their organisation's current performance management and HR Policies were not suited for working remotely.

Contribution/value-add: The study offers insights that could assist South African organisations to adopt more effective remote work structures and policies, especially those who will continue with remote work even after the pandemic.

Keywords: remote working; employee productivity; performance management; work-life balance; COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Orientation

Remote working has been in existence even before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Recently, remote working is more in use in different organisations around the world because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced these organisations to adapt quickly and strategically. Remote working has been studied under various terminologies, which are all connected and, to some extent, mean the same thing. Common terms for remote working are telecommuting, virtual working, working from home (WFH) and teleworking. According to Anastasios and Prodromos (2018), remote work is the work that an employee can perform from any location other than the conventional workplace. Benjamin (2020) states that remote working is when the employee resides outside of the organisation's main office's geographical location for work. A remote-working employee works away from the office and makes use of telecommunication (Lopaz, 2020). According to Virtanen (2020), remote work is working from other premises rather than the employer's premises. Different authors discovered different views about the remote working influence on employees, in that remote work has both negative and positive impacts on organisations and employees and that some employees enjoy remote work more than others.

Traditional work is slightly different from remote work. In a traditional work setting or environment, employees partake in face-to-face interactions, which improve productivity since there is guidance from other employees (Nield, 2016). Regarding face-to-face meetings, colleagues

can read each other's body language and facial expressions when ideas are shared during the meetings. There is also a chance for team building when employees work traditionally. Now that businesses have transitioned to remote working, work is performed differently. Employees do not have much engagement, and team building meetings or exercises are not considered a priority anymore. As for employees who depend on interactions with fellow employees, it may be more difficult for them to execute their work deliverables while working remotely, as it sometimes takes longer to reconcile schedules with colleagues who are not in the same physical working environment. According to Thorstensson (2020), remote working decreases costs for organisations and employees and increases the spending of time with families. In addition, costs are cut due to not commuting to work. Organisations provide technological equipment to employees so that work can continue to be performed as effectively and efficiently at home as when working from the office.

Performance management (PM) in the workplace is key as it enables organisations and line managers to determine whether employees are achieving the necessary milestones towards an organisation's objectives (Saurombe & Barkhuizen, 2020) and is consequently linked to the assessment of employee productivity (Ngobeni et al., 2022). Considering how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the world of work, especially concerning the increased prevalence of remote working employment arrangements, line managers have had to employ unconventional ways of managing employees during the pandemic and are likely to be compelled to keep rethinking the way PM processes are dealt with beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, given the increasing expectation by employees of a hybrid work or employment structure (Ngobeni et al., 2022). This study examined the perceived influence of remote working on specific human resource (HR) outcomes, namely employee productivity and PM.

Research purpose and objectives

The study sought to investigate the perceived influence of remote working on employee productivity and PM.

The specific objectives of this study were:

- to investigate the differences between traditional working and remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic
- to investigate the perceived influence of WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic on employee productivity
- to investigate the perceived influence of WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic on PM.

Literature review

Theoretical framework of the study: The agency theory

Early researchers employed the agency theory (Baiman, 1990; Jensen & Meckling, 1976) to delineate the principal-agent dynamics underpinning management control matters. Consequently, it is imperative to dissect the main elements of

agency theory to understand how it influences management control theory. Agency theory seeks to explain this relationship using the metaphor of a contract (White, 2018). An agency scenario results when one of two or more parties – that being the agent – acts on behalf of or represents the other party, called the principal, in decision-making (Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015). Agency theory seeks to resolve two challenges in agency relationships. The first is the challenge that occurs when (1) the goals of the principal and agent are incongruent, and (2) it is either problematic or expensive for the principal to verify the agent's work. The challenge is that the principal cannot verify the appropriate or inappropriate behaviour of the agent. Secondly, the principal and the agent may prefer different actions due to varying risk preferences (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Since the contract governs the relationship between the principal and the agent in this instance, the focus of the agency theory is on determining the best contract to govern the principal-agent relationship considering preconceptions about people (e.g. self-interest, bounded rationality and risk aversion), organisations (e.g. goal conflict among parties) and information (e.g. information is a commodity for sale or purchase) (Eisenhardt, 1989). The question then becomes: is a behaviour-orientated contract (e.g. salaries, hierarchical governance) better than an outcome-orientated contract (e.g. commissions, stock options, market governance, etc.)?

The developed theory about the efficiency of the agency contract highlights two solutions that the principal can choose to solve the agent-principal contention (Tosi et al., 2000). Firstly, when the principal can comprehensively access information regarding the agent's efforts, the best contract is based on observing the agent's behaviour (monitoring) (Zenger & Gubler, 2018). This prevents a contract from being based on results, which would unnecessarily transfer the risks to the reluctant agent. Secondly, when the principal cannot monitor the agent's efforts and there is high information misalignment, the principal is led to transfer the risks to the agent using an incentive contract (Zenger & Gubler, 2018).

Remote performance can be more challenging to observe in practice, as presence is often associated with performance. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, managers were mainly reluctant to permit WFH and similar ways of flexible working (Lal et al., 2021). The prevailing sentiment among managers was worrying about tracking what employees are doing at any given time. The global remote working movement driven by the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that such concerns are not as weighty as they were thought to be (Pechan, 2021). Nevertheless, organisations and managers still tend to favour being able to see people working long hours and putting in office face time (Lal et al., 2021).

