TELECOMMUTING DURING COVID-19 IN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT
The emergence of the coronavirus pandemic has enforced the Telecommuting (Work from Home (WFH) concept in many sectors of the economy. Telecommuting or Work from Home concept is new to many employees as they have to work from home for the first time. This paper focuses on employees' productivity and willingness to continue working from home. An online survey instrument was used to elicit information from respondents on their efficiency while working from home and willingness to work from home. Many of the respondents were willing to continue working from home, as it gives them the opportunity to care for their families while increasing their efficiency on the job. Therefore, the need to create opportunities and support for employees working from home may lead to higher job satisfaction and efficiency.

Keywords: Telecommuting (work from home), COVID-19, Productivity, Willingness to work from home, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

As the global economy shuts down due to the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, millions of employees and employers are faced with working remotely. Working remotely (which is also referred to as telecommuting or telework) simply means working from home with the use of information technology (IT). Telecommuting is not a new concept par say, it has always been there, but it gained more popularity during the coronavirus pandemic. It has been widely adopted as a response to curtail the spread of the virus while working from home and staying safe. Telecommuting has been made a lot easier due to developments in information and communication techniques, thus making it easier to complete tasks outside the work place because of user friendly computers, laptops, Android phones and good internet connectivity (Shareena and Shahid, 2020).

The global lockdown and the need to stay safe had necessitated organizations and governments to embrace the idea of working remotely. The pandemic has affected every sector of the global economy. Thus, the rapid diffusion of teleworking has suddenly increased due to the need to stay at home and reduce social and physical contact of persons to the barest minimum in the wake of the outbreak of the pandemic.

The lockdown has impacted nations and individuals in different dimensions, categorized under mental, social and financial, Pan, Cui, and Qian, (2020). Petersen, et al (2020) highlighted that the effective "shut down" and reduction in economic activities through closing offices and manufacturing plants, restricting all forms of traffic, closing educational institutions, restricting movements in public places and so on are part of the comprehensive strategy to "flatten the curve" in most countries. They revealed that with no proven effective treatment and vaccine, the tools employable are limited to social distancing and restrictions. A crisis of such magnitude is not without its shifts. Joseph et al (2020) outlined a few COVID-19 incurred shifts. First the adoption of telecommuting and virtual meetings over energy-intensive forms of transportation. This was as a result of the need to reinforce isolation and separation and a work from home job task performance. Second, the issue of productivity while telecommuting, might be seen to increase due to the modifications of working times to fewer or more work hours. Furthermore, the home work experience is quite different for many individuals, while some individuals appreciate the flexibility, the increased daily work-hours is discomforting to others McKeever, (2020).

Fosslien and West Duffy (2020) observed that telecommuting, has affected even more people in unexpected ways. Problems such as sharing the home office with a partner, working around kids, complete loss of physical interactions, increased video conferencing and inability to stick to a daily routine are experienced by more individuals in the digital work

'paradigm'. On the part employers especially supervisors, it may be difficult to manage employees' who are not present in the office and to track productivity. Correcting the notion of telecommuting being "more stressful and tiring", Alexander (2020) noted that the 'crisis mode' the lockdown turned on in most organizations made telecommuting seem rather stressful than usual. The situation gave workers little or no room to familiarize themselves with the digital work experience. Despite these shortcomings, telecommuting allows employees to connect in new ways, work more flexibly, and establish new patterns of work autonomy and leadership Richter, Leyer, and Steinhüser, (2020). Telecommuting proficiency has risen over the course of the pandemic, employees have become more proficient at using digital work tools, employers find it appeasing that work continues despite employees not being physically present in the office and lastly, organizations have employed diverse digital means to reach out to the needs of the consumers while consumers have learned digital ways to have their needs met, (Alexander, 2020). Unlike physical meetings, online meetings are held if and when needed, like physical meetings it also requires a lot of planning and strategy and meeting time is strictly adhered to. Apart from the above views, productivity of employees working from home is also very important because their productivity will help to sustain the organization in business. Hence employees are a major component in achieving productivity (Helms, 1996) and a conducive environment is a must. Besides telecommuting has also been found to be an important element in achieving productivity (Glenn Dutcher 2012; Neufeld and Fang, 2005).

Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic many firms and corporate organizations in Nigeria had hitherto found teleworking an unacceptable work style. Now many firms and corporate organizations in Nigeria have embraced the work from home style so as to remain in business. Considering the possibility of a prolonged or recurring coronavirus outbreak, it is important to think of improving employee productivity at home so as to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on the economy. Therefore, the major objective of this study to investigate employees' willingness to work from home and productivity.

2. CONCEPTUAL ISSUES ON TELECOMMUTING AND PRODUCTIVITY

Telecommuting also referred to as telework, remote work, distributed work, virtual work, flexible work, flexplace and distance work is the use of telecommunication technology to get work done in any location away from the usual office space (Allen et al, 2015). It is a work arrangement in which employees do not commute or travel to a central place of work such as office building, warehouse or store. For employees to be effective at telecommuting, they must have access to regular supply of electricity, internet connectivity, laptops, android phones, iPad and tabs. Studies have shown that employees' productivity increases while working from home or remote areas (see. Dutcher 2012; Soenanto et al, 2016). Hence companies benefit from increased productivity and save costs associated with office space (Soenanto et al, 2016). Telecommuting is also associated with societal benefits such as reduced traffic congestions, minimal transport costs, reduced environmental pollution and availability of a wide range of options offered by electronic communication technology and the internet (see Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Soenanto et al, 2016).

Productivity has been thought of in many ways. The International Labour Organization (ILO) conceptualizes productivity as a measure of the economy as a whole. That is, productivity can be thought of in terms of individual industries and plants. Business men think that the whole matter of productivity had to do with the degree of application of the workers to their jobs. The concept of productivity is also used to measure the level of efficiency achieved in production. The Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) conceptualized productivity as the measurement of economic soundness of nations. The European Productivity Agency (EPA) conceptualized productivity as an attitude of the mind. It is the certainty of being able to do better today than yesterday and continuously. It is the constant adaptation of economic and social life to changing conditions. It is the continual effort to apply new techniques and methods and faith in human progress. One thing common to all these concepts of productivity is the desire to portray one's ability to produce or the

rate at which production is carried on (Solomon Fabricant, 1973). Thus, productivity is said to be the ratio of output to input, it is the measure of efficiency of a person in converting inputs to useful outputs.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The terms 'telecommuting' and 'teleworking' was first developed by Jack Nilles in 1973 as cited in JALA International, 2007. These terms were used to define the practice of working in a location that is outside of the traditional office space (JALA International, 2007). Since then and as technology advanced with remarkable speed, telecommuting has become increasingly prevalent in the work place. In 2011 it was reported that