

OIL FIELD WORK-FLEXIBILITY IN POST COVID-19 ERA

Engr Chukwu Emeke & Jones Oghenemega Ejechi, PhD

Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences

University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria

E-mail Addresses: pastorechukwu@gmail.com; jonesejechi@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This study provides insight on how work place conditions are rapidly changing as a result of the pandemic. To fully understand the impact of the changes resulting from the global pandemic, the post covid era working conditions were compared to the pre-covid work conditions. Seventy (70) employees working in oil companies Niger Delta of Nigeria, on how the lockdown conditions have affected their conventional work expectations were administered copies of questionnaire to. The studies shows that the generality of staff interviewed want the pre-covid era work conditions reviewed to accommodate some level of work flexibility. Most staff members feel that they can efficiently carry out 80% of their work from home, though majority of field staff showed indifference as work from home does not apply to them. The general sentiment is that a hybrid system should be adopted to meet staff preference. Finally, it was observed that employee expectation is shifting as they take into account post COVID-19 conditions. This research concludes that policy makers review what needs to be changed as they come up with adaptable remote work policies that are in alignment with corporate objectives.

Keywords: COVID-19, Employees, Employers, Pre-COVID era, Remote working.

Introduction

Many organizations in this modern era are coming up with survival strategies to remain in business as a result of rapidly changing business environment (Tovstiga, 2013). Current business climes are characterized as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA), a situation that required them to be more resilient, and innovative to mitigate all possible risk. Past studies have shown how the HR work, through modified HR procedures in aligning employees' ever-changing behaviors (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018; Shafer *et al.*, 2001; Shipton *et al.*, 2017). The changes occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates a quick response from the HR to cope with the travel embargos and isolations, that greeted general move to a work-from-home method of activities (McCulloch, 2020; Thomas *et al.*, 2020; Wei & Wong, 2020).

COVID-19 spread in Nigeria accompanied by the number of cases and fatality, which has impacted the socio-economic wellbeing the populace such that a far-reaching strategy and effort is required in fast-tracking the handling of COVID-19 (Nakaduna *et al.*, 2021). To clearly anticipate the impact of transmission, the business and workers' community play a critical role in breaking the chain of transmission. The activity at the workplace increases substantial mobility and inter-connectivity of the populace which creates a risk factor (MENKES, 2020). "We are facing the COVID-19 pandemic with 215 other countries, don't let anyone still have the feeling that we are normal, so we don't wear masks, forget to wash our hands after unnecessary crowding, this is seriously dangerous", declared the Indonesian President Joko Widodo during his working visit to East Java, June 25, 2020 (Jokowi, 2020).

Reported on the NCDC web page (<https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng>, 2022), data show the top four States in Nigeria with the highest COVID-19 virus cases, with details: Lagos 99,036 cases, FCT with 28,565 cases, Rivers with 16,603 cases, Kaduna with 11,233 cases. To manage these crises, the human resources need to build capacity to be adaptable and responsive. Different models integrate astonishing government preferences and administrative changes that influence specialist flexibility, extraordinary development of the gig economy, rising innovations, and new aptitude requests (Duncan *et al.*, 2011; Kochan *et al.*, 2019).

In a society encumbered with clashing responsibilities, an adaptable work course of action has become a transcendent issue in the working environment. Three strong points of argument support the enthusiasm for and significance of genuine notion of flexible remote work environment: worldwide rivalry, a maturing workforce, recharged enthusiasm for individual lives/ family esteems. Consistently, there have been concerns around discussions on flexible work arrangement strategy and action from the viewpoints of the nature of the work-life especially when evaluated against the more extensive family matters. However, the test would be the way employees embrace demanding work flexibility arrangements, practices and in consonants with how organizations would manage clashes that rise from the interface of family or social weights and work pressure (Mungania *et al.*, 2016).