Comparisons between traditional and remote working

Traditionally, a completely furnished workplace entails an array of advantages in many organisations. Several people

discovered that it is simpler to do their jobs in an environment that is favourable for attentiveness, and they appreciate the classification of their work and domestic lives (Brough et al., 2020; Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2020). The opportunity to socialise away from their homes is additionally valuable; numerous individuals make new friends within the office that outlive their tenure in the company, and some create beneficial relationships towards the organisation (Purwanto et al., 2020; Singer-Velush et al. (2020). The chance to engage with one's coworkers also offers a chance to make valuable business connections and superior team bonds. In numerous cases, having a proficient office environment is basic to keeping up connections with vital clients, because clients or people are more persuaded in a face-to-face scenario (Stat International Writing Staff, 2020). Traditional office employees previously reported that they spent quality time during their workday at this workspace (Hill et al., 2003).

Remote work improved efficiency, adaptability, access to worldwide abilities, cost saving, superior workforce and natural impact. Nevertheless, it presents problems and challenges that may include social separation, laziness, difficulties in organising tasks and other negative effects towards people. Caramela (2017) highlights that the introduction to the remote working concept ought to be executed circumspectly, so that those concerned will be well guided and educated, as well as to also assist them in accomplishing sound decision-making (Jalagat & Jalagat, 2019). Because of the abrupt introduction of remote working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, employers and employees, especially in developing countries, did not have enough time to implement sound WFH strategy and policy.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on performance

The current COVID-19 emergency has, and will proceed to have, a huge impact on people, organisations and societies, on a worldwide level. At the institutional level, the widespread pandemic brings into the spotlight the role of leaders and administration in reshaping their organisations to survive during and beyond the crisis. The pandemic is influencing both personal and work lives; therefore, most individuals depend on organisations to keep them informed about security measures, how the crisis is influencing their occupations and other things that may matter to them (Akkermans et al., 2020). The existing COVID-19 worldwide pandemic is phenomenal. It is considered one of the turning focuses in history, as it is rearranging social and financial benchmarks and triggering a modern human era. The measurement and speed of collapse in numerous activities that have followed are not at all like anything experienced in this generation (Gopinath, 2020).

Employees are an imperative resource to any organisation, and they may influence it either positively or negatively (Saurombe & Barkhuizen, 2022). Therefore, employee performance is essential for an organisation to attain its goals and objectives (Saurombe & Barkhuizen, 2020). Employee

performance is characterised as how a worker satisfies their work obligations, performs their required tasks and fulfils organisational projects (Aguinis, 2015). It refers to the effectiveness, quality and productivity of their outputs. Performance also contributes to the evaluation of how important an employee is to the company. Technological changes in this respect can also be a consideration in influencing employees' productivity in different ways such as redundancy, worker turnover and the level of inspiration at work (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020; Nkuraru & Wanza, 2016; Parry & Battista, 2019). Because of unavoidable natural changes, institutions have lately been challenged to advocate for changes that affect employees' performance. Hence, the top administration ought to ensure that components that affect employees' performance are taken into consideration. Administration can be portrayed as a creative and systematic flow of information that can be applied to achieve quality results by using human as well as other vital resources in an effective manner (Payne & Petrenko, 2019).

Benefits and challenges of remote working for employees

According to Nield (2016), people who work remotely are more productive and much happier than traditional workers, even though remote workers are not physically present and actively involved in the office. Like any other work arrangement, remote working has both its advantages and disadvantages.

Recent research (Gigauri, 2020b) has indicated that there are many benefits from WFH. Jalagat and Jalagat (2019) state that flexible working hours is an advantage for remote working employees. Firstly, individuals who WFH enjoy the freedom of managing their own schedule, allowing them to attend to other appointments while working, and this makes them feel less pressured and allows them to complete tasks with ease. The second advantage is cost saving, which makes remote working beneficial to employees. Employees save on transport costs and travelling time to work. Employees also save costs on childcare and transportation while they are at work. The third advantage is change of environment; employees tend to work freely with no bosses around and can move around freely with no micromanagement, as is the case in the office. The fourth advantage of remote work for employees is that there are low levels of stress; individuals travelling to work daily and who were in traffic for long hours tend to be stressed by the time they reach work, which can have a negative influence on the individual's productivity for the day. Lastly, there is an increase in productivity and motivation in that remote working may result in job satisfaction when individuals feel freer to do their work (Jalagat & Jalagat, 2019).

In contrast, there are also pitfalls that employees and organisations experience as a result of the abrupt transition that took place at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic between working at the employer's premises and working remotely, including the loss of motivation among employees

because of the atmospheric difference of a house in comparison to an office (Gigauri, 2020b; Singer-Velush et al., 2020). At home, one can be distracted by social media, television shows or entertainment, as well as family. Secondly, there is less teamwork; working remotely has led to employees not being exposed to teamwork, and employees are communicating less with each other. This might cause employees to not be updated with current events or issues in the organisation. Thirdly, the feeling of isolation, not being able to interact and share ideas, may impact employees' performance and productivity in a negative manner (Purwanto et al., 2020). This isolation also has an impact on the employees' psychological state and will reduce sense of belonging. The fourth disadvantage is that employee personal costs increase. Although employees may save on transport, the savings of employees go back into ensuring an appropriate office space at home (Gigauri, 2020a). In many instances, employees' costs increase as a result of increased electricity consumption at their homes, data costs, mobile bill increases, buying comfortable chairs and tables to turn a home into a comfortable office space and increases in their grocery budgets, as employees spend most of their time at work drinking coffee and having a lunch box, whereas at home you tend to consume more. Lastly, there are more distractions associated with remote working, such as noise in the neighbourhood or restaurants or noisy kids at home, which may have an impact on concentration levels as well as employee productivity (Purwanto et al., 2020).

