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Job satisfaction and work-life balance: A comparative study between virtual and traditional work environments during COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The world had to rapidly adapt to a new working schedule due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with many organizations moving away from equivalent office environments towards virtual spaces. This study examines the effects of this transition on employee job satisfaction and work-life balance. Using a mixed-method approach through a survey and interview of 300 employees across industries, the study reveals that although the virtual environment provides more flexibility, it also creates pressure in terms of social isolation and work-life balance. Conversely, traditional settings offer more structured interactions but lack the flexibility that many employees now want. Such differences must be taken into account when shaping workplace policies, which can ensure job satisfaction and work-life balance in both situations.

Keywords: Job satisfaction, work-life balance, virtual working environment, traditional working environment, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

Thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift from in-person to virtual work environments was ushered throughout 2023 and beyond. Before the pandemic, remote work was on the rise, but it became essential during the crisis. Gartner (2020) ^[1] found that 88% of organizations worldwide required or encouraged employees to work from home following the pandemic. This abrupt transition has highlighted the importance of job satisfaction and work-life balance within various work environments.

Background

The traditional work environment of physical workplaces, regular working hours, and face-to-face interactions have been the standard for years. But as technology continues to advance, ideas about work shifts and virtual work environments have become more favoured. All in all, virtual environments provide more flexibility and autonomy, and employees can work from anywhere. This shift begs the question of how these different environments affect job satisfaction and work-life balance.

Need for the study: To investigate differences in job satisfaction and work-life imbalance as a function of virtual versus traditional work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to shed light on organizational evolution in terms of workforce situational work by examining employee experiences in both environments.

Research Questions

Virtual work environment, job satisfaction relations compare to traditional settings.

- How does work-life balance factor into each environment?
- How can organizations increase the happiness and harmony of employees in such environments?

Problem Statement

While virtual work environments provide more flexibility, they also present challenges such as social isolation and work-life balance.

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Conventional environments offer more regulated socializing abilities but have less freedom employees want. Such insights are important for organizations that want to improve job satisfaction and work-life balance.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Job satisfaction and work-life balance are complex constructs influenced by multiple factors. As motivating factors, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs help address the bases for these constructs.

According to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, there are two types of factors that motivate job satisfaction: hygiene factors and motivators. Hygiene factors, such as the company's policies and the work itself, keep people from being unhappy but do not maintain long-term satisfaction. Herzberg (1966) ^[3] describes motivators as aspects that lead to satisfaction and motivation, such as recognition and personal growth.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs focuses on the accomplishment of individual needs in order to find satisfaction. According to Maslow, organizations should focus on meeting employees' lower-order needs, including basic physiological and safety needs, before addressing higher-order needs, which include belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943) ^[4]. The theory emphasizes the need to design workspaces that support employees' varying needs.

Traditional Environment(s) Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction in traditional work environments has received a lot of research attention. Face-to-face interactions, clear communications, and structured routines should also be used as they positively affect satisfaction. 40% are more satisfied with their jobs than employees in a traditional setting (Smith & Stake, 2018) ^[6] and have lower turnover rates.

How the Virtual Environment has affected Job Satisfaction Since the pandemic forced many people to work from home, job satisfaction has received extra attention when it comes to working remotely. Smith & Jones (2022) ^[5] discovered that the virtual environment allows flexibility and employee autonomy, which imparts satisfaction. Though this does help balance work and life, it also brings additional challenges like isolation, limited socializing, and blurred lines between personal and work life.

Gaps in Literature

Existing research covers job satisfaction in most traditional ecosystems; studies on virtual environments or communities are still emerging. It is here where the COVID-19 pandemic offers a rare opportunity to assess these environments as an influence on workers' happiness and balance during a time of global uncertainty. The current study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the comparison of individuals' satisfaction with their jobs and the balance between work and life through both virtual and traditional environments during the pandemic, highlighting the unique aspects and challenges of each.

Methodology

The present study uses a mixed-methods research design to collect both quantitative data (surveys) and qualitative data (interviews) to provide a more complete picture. Thus, this method of inquiry can yield a more comprehensive

perspective of the differences and similarities among workplace environments throughout the pandemic.

Research Design

Quantitative Component

The quantitative aspect consists of an online survey administered to 300 employees in diverse sectors. Our survey measures job satisfaction levels, perceptions of work-life balance, and drivers of those ends, as well as traditional settings. The respondents include people who worked fully in virtual spaces, traditional places or a mix of both during the pandemic.

Qualitative Component

Qualitative insights into participant experiences are available through in-depth interviews with 30 respondents (15 from each environment). We used a stratified sampling approach to select participants from a range of industries, roles, and demographic features.

Sample Selection

The sample consists of 150 employees from virtual environments and 150 employees from traditional environments. The data were collected using a set of samples from different industries such as technology, health, education, and finance. Participants include both very junior staff and senior management providing a holistic overview of experiences across a range of organisational levels.

Data Collection

Survey

The survey includes multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions. These include things such as job satisfaction, work-life balance, communication, social interactions, flexible work and autonomy. The survey was done online and was designed to be anonymous so participants would be honest in their answers.

Interviews

He conducts semi-structured interviews using video conferencing platforms. Each of the interviews, lasting around 30 minutes, delved into the individual experiences, challenges, and perceptions of job satisfaction and work-life balance within their environments.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

SPSS software was used to statistically analyze survey data. A summary of responses was obtained using descriptive statistics, whereas inferential statistics, such as t-tests and chi-square tests, were conducted to discern significant differences between the virtual and traditional environments.

Qualitative Analysis

Interview responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify general themes and patterns. We coded transcripts and categorized themes to reflect nuances in participants' experiences.