The COVID-19 outbreak has displayed how quickly industries should react to evolving HR-related concerns (McCulloch, 2020; Sylvers & Foldy, 2020; Wei & Wong, 2020). For example, workers in Kenya's financial institutes are working longer hours, which cover over 48 hours (Ioan *et al.*, 2010). This makes it difficult for the employees to obtain a good work-life balance. (Muhammadi &

Qaisar, 2009). The result of this work-life imbalance is clearly manifested in the mental health cases as a result of stress and which evidently impact the organizations long corporate objectives and performance (Mungania *et al.*, 2016). Key to achieving corporate objectives is human capital, therefore, it is imperative for managing directors to develop and align employees along these evolving trends to remain relevant and resilient. (Derin & Gökçe, 2016). The human resources specialist must then be innovative to enable them effectively to respond to the challenges posed by the post COVID-19 dilemma. In light of the above discourse, this study examines oil field work-flexibility in post COVID-19 era.

Literature Review

Historically, the world has witnessed phenomenon's that has redefined its socio-political outlook. Some were man made others were nature by making. Amongst this historic change drivers are revolutions in different shapes, wars and pandemics. Devastating plagues over the years have defied human science and ravaged the world, one of such is the great influenza recorded from 1918-1920 with millions of deaths along its path. Of recent time, the world again witnessed the COVID-19 pandemic born from the family of coronavirus, a unique new mutation. This was first recorded in the city of Wuhan, China, December 1st 2019 (Ceylan *et al.*, 2020).

Initially, other nations doubted its capacity to spread outside China, this very contagious disease quickly developed momentum and crossed over the Asian borders into Europe and America at a fatality rate of 7% (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (2020)).

The ILO stated that there was a labour cut of 81% due to the global lockdown, why IMF recorded a negative growth rate of -6.3% by mid-April of 2020. Beyond the economic devastation occasioned by the global crude oil price crash, many companies are still on the path of recovery, innovating and developing resilience to weather future storm.

Remote work Concept (Telework)

In the 1970s, the term teleworking or remote work was used to describe working from a distant location outside of one's physical workplace, using information technology. This in return reduces physical traveling and other associated cost (Nilles *et al.*, 1976). Teleworking in the 80's was noted as the "next working environment revolution" (Kelly, 1985), and the excitement for

teleworking has kept on growing among employees, managers, organizations, networks, the media communications industry and others (Handy and Mokhtarian, 1996). Study from Nield (2016) shows that those who have the opportunity to work remotely, were found to be happier than those doing conventional work system. The global lockdown unfortunately has given rise to this trend making it more attractive to business owners wanting to remain in business. A study conducted in the United State of America shows that over 91% of teleworkers feel more fulfilled and confidence with their assigned roles (Peeters, 2014). Remote workers continue to show increased performance, as are result of full devotion of time and resource to their assigned task; this is because they have less exposure to tea breaks and sick leave excuses (Schermerhorn, 2008).

Bloom *et al.* (2014) inferred that there is a growing awareness of work from home (WFH) among the workforce, as over 50% of job seekers in the developed nations now prefer this option as against the conventional work system.

Teleworking by Moon and Stanworth (1997), is defined as as a flexible form of work especially from a distant location, that is heavily reliant on information and communication technologies. Andriessen (1991) categorizes it into three namely;

1. *Working from remote offices:* Here the concept of satellite workplace is used to describe remote workplace. It is a workplace that is far from a primary office such as telecommunication sub stations or at telecottages (where training is provided for customers, and provisions are made to attract recruitment for independently employed telecommuters).
2. *Home-based telework:* This refers to the execution of jobs from the home; this involves both highly skilled and low skill work requirements usually delivered virtually. This captures the use of telecommunication devises such as computers, telephones and other digital devices.
3. *Mobile telework:* This refers to work done outside of a traditional office place or home, this group executive task while traveling or investing time with a client. Therefore, teleworking is characterized by a mixture of practices which utilizes more than one type of system and is best seen of as a multidimensional phenomenon in which its character varies along utilization, knowledge intensity, intra-organizational contact, extra-organizational contact and location (Olsen, 1989; Gray *et al.*, 1993; Gillespie *et al.*, 1995).