Benefits and challenges of remote working for employers

Deloitte (2020) mentions that organisational expenditures such as rent, repairs, computers, telephones, offices, utilities, supplies, parking spaces and other expenses are minimised. Another benefit for organisations is increased productivity, according to Deloitte (2020), as long commutes are eliminated and workplace disturbances (coffee breaks, coworker disruptions, etc.) are reduced. The third benefit of remote work for organisations is reduced absenteeism, as according to Lupu (2017), impediments such as illnesses, unavoidable personal responsibilities, unfavourable climatic conditions and psychological unfitness, among others, usually increase absenteeism, of which such impediments would be more disruptive to employees working from their employer's premises, compared to those working remotely. The fourth benefit is that there is a possibility of employing those who may otherwise be unable to come to work, such as mothers, the handicapped and workers who live far from the workplace and do not want to relocate (Lupu, 2017). Lastly, Lupu (2017) states that reducing the spread of infectious diseases among workers, which causes disruptions in the workplace and imposes certain extra costs, benefits the organisation.

Deloitte (2020) states that working remotely can present problems with power, Internet access and hardware, which are more difficult to address at home, even with remote information technology (IT) support. Another setback to remote work is loss of control over the employees. According

to Thorstensson (2020), organisations are concerned that employees will prioritise personal errands over work or give their tasks to others to complete on their behalf, further reducing organisational power. This could result in data protection issues. The third setback is productivity and work quality problems. Supervisors reported distractions in the employees' home environments as a disadvantage. They also complained about a lack of sufficient work-related tools, such as technical equipment and files stored at the main worksite that are required to conduct work-related tasks when working remotely (Greer & Payne, 2014). This further poses challenges to the effective PM of employees (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2018).

Finally, the company's disadvantage, according to Thorstensson (2020), is not just the risk of harm or misuse to office equipment but also the liability issue that arises when the office equipment is off-site. Other drawbacks include the cost of repairing and transporting broken office equipment, identifying who is responsible for the repair (the company or the individual) and deciding how to replace the broken equipment (Gigauri, 2020b).

The role of human resource management in facilitating effective remote working

The COVID-19 pandemic has recently formed extremely tough circumstances for HR management (HRM). Human resource practitioners must help their workers in adapting to the fast changes that are happening within the working environment and in society. According to Akkermans et al. (2020), COVID-19 has a critical impact on occupations and may cause individuals to encounter career shock. As a result of remote working, which has blurred the barriers between work and family life, HRM must now adjust to the rising stress levels among its employees (Virtanen, 2020). Digital systems, mechanical technology, artificial intelligence, virtual reality and blockchain are cases of new technology that will alter the way HR professionals conduct their occupations. Workers ought to learn modern skills to adjust to advanced work and enhance their employability. They can be supported in utilising new technology within the working environment through HRM. Employees struggle to adapt to new technology on their own; therefore, HR practitioners need to help them in developing digital abilities and planning their well-being. Furthermore, modern technologies progress to empower workers to work remotely; therefore, HR professionals in this case must create approaches and performance processes to guarantee that employees meet expectations while also reducing the negative impacts of digital working in the workspace, particularly in terms of social interactions (Parry & Battista, 2019).

Van der Lippe and Lippényi (2020) state that individual performance is influenced by job characteristics, satisfaction and engagement, while team performance suffers when employees work from home for more than 8 h a week, and flexible work should be organised accordingly. According to Singer-Velush et al. (2020), employees are also adversely

impacted by social isolation. As a result, HR managers must ensure that workers who work remotely retain social contact. To combat loneliness, small-group gatherings, networking and virtual interactions should be coordinated, as work relationships are a source of motivation. Managers have used digital data and online dashboards to measure the workload and efficiency of HRs, such as the number of transactions, tickets closed, calls received, hours logged on or number of customers served (Narayandas et al., 2020). As a result, HRM can assist businesses in transforming their business processes into the digital realm by improving employee skills, creating an organisational culture that is adaptable to digitalisation and maintaining a work-life balance to keep workers healthy, inspired and productive (Brough et al., 2020; Gigauro, 2020a).

Performance management strategies during remote working

Performance of employees has been measured and managed for traditional work, and organisations had to adapt and change how they measure performance in terms of remote working. Good PM practice for remote working will lead to job satisfaction and productivity. According to Wang et al. (2021), the following are strategies and tips to manage and support remote workers:

Equip remote-working employees: The organisation must ensure that remote workers have the right resources and technologies to ensure they function effectively to perform their work. Organisations need to ensure that if employees must make work calls, they are provided with airtime for mobile phones or data to conduct work remotely. They further need to ensure that the virtual communication tools used are easy for employees to navigate, since some individuals will be using these technologies and programs for the first time when working remotely.