Results

Top employers in the pre-COVID context have one million seats where they can directly observe job satisfaction, different work-life balance options, and other aspects of a healthy virtual work environment.

Quantitative Results

Job Satisfaction

Survey results show that employees in virtual environments showed a higher level of flexibility (82%) in comparison to traditional settings (58%). However, they also faced more challenges of social isolation (68% vs 42%) and blurred work-life boundaries (75% vs 49%).

Work-Life Balance

On work-life balance, virtual workers more commonly reported having a hard time separating work and personal life (72% vs. 48%). On the other hand, traditional employees had more structured routines, leading to improved work-life balance (67% vs. 55%).

Statistical Analysis

A t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in job satisfaction between virtual and traditional environments ($p < 0.05$). Virtual employees scored higher on flexibility and autonomy but lower on social interaction and work-life balance.

Factor	Virtual Environment	Traditional Environment
Flexibility	82%	58%
Social Interaction	55%	78%
Work-Life Balance	55%	67%
Autonomy	80%	62%
Isolation Challenges	68%	42%

Qualitative Results

Themes Identified

Thematic analysis of interview responses revealed several key themes:

1. Flexibility and Autonomy: Virtual employees appreciate the ability to set their own schedules and work from any location. However, this autonomy sometimes leads to

Theme	Virtual Environment	Traditional Environment
Flexibility and Autonomy	High flexibility and autonomy; challenges with boundaries	Less flexibility but clear boundaries between work and home
Social Interaction	Isolation challenges; lack of face-to-face interactions	Positive social interactions and camaraderie
Productivity and Performance	Increased productivity; communication challenges	Steady productivity; better communication
Work-Life Balance	Blurred boundaries; potential for burnout	Clear separation; better balance

Discussion

The results indicate important differences between virtual and traditional working environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. These clefs have weighty repercussions for job contentment and work-life balance.

Interpretation of Results

Virtual Work Environments

In short, such virtual work settings are not without their design benefits — benefits that, in part, add to positive job satisfaction through increased flexibility and autonomy. But social isolation and blurring work-life balances make it harder to find balance and peace of mind. These challenges only worsened during the pandemic as workers adjusted to remote work amid personal obligations, raising the risk of burnout.

Traditional Work Environments

Conventional environments also offer a structured routine

overworking and difficulty in establishing work-life boundaries.

- “Working from home has given me the freedom to manage my time, but it’s hard to switch off. Work seems to blend into my personal life more than ever.” - Virtual Employee.

2. Social Interaction and Isolation: Traditional employees value face-to-face interactions and the camaraderie of office settings, which contribute positively to job satisfaction. Virtual employees, however, reported feelings of isolation and disconnectedness from their teams.

- “I miss the casual conversations and collaboration with my colleagues. Virtual meetings just don’t offer the same level of connection.” - Traditional Employee.

3. Productivity and Performance: Virtual employees reported higher productivity due to fewer office distractions and the flexibility to work during peak performance hours. However, they also noted challenges in communication and collaboration.

- “I’m more productive at home, but coordinating with my team can be challenging. Communication sometimes gets lost in emails and messages.” - Virtual Employee.

4. Work-Life Balance: Traditional employees experienced better work-life balance due to structured work hours and physical separation from home life. Virtual employees face difficulties maintaining boundaries, leading to potential burnout.

- "Leaving the office at the end of the day allows me to disconnect. At home, it is harder to draw the line between work and personal time." - Traditional Employee.

and a social structure where like-minded people bond better. These play a role in their increased job satisfaction and work-life balance. But a lack of flexibility can restrict employees from adjusting as their personal and professional demands evolve.

Implications for Employers

To overcome these challenges and enhance employee satisfaction and work-life balance, organizations may focus on the following solutions:

For Virtual Environments

Schedule frequent virtual team bonding sessions to promote connection and mitigate isolation.

- Model good practices for employees by setting clear personal boundaries and working hours.
- Reinforce access to resources and support for remote work, including ergonomic equipment and mental health services.

For Traditional Environments

- Make working arrangements more flexible (hybrid or otherwise) for employees with different preferences.
- Encourage employee well-being, promote a work-life balance, and practice room for growth by creating a positive organizational culture.
- Offer avenues for professional development and career advancement to improve job satisfaction.

However, with the introduction of these approaches, organizations can build up supportive work environments across the setting, increasing job satisfaction and work/life balance.

Conclusion

Specifically, we look at job satisfaction and work-life balance in virtual work during COVID-19 as the researchers find differences in these features when comparing virtual to traditional work environments. While virtual environments provide flexibility and independence, they bring their own challenges related to isolation and boundary-setting that must be thoughtfully managed. The structured routines on the social front in the classroom can provide the environment to interact with multiple different people in one class, something that is only achieved at school.

Summary of Findings

- Virtual employees have more freedom but struggle with social interaction and work-life balance.
- Conventional workers have the benefit of better socialization and work-life compartmentalization but no flexibility.
- Both settings bring pros and cons that influence career contentment and equilibrium.

Suggestions for Further Investigations

There is room for future research to understand how the long-term consequences of remote work influence employee well-being and productivity or the potential influence of hybrid patterns that incorporate some virtual and some traditional elements. Moreover, researcher can investigate the impact of technology on communication and collaboration during virtual engagements.

Final Thoughts

Selecting a stimulating subject of research is key to making an impactful scientific contribution, in addition to providing interesting insights into current affairs. Understanding the differences between virtual and traditional settings enables employers to formulate strategies that work better for their workforce, leading to a happier and balanced work culture.

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