As earlier inferred, teleworking is the utilization of telecommunication devices to deliver job task from a variety of locations (Perez-Perez *et al.*, 2003). It has been considered an optional method of organizing tasks. By offering the prospect of working anyplace, teleworking is appealing to both academics and professionals. It has been observed as a win-win situation for employees and organizations, making it plausible to choose from various abilities to minimize costs, and to stimulate workers in creating a work-life balance (Madsen, 2003). Previous researches have disclosed various multifaceted advantages of teleworking for organizations (Perez-Perez *et al.*, 2003) this includes;

1. *Development of skillsets on planning:* Various literature have showed that time-planning skills and independence are significant advantage teleworking (Morgan, 2004). Such level of independence leads to employee satisfaction (Harpaz, 2002), which has a direct correlation with high job productivity (Morgan, 2004).
2. *Cost minimization:* Radcliffe (2010) noted that companies can cut down their unit costs by teleworking, this can be in form of savings from feeding, transportation and estacode, reduction in risk exposure etc. Some other examples of such savings include infrastructure, Internet bills, water, electricity, phone, cleaning and security staff costs. De Graaf and Rietveld (2007) also stated that companies utilizing technologies to work remotely employ less staff reducing the huge wage bills from employing many staffs.
3. *Reduces employee's turnover:* Having a work-life balance as a result of remote working increases employee job satisfaction and in return leads to increased productivity. Employees are less likely to apply for sick leaves as a result of worksite stress.

Significance of telework for staff

On the part of employees, the following advantages noticeable from remote working include:

1. *More family time:* Work from home enables employees to spend more time with their families. Issues arising from the family front will not likely get to the office (Johnson *et al.*, 2007) creating a work-life balance system. This alone could be a motivator trigger which will help employees remain positive and productive.
2. *Work flexibility:* This helps employees to choose the best pathway to deliver their job task without stifling company-wide work process. The emphasis here is on effective delivery of assigned task (Tremblay & Genin,

2007). The time lag spent on commuting and in office offside activities will be invested in timely completion of assigned task.

3. *Ability to work from home during minor illness:* While this is not an ideal situation, remote work enables staff to carry out light work while recovering from any ill health. (Johns, 2010). The home environment creates a relaxing atmosphere and an environment devoid of stress and tension usually associated with the office environment. As such, employees are more likely to have better job satisfaction from working remotely.
4. *Personal expense savings:* Employees enjoy cost saving in transportation to a physical office (Tremblay & Genin, 2007). This helps employees to re-channel their transportation savings to other critical needs within the home.

Methodology

The research design adopted in this study is the survey research design. This entails the administration of self-designed questionnaire for collecting data. The survey research design, primary data of this study was collected from staff of some selected Marginal Field Oil Companies in Delta state.

The structured type of questionnaire was used. The questionnaire was divided into two parts (A&B); Part A covers the personal data of the respondents while Section B contains research statement postulated in line with the research question and hypothesis. Options were provided for each respondent to pick or tick one of the options. Sample is the set of people or items which constitute part of a given population sampling. The Taro Yamani formula was used in this study to arrive at the sample population of the study.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e^2)}$$

Where: n = sample size; N= population = 85; e = level of significance = 0.05

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)} = \frac{85}{1 + 85(0.05^2)} = 70$$

The sample size is 70 and the researcher issue the same number of the questionnaire to the staff of the company to answer. The Bowley's proportional method was used determine the minimum number of responses from each of the section of work in the population.

The questionnaires were self-administered and delivered in paper/pen format. This method was chosen because it is less expensive and easier to administer. In this study, Microsoft Excel was used to carry out the analysis of the collected data.

Results and Discussions

The data were collected between February 2022 and April 2022. The study sample comprises 70 participants from across oil field workers in the Niger Delta. Table 1 presents the participants' age distribution and percentage responses.

Table1: Respondents by their age distribution

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
20 – 29	8	11
30 – 39	19	27
40 – 49	33	47
50 – above	10	14
Total	70	100

Source: field study (2022)

Table 2 shows the various departments / units of the respondent that provided answer to the question in the questionnaire. Account unit representing 3 (4%) of the respondent, IT unit representing 2 (3%) of the respondent, Field Operations unit representing 29 (41%) of the respondent, Admin/HR unit representing 6 (9%) of the respondent, Asset/Technical unit representing 6 (9%) of the respondent, Internal Control unit representing 3 (4%) of the respondent, HSE unit representing 12 (17%) of the respondent, Security unit representing 8 (11%) of the respondent and the Commercial unit representing 2(3%) of the respondent.