Set clear goals and objectives: An organisation with clear goals and objectives gives employees a sense of belonging and helps to increase motivation, as employees will receive some guidance as to what is expected from them to complete their work remotely.

Engage with employees in one-on-one sessions: The quick office meetings or chats must be replaced by having conversations remotely with staff regarding work, discussing the issues they are facing working remotely, what is expected from them in terms of performance, the state of their well-being and their personal development plan. This will make employees feel valued and will increase motivation.

Have feedback sessions: It is crucial to conduct regular feedback sessions with employees, as they are always waiting to get feedback from management. Having feedback sessions will assist in eliminating misunderstandings among remote workers, and this will be a perfect platform to convey the correct communication so everyone in the organisation is on the same page. It is also crucial to highlight the remote working challenges the organisation is facing in terms of what is working and what is not working and clarifying whether employees are doing what is expected of them.

Ask for updates on tasks staff is working on: Ask employees to keep a log of what they are working on weekly; that way, both employees and the manager will know what task is pending and the progress thereof. Keeping track of employee task progression

is beneficial to both parties as it helps in measuring individual performance and acknowledging employee accomplishments.

Research design

The type of design for this research was descriptive as it sought to describe perceptions regarding the influence of remote working on specific HR outcomes, namely employee productivity and PM during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected were carefully selected and studied for each HR outcome. The factors which were identified as affecting employee productivity were working alone (WA), keeping work and home life separate (KWAHLs), self-motivation and productivity (SMAP) and work-related travel (WRT). Since the data were collected through survey responses, the variables were not controlled or manipulated, and there was no intervention application.

Research approach

A quantitative research approach was used in this study. The measuring instrument was adapted from existing questionnaires and sought to investigate the impact of remote working on employee productivity and performance. The survey was compiled and distributed specifically to remote working individuals in various sectors. A sample of 150 respondents had been targeted; however, only 102 completed questionnaires were obtained, which was still sufficient to conduct the necessary data analyses.

Research method

Research participants

The respondents who were consulted included individuals within a working environment who were 18 years of age up to the retirement age of 65 years, as the shift from traditional work to remote work affects all generations of the current workforce. The focus was on people who have a minimum of more than 3 years of work experience, especially in the following identified sectors: finance, banking, market research, trade, public administration, education, communications or IT and other sectors. The main reason behind the minimum work experience part of the questionnaire was to find respondents who had substantial experience of working before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sampling method that was used for conducting the research was purposive sampling, whereby the researchers' experience and knowledge were used to create samples. The sample chosen for the study consisted of an array of individuals in full-time remote working, flexible remote working and part-time remote working, who volunteered to be part of the research rather than being chosen to participate. A complementary snowball sampling approach was thus employed, whereby surveys were completed by individuals who then referred the study to other remote workers, as the researchers encouraged them to disseminate the link of the survey to other people they knew in the same field or profession they were working in.

Measuring instruments

The measuring instrument for this research was an adapted version of previous questionnaires, compiled by the main researcher. The survey consisted of three sections. Section A was based on the biographical information of respondents; Section B included pertinent subsections about the teleworking experiences of the respondents; and Section C covered PM, while addressing matters of related HR policy. The ranges used for the survey questions were from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree for Section B, while Section C ranged from 1 to 10, 1 being 'not at all' and 10 being 'absolutely'. Example items in Section B include working alone or in isolation ('I am able to work in isolation without my manager or supervisor's support', 'I am okay with neither my boss nor my colleagues being there to see how well I manage problems except at a distance' and 'I struggle to create or keep up a social life outside of work'); keeping work and home life separate ('I am able to resist the temptation of doing household tasks or chores during my typical working hours', 'Despite not physically working from my organisation's premises, I am able to keep work and home apart' and 'I have a conducive workstation and sufficient work-related equipment at home'); and self-motivation and productivity ('I mostly thrive on intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation', 'I am able to be more productive when I work autonomously and don't need a support structure or system from my colleagues and/or supervisors' and 'I work better with routine than without'). Example items in Section C include: 'On a scale from 0 to 10, do you think the usual performance of most workers in a job similar to yours is good?', 'Do you think your overall performance during the past year has been good?', 'Has your employer provided you with all the necessary tools or equipment for you to perform your job well?' and 'Do you feel your organisation's HR performance criteria is reasonable or realistic for employees working from home?'

Research procedure

The data were collected electronically using a Google Forms link (Alphabet, Inc., Mountain View, California, United States) that was disseminated among the respondents. This was to minimise physical contact with respondents, in adherence to the COVID-19 protocols and national lockdown regulations at the time of data collection.

In conducting the research, the researchers adhered to ethical conduct and standards. The names and details of the respondents were not disclosed and were kept confidential. Throughout the research, the researchers ensured that no one was harmed or hurt emotionally or physically due to the study. Respondents signed a consent form, which proved that they agreed to participate in the research.

Statistical analysis

After collecting the data for the study via Google Forms, statistical analysis method was utilised to analyse the

collected data. Statistical analysis is a method for carrying out numerous statistical operations, where the goal is to quantify the data using some form of statistical analysis. Descriptive data, such as survey data and observational data, are examples of quantitative data. The software that was used to perform statistical analysis is the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York, United States). Descriptive statistics, including correlation and reliability analyses, were performed using the SPSS software. Biographical comparative information was generated and depicted in table format in the results section, as well as descriptive statistics specifically depicting employee perceptions of the HR outcomes examined in this study, namely employee productivity and PM.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was sought from the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Business and Economics (Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management), University of Johannesburg (ref. no. IPPM-2021-549[H]).

Results

Descriptive statistics

The classification of information provides socio-economic descriptors of the respondents in the survey, which are referred to as demographic data (Malhotra, 2010). Pie charts are used to illustrate the information gathered. The demographic information of the complete sample is included in Section A of the questionnaire, which includes the respondents' city or town of work, gender, generational cohorts, ethnicity, years of experience, highest educational qualification and field of employment. The next subsections go over each of these qualities.

Table 1 presents the classification of information related to the respondents' city or town of work. The largest portion of the sample indicated that they work in Gauteng 89.22% ($n = 91$), followed by those who revealed that they work in Limpopo 5.88% ($n = 6$). Moreover, the remainder of the respondents, 4.90% ($n = 5$), revealed that they work in the Free State province.

Table 2 presents the classification of information related to the respondents' gender. The largest portion of the sample indicated that they were female at 60.78% ($n = 62$), followed by those who revealed that they were male at 39.22% ($n = 40$).

Table 3 presented the classification of information related to the generational codes. The largest portion of the sample indicated that respondents were from Generation Z at 49.02% ($n = 50$), followed by millennials at 31.37% ($n = 32$), Generation X at 16.67% ($n = 17$) and, lastly, baby boomers at 2.94% ($n = 3$).

Table 4 presented the classification of information related to ethnicity. The largest portion of the sample indicated that respondents were black at 58.82% ($n = 60$), followed by mixed race at 26.47% ($n = 27$), white at 4.90% ($n = 5$), Asian at 4.90%

TABLE 1: Place of residence.

Province	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Gauteng	91	89.2	89.2
Free State	5	4.9	94.1
Limpopo	6	5.9	100.0
Total	102	100.0	-

TABLE 2: Gender.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Male	40	39.2	39.2
Female	62	60.8	100.0
Total	102	100.0	-

TABLE 3: Generational codes.

Generation	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Baby boomers	3	2.9	2.9
Generation X	17	16.7	19.6
Millennials	32	31.4	51.0
Generation Z	50	49.0	100.0
Total	102	100.0	-

($n = 5$) and lastly other at 4.90% ($n = 5$), referring to ethnic groups that were not mentioned in the survey.

Table 5 presents the classification of information related to the respondents' years of experience. The largest portion of the sample indicated that they had worked for 3–5 years at 59.80% ($n = 61$), followed by those who had worked for 6–8 years at 12.75% ($n = 13$), followed by those who had worked for 16–18 years at 6.86% ($n = 7$), followed by those who had worked for more than 26 years at 6.86% ($n = 7$), followed by those who had worked for 22–25 years at 4.90% ($n = 5$), followed by those who had worked for 9–15 years at 3.92% ($n = 4$), followed by those who had worked for 19–21 years at 3.92% ($n = 4$). Moreover, the remainder of the respondents (0.98%, $n = 1$) revealed that they had 9–11 years of working experience.

Table 6 presents the classification of information related to the respondents' highest level of educational qualification. The largest portion of the sample indicated that there were those who had matric or Grade 12 at 35.29% ($n = 36$), followed by those who possessed a 3-year degree at 30.39% ($n = 31$), followed by those who possessed a 4-year degree at 23.53% ($n = 24$), followed by those who had a diploma at 4.90% ($n = 5$), followed by those who had a master's degree at 4.90% ($n = 5$). The remainder of the respondents at 0.98% ($n = 1$) possessed a doctoral degree.

Table 7 presented the classification of information related to the respondents' field of work. The largest portion of the sample indicated that they worked in banking or finance (30.39%, $n = 31$); followed by others (24.51%, $n = 25$) who were revealed to be working in various fields, followed by those who worked in marketing or communications (22.55%, $n = 23$), followed by those who worked in IT (12.75%, $n = 13$). The remainder of the respondents, 9.80% ($n = 10$), worked in education.

TABLE 4: Race.

Race	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Black	60	58.8	58.8
Mixed race	27	26.5	85.3
Asian	5	4.9	90.2
White	5	4.9	95.1
Other	5	4.9	100.0
Total	102	100.0	-

TABLE 5: Years of experience.

Years of experience	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
3–5 years	61	59.8	59.8
6–8 years	13	12.7	72.5
9–11 years	1	1.0	73.5
12–15 years	4	3.9	77.5
16–18 years	7	6.9	84.3
19–21 years	4	3.9	88.2
22–25 years	5	4.9	93.1
26 + years	7	6.9	100.0
Total	102	100.0	-

TABLE 6: Highest level of education or qualification.

Highest level of education or qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Matric or Grade 12	36	35.3	35.3
Diploma	5	4.9	40.2
3-year degree	31	30.4	70.6
4-year degree	24	23.5	94.1
Master's degree	5	4.9	99.0
Doctoral degree	1	1.0	100.0
Total	102	100.0	-

TABLE 7: Field of work.