Table 2: Department / unit of the Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Account unit	3	4
IT unit	2	3
Field Operations unit	29	41
Admin/HR unit	6	9
Asset/Technical Unit	6	9

Internal Control Unit	3	4
HSE Unit	12	17
Security Unit	8	11
Commercial Unit	2	3
Total	70	100%

Source: field study 2022

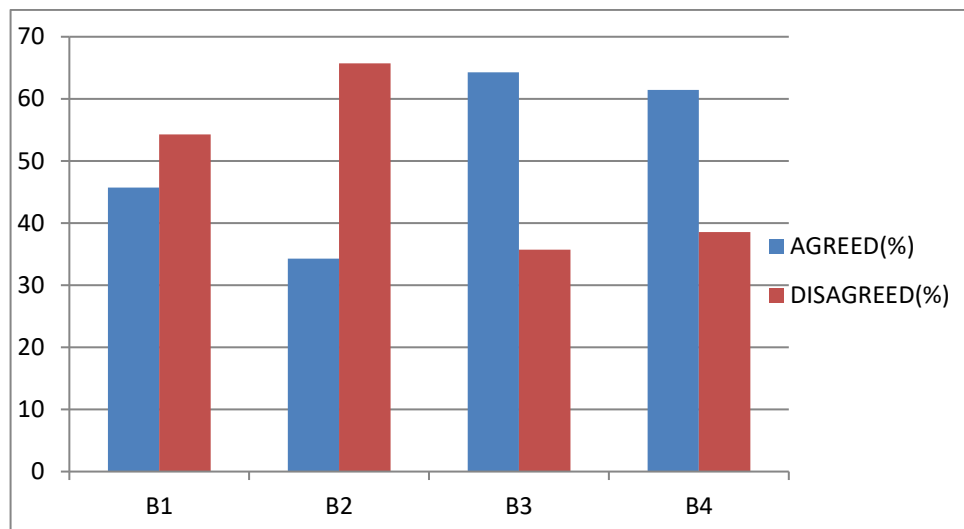
The researchers carried out interpretation of the coding process immediately after sorting out the descriptive codes. Manual coding and a thematic process were applied by deriving first-order codes and creating conceptual categories by consolidating the codes. In order to do so, we thoroughly reviewed the data by screening for commonalities, relationships and differences between them.

Q1. When asked about their preference on pre-COVID-19 working conventional time:

Findings: From the responses, majority of people felt that the traditional eight to nine hours working day is too long as well as the weeklong working days are too much. Respondents inferred that since physical meetings can be conducted by emails, traditional working hours should be minimized. Finally, one can safely postulate that pre-covid-19 conditions should be reviewed as seen in Table 4.3.

Table 3: Employee preference on pre-COVID-19 work conventions

QUESTIONS	CODE
The nine hours working day is too long, and My daily task can be achieved in less time.	B1
Reduce the 5 days a week work routine	B2
Minimize daily office working hours	B3
Possibilities of changing physical meetings to emails	B4



Graph 1.0: Response to question one

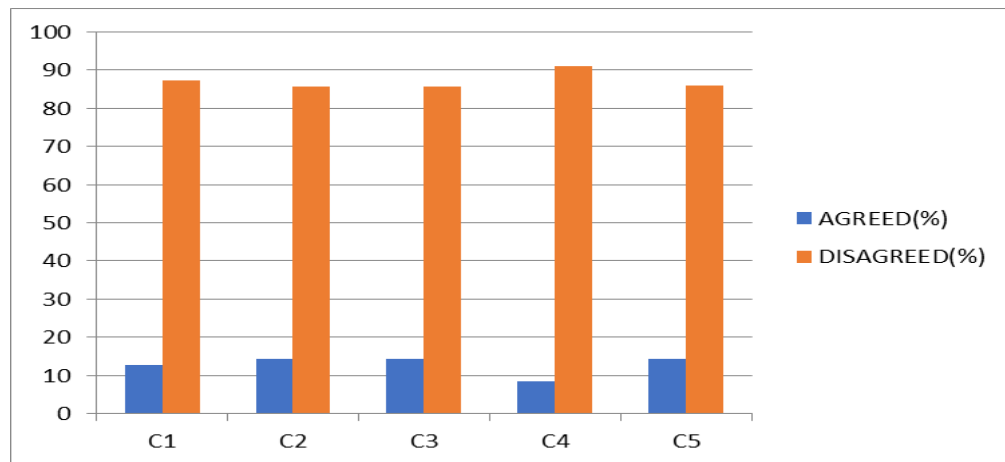
Q2. Respondents were asked to compare the efficiency of working from the office preCOVID-19 to working from home:

Findings: Most respondents agreed that they are more productive working from home than in a physical office away from their homes, though more of these categories are majorly office-based workers as against field workers. The typical reason for this may be unconnected to the comfort and serenity of the home when compared to some toxic work environment. Table 4 shows an almost an even split with respect to getting their work done in less time at home, as 52% responded in agreement while 48% disagreed. The close tie shows the dividing line along those whose job description lies in the office compared to field workers. Most office staff see working from home as more effective as they have the liberty to align task delivery within their flexible schedule. Many respondents inferred that they could deal with the distractions associated with working from home, especially non field workers. If organizations provide the needed interconnecting infrastructure required to seamlessly execute supply chain demands as well as other logistics requirement, efficiency on working from home can be achieved.

Table 4: CWC – individual efficiency of telework vs working on-site

QUESTIONS	CODE
Working from home is more productive compared to working from the office.	C1
My concentration is higher working from home compared to working from the office	C2

Job tasks are delivered in less time working from home compared to working from the office	C3
Working from home makes me more resourceful compared to working from the office	C4
I can easily find a comfortable place to work at home	C5



Graph 2.0: Response to question 2

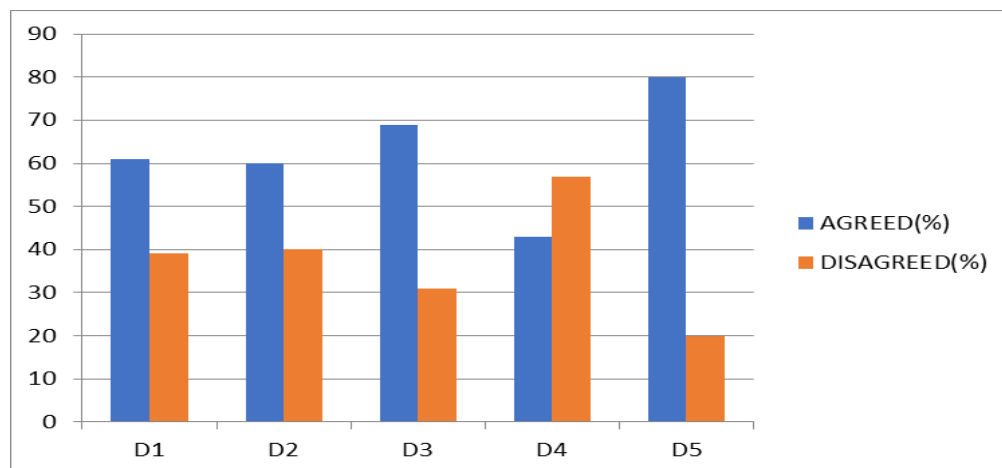
Q3. When asked about their sentiments on remote working conditions:

Findings: Table 5 shows that most respondents are more comfortable setting their work schedule as long as they deliver their job task within the required time boundary. There is a shift globally from the conventional fixed work schedules to more flexible working hours with more emphases on effective productivity. The preference in this age is tending more towards employees' desire to spend more time with family and relaxation. The covid-19 lock down has created this renewed demand. One benefit as seen in the responds is the amount of time spent commuting to work especially in heavily dense cities like Warri with poor road networks, the associated stress can lead to mental health issues. Also, many are comfortable showing their faces on live meetings and webinar.

Table 5: General employee sentiments on remote working conditions

QUESTION	CODE
I love the option of deciding my working hours	D1

Flexible working hours helps me to be more productive	D2
I am willing to show my face during live webinars	D3
Commuting to/from work makes me less productive	D4
Having quality family time is my priority	D5



Graph 3: Response to question 3

Q4. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the different elements of work expectations:

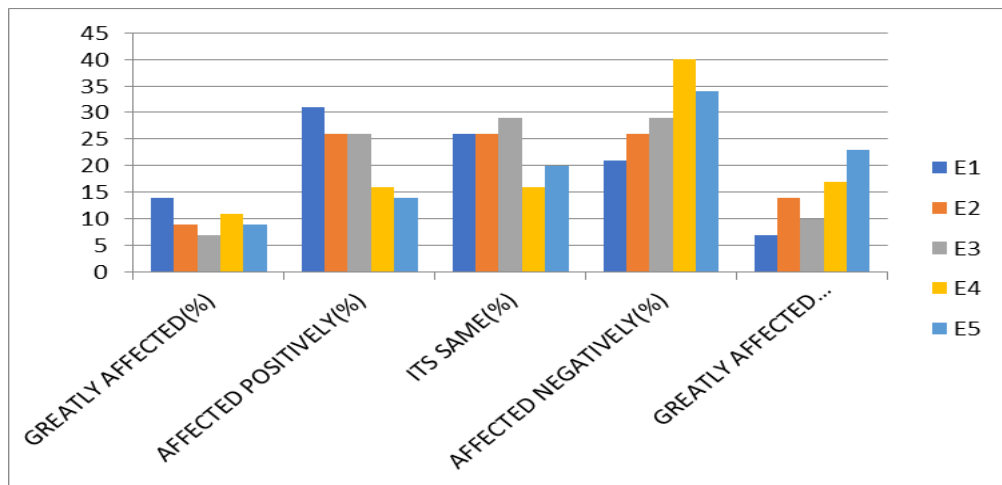
Findings: Majority of the respondents felt their ability to conducted meetings were not impacted by the covid-19 lockdown as remote technology increased the optionality of conducting meetings online, decision making as seen in the response remained same as more and more companies adopted remote technology. Even though team bonding was impacted, there were considerable information sharing mechanism put in place to enable seamless sharing of information amongst teams. While the covid-19 restrictions did not affect field staff, it however impacted office based staff as noted in the survey where 27% agreed that team cohesion and efficiency was negatively affected by the remote working condition.

Table 6: Consequences of tele-working on work elements

QUESTIONS	CODE
Effectively conduct meetings	E1
Meeting deadlines	E2
Taking decisions	E3

Sharing work
content/information with
colleagues
Efficiency & Team cohesion

E4
E5
E6



Graph 4: Response to question 4

Q5. Workload that can be accomplished if remote work condition is adopted

Findings: Many respondents strongly feel they can execute their given task remotely as seen in Table 7. This indicated from the survey, work from home can be designed to be efficient and purposeful such that given task or workloads are easily executed. As such organizations are encouraged to redesign their policies to enable adapt to changing work condition.

Table 7: Percentage of workload efficiently done remotely (only remote work option)

Workload (<50%)	15%
Workload (50-60%)	16%
Workload (60-70%)	25%
Workload (70-80%)	16%
Workload (80-90%)	15%
Workload (> 90%)	15%

Discussions

Arising from the covid-19 pandemic, there was a global lock down, forcing many companies to shut down operations. Those with remote operational capability were able to weather the storm, many others who were constrained to adopted remote working technology late. The oil and gas companies listed amongst essential organizations were allowed to operate within the confines of the rules of the disease control regulatory agency adopted a hybrid working system. Results from the studies showed preference along two lines, employees who work in the office and oil field workers. While the office staff workers generally prefer a reduction in the daily working hours and a flexible work schedule that allows them to plan their work and at the same time effectively delivering assigned task, the field workers are indifference to work time reduction. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus about having a hybrid working conditions that allow each department adopt a work practice that enable staff enjoy more quality time with their families while effectively completing assigned task. This can be done by deploying technology and upskilling staff technological capacity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it was found that most employees' preference is towards a review of the pre-covid work era. Haven tasted the new working conditions post-covid, majority of office workers now appreciate the time spent with their families while delivering on the job task. Furthermore, many of those surveyed agreed that the elements of the pre-covid-19 work conditions did not change. An optionality of a hybrid model which accommodated both remote work and office presence is considerably desired by the majority as reported. Most were able to efficiently execute at least 70% of their work expectation working remotely. Lastly, it is obvious that the post covid-19 condition has greatly impacted on employees work schedule preference with respect to work-life balance. This changing preference is a red flag for policy makers to design work from home policies to meets employee preference. A well-executed hybrid work system will save cost, increase company bottom-line and ensure high returns on staff productivity.

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