Field of work	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Finance or banking	31	30.4	30.4
Education	10	9.8	40.2
Marketing or communications	23	22.5	62.7
IT	13	12.7	75.5
Other	25	24.5	100.0
Total	102	100.0	-

The analysis proceeded to determine the level of respondents' agreement or disagreement for each construct. Table 8, Table 9, Table 10, Table 11 and Table 12 report on the basic descriptive statistics comprising the means and standard deviations (SDs) of the predetermined constructs. Mean values were computed as the measures of central tendency for this study. All the tables presented below reveal that the mean value for all the items ranges between 3 and 4, indicating that most of the respondents had either a neutral standpoint ('3' on the Likert scale) or they agreed ('4' on the Likert scale) with the statements provided. Standard deviation values were computed to measure the variance of responses on each variable. As posited by Hair et al. (2003), the relationship between the mean and the SD is that a small estimated SD denotes that respondents' responses were consistent and that the response distributions lay close to the mean. Conversely, a large SD indicates that the responses are varying, making the response distribution values fall away

TABLE 8: Descriptive statistical analysis (Section B – working alone).

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
WA1	102	1	5	3.40	1.145
WA2	102	1	5	3.73	1.136
WA3	102	1	5	3.55	1.105
WA4	102	1	5	3.49	1.088
WA5	102	1	5	2.52	1.132
WA6	102	1	5	2.87	1.158

SD, standard deviation; WA, working alone.

TABLE 9: Descriptive statistical analysis (Section B – keeping work and home life separate).

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
KWAHLS1	102	1	5	3.32	1.136
KWAHLS2	102	1	5	3.12	1.196
KWAHLS3	102	1	5	3.24	1.276
KWAHLS4	102	1	5	3.15	1.277
KWAHLS5	102	1	5	2.92	1.325
KWAHLS6	102	1	5	3.24	1.314

SD, standard deviation; KWAHL, keeping work and home life separate.

TABLE 10: Descriptive statistical analysis (Section B – self-motivation and productivity).

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
SMAP1	102	1	5	3.32	0.997
SMAP2	102	1	5	3.43	0.907
SMAP3	102	1	5	3.47	1.141
SMAP4	102	1	5	2.42	1.156
SMAP5	102	1	5	3.34	1.239
SMAP6	102	1	5	3.67	1.056

SD, standard deviation; SMAP, self-motivation and productivity.

TABLE 11: Descriptive statistical analysis (Section B – work-related travel).

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
WRT1	102	1	5	3.89	1.134
WRT2	102	1	5	3.66	1.139
WRT3	102	1	5	3.93	1.074
WRT4	102	1	5	3.51	1.217

SD, standard deviation; WRT, work-related travel.

from the mean of the distribution (Drost, 2011). Moreover, the SD value 'should be less than 1 but it is recommended to at least include a value of less than 2 to ensure that there is no issue of outliers' (Drost, 2011, p. 87).

Working alone, which constituted part 1 of Section B from the questionnaire, had the highest mean score of 3.73 (Item WA2), and the lowest mean score was 2.52 (Item WA5), giving a range of 1.21. Precisely, the lowest mean score of 2.52 (Item WA5) indicated that respondents struggled to create or keep up a social life outside of work, while results from Section B of the questionnaire highlighted the fact that the highest mean score was 3.73 (Item WA2). Most of the respondents admitted that they could work in isolation without a manager or with the supervisor's support. Table 8 reveals that the WA scale had the highest SD value reported at 1.158 (Item WA6) and the lowest SD value was 1.088 (Item WA4). This information indicates that the data points are clustered around the mean. The SD values are below 2, hence an indication that there is no presence of outliers.

TABLE 12: Descriptive statistical analysis (Section C – performance management).

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
PM1	102	1	10	7.43	1.963
PM2	102	1	10	8.36	1.682
PM3	102	1	10	8.46	1.938
PM4	102	3	10	8.85	1.550
PM5	102	1	10	7.70	2.609
PM6	102	1	10	7.41	2.467
PM7	102	1	10	7.70	2.337
PM8	102	1	10	7.46	2.319
PM9	102	1	10	7.13	2.370
PM10	102	1	10	7.59	2.318

SD, standard deviation; PM, performance management.

Descriptive statistics for the second part of Section B, KWAHLS in this study, are given in Table 9. As illustrated in the table, the highest mean score was 3.32 (Item KWAHLS1), while the lowest mean score was 2.92 (Item KWAHLS5), as considering the range value, this resulted in a total range of 0.4. Specifically, the lowest mean score (Item KWAHLS5) from the statistics table indicated that some respondents are unable to separate normal work from overtime while WFH, as asked from the questionnaire. While the highest mean score (Item KWAHLS1) reveals that most respondents could keep work and home apart during their working hours, Table 9 demonstrates that the KWAHLS scale had the highest SD value reported at 1.325 (KWAHLS5), and the lowest SD value was 1.136 (KWAHLS1). This suggests that the data points were reasonably in support of the mean with no presence of outliers.

Self-motivation and productivity from the statistics table, which constituted part 3 of Section B from the questionnaire, indicated the lowest mean score of 2.42 (Item SMAP4), while the highest mean score was 3.67 (Item SMAP6), resulting in a range of 1.25. Precisely, the lowest mean score of 2.42 (Item SMAP4) indicated that few respondents struggle to outperform their task when WFH than when working from the office, while results from part 3 of Section B in the questionnaire highlighted the fact that the highest mean score of 3.67 (Item SMAP6) is in support of the respondents positing that they are still able to pull weight in a team when WFH as when working from the physical office. In addition, Table 10 reveals that the SMAP scale had the highest SD value reported at 1.239 (Item SMAP5) and the lowest SD value was 0.907 (Item SMAP1), which implies that the data points are clustered around the mean and there is no presence of outliers again. Basically, this means that individuals find it easy to motivate themselves to enhance work productivity.

The closing part of Section B from the questionnaire is represented by WRT scale, and it contained the highest mean score of 3.93 (Item WRT3), and the lowest mean score was 3.51 (Item WRT4), giving 0.42 in total range. Consequently, the lowest mean from the table, Item WRT4 (3.51), indicated that despite respondents not having to travel to and from work, some are still struggling to have a reasonable start and finish work time, whereas the highest mean, Item WRT3 (3.93), revealed that most respondents

viewed this shift as beneficial in some cases, because they believe it has made a significant difference in household expenditure because of less travelling. Moreover, Table 11 also illustrated the different SD WRT scale in values which included the highest SD value reported, at 1.217 (Item WRT4), with the lowest SD value of 1.074 (Item WRT3). As per the results, the information indicated that the data points or the SD average distance to the mean is quite close, as they are all below 2.

Lastly, the descriptive statistics for Section C of the questionnaire PM in this study are given in Table 12. The highest mean score was 8.85, with the lowest SD value of 1.550 (Item PM4), while on the other side the lowest mean score from the statistically analysed data was 7.13 (Item PM9), with the highest SD score of 2.609 (Item PM5). Considering the range value from the analysed data, it is there to produce 1.72 in total range. In addition, the lowest mean score of 7.13 (Item PM9) from the statistics table indicated that some respondents did not believe that their organisation's current HR policies are aligned with employees WFH, while the highest mean score of 8.85 (Item PM4) revealed that some respondents know exactly what is expected from them even while WFH. In terms of the minimum SD value, it is known to be below 2, and according to the information provided from the table, this revealed that the data points were somehow a bit distant from the mean.

Reliability

Reliability refers to how consistent a research measure is; for instance, a respondent completing a survey on employee motivation should complete it similarly on each attempt (Heale & Twycross, 2015). Reliability was measured by the Cronbach's alpha, where the values are expected to reach 0.6 to confirm reliability (Pallant, 2016). The results presented in Table 13 show these reliability scores.

The statistics demonstrating the perceived influence of remote work on the HR outcomes in Table 13 can be considered to be reliable because the reliability scores of all the constructs – except for one which had a score of 0.6 – are above 0.7, and they are generally closely related as a group, which shows consistency. While a score of 0.6 is average in terms of reliability compared to a score of 0.7, which is more widely acceptable as a good score, Ursachi et al. (2015) imply that 0.6 is still sufficient to denote acceptable reliability.

Correlation analysis

In accordance with the study objectives outlined towards the beginning of the study and in the discussion section, it was imperative to examine the relationships between the constructs under investigation, namely employee productivity (which included factors such as WA, KWAHLS, SMAP and WRT) and PM. Therefore, it was necessary to employ correlation analysis among the mentioned

TABLE 13: Cronbach's alpha.

Factor	Cronbach's alpha
WA	0.743
KWAHLS	0.822
SMAP	0.834
WRT	0.617
PM	0.781

WA, working alone; KWAHLS, keeping work and home life separate; SMAP, self-motivation and productivity; WRT, work-related travel; PM, performance management.

TABLE 14: Correlations matrix between constructs.

Correlations	WA	KWAHLS	SMAP	WRT	PM
WA	1	-	-	-	-
KWAHLS	0.469**	1	-	-	-
SMAP	0.429**	0.413**	1	-	-
WRT	0.284**	0.453**	0.549**	1	-
PM	0.220*	0.414**	0.233*	0.295**	1

WA, working alone; KWAHLS, keeping work and home life separate; SMAP, self-motivation and productivity; WRT, work-related travel; PM, performance management.

**, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

constructs to determine the strength of the underlying relationship. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to measure the degree of linear association between the variables, as proposed by Malhotra (2010, p. 562). The composite correlation was undertaken and presented in Table 14.

As Table 14 shows, there are positive correlations (+1.00) between the five variables. Since the significance level of correlation is supposed to be smaller than 0.5 to be statistically significant, a significant and medium correlation was revealed with the WA and KWAHLS association ($r = 0.469$; $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

Outline of the results

The purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of remote working on employee productivity and PM. The subsequent subsections entail a discussion of the research results, as per the research objectives.

Specific objective 1: To investigate the differences between traditional working and remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic

Different literature have indicated that the transition from traditional work to remote work is hard for most employees (Gigauri, 2020b; Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2020). Employees prefer to work in traditional offices because they can interact with their colleagues and make friends. It is also easier for employees to ask for assistance in a face-to-face setting (Purwanto et al., 2020). Higher mean scores in relation to the WA construct examined in this study indicated most respondents can work in isolation without manager or supervisor support. Most respondents indicated that they still must pull their weight in a team when WFH the same way as working from the physical office. The result's highest mean scores in relation to the WRT construct examined in this study revealed that most respondents viewed a shift from traditional work to be beneficial in some cases because

it has made a significant difference in household expenditure because they are travelling less. This is similarly revealed in the study by Singer-Velush et al. (2020) who found that working remotely not only saves employees time but also saves them the cost associated with travelling to an employer's work premises.

Specific objective 2: To investigate the perceived influence of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic on employee productivity

The literature revealed that most employees do not prefer to work remotely because they become unproductive, they have separation anxiety from being far from their colleagues and cannot separate work and personal lives because of difficulty organising work (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2020). In relation to the KWAHLS construct examined in this study, respondents indicated they were able to keep their work and home lives apart during their working hours. On the other hand, the results from this study also revealed that respondents struggled to create and/or keep a social life outside of work. Some respondents could not separate normal work from overtime work while WFH. This aligned with the results found by Singh et al. (2017). Although respondents did not have to travel to and from the office, which saves money, some indicated that they struggled to have a reasonable start and finish work time, which they believed would adversely affect their productivity in the long term.

In relation to the SMAP construct examined in this study, the highest mean scores showed that respondents were still able to motivate themselves while working remotely, thus maintaining their usual productivity. This result was supported by Pechan (2021), who suggested that many employers who initially, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, worried about whether their employees would still maintain their productivity while working remotely soon realised that this was in fact not something to worry much about. The low mean scores in relation to the SMAP construct proceeded to show that some respondents struggled to outperform their tasks when WFH than when working from the office.

Specific objective 3: To investigate the perceived influence of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic on performance management

Existing literature emphasises the crucial role that PM plays in ensuring the achievement of an organisation's objectives by employees (Jalagat & Jalagat, 2019). The literature also indicates that it is hard for most HR professionals in organisations to measure employee performance remotely as compared to working traditionally (Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020). Employees also worry as to whether they are evaluated fairly, as there is no physical contact where their work and efforts can be shown, which then leads to employees not being able to manage their performance as well (Purwanto et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2017). In relation to the PM construct examined in this study, the results suggested that the respondents knew exactly what was expected of them even when WFH, implying their ability to maintain the same or similar performance when working remotely as

when working from their employer's premises. The results further revealed, however, that some respondents did not believe that their organisation's current HR policies were aligned with employees WFH, thus posing PM challenges, as corroborated by Van der Lippe and Lippényi (2020).

Practical implications

Like the study by Wang et al. (2021), the results of this study implied that organisations are yet to properly align their policies with remote working employees and to also find more effective ways to determine the productivity of remote working employees during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The indication that some respondents were not sure what was expected of them while WFH implies that the PM process is compromised, which presents challenges for its custodians, as similarly implied by Serapicos et al. (2020). Literature stated that remote work due to COVID-19 has affected the way employers and HR departments evaluate performance (Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020). While the literature largely suggests that many employees prefer traditional work over remote work (Singh et al., 2017; Singer-Velush et al., 2020; Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2020), the results from this study show that respondents preferred to work remotely because they deem it convenient and less costly, as similarly found in Nield (2016).

Limitations and recommendations

- A limitation to the study was that respondents may have had limited Internet access, which resulted in getting fewer respondents (102 instead of the target sample of 150) to complete the survey online.
- There were also time constraints associated with the predetermined completion period of the research, which was in partial fulfilment of a postgraduate qualification, which prevented further data collection; thus, the smaller sample limited the ability to make broader comparisons.
- It is recommended that HR professionals need to come up with different policies that are aligned with remote work and find ways to reconstruct or restructure their organisations' business operations to provide and allocate employees with jobs (same or new) that have additional or entirely changed roles and responsibilities, as remote work has to do with online environment.
- Future research, on the other hand, should be conducted on HR practitioners which will focus on the challenges associated with aligning remote work with company's policies and how measurements are aligned with employee performance contracts.
- A mixed-methods research approach may be beneficial in future to establish the contrasting perceptions between employers and employees.
- A larger future sample size is also recommended.

Conclusion

The focus of the research was on unravelling the impact of remote work on the productivity and performance of

employees in opposition to traditional work, the advantages and disadvantages of remote work for employees, the setbacks and benefits for organisations and the impact it has on HR functions. The research philosophical strategy covered how the research was conducted, which was via a questionnaire survey, and the various research questions that were asked, which had to be aligned with the responses provided by respondents and have some sort of connection to the aims and objectives of the research. The ethical part of the research has also been addressed, which included confidentiality and anonymity, accuracy of information, voluntarily participation and informed consent.

Another essential segment of the research was the descriptive statistics data analysis, where the level of respondents' agreement or disagreement for each construct on the basic descriptive statistics comprising the means and SDs computed was highlighted as the measures of central tendency for the mean and measures of the variance of responses on each variable for SDs. In the global economy, technology introductions have a significant impact on the change management system and the operations of a business. While remote working had only minimally been practiced before the COVID-19 pandemic, which undeniably exacerbated its embrace, there are indications that it will continue to prevail in some way or form even after the pandemic. It is also clear that no matter how much people may resist remote work, it indeed has an important place in today's rapidly technologically advancing workplace and world and thus, organisations must be well geared up to implement various remote employee processes such as remote HRM.

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Authors' contributions

This article was adapted from the honours research of S.S.R., K.A.M. and K.M., who executed and wrote-up the study, while M.D.S. was the study leader and provided supervision, conceptualisation guidelines, methodology refinement, data analysis and interpretation, editorial input and the write-up of the research article.

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Data availability

The original dataset from which the results of this article were analysed and delineated is available on the researchers' electronic database.

Disclaimer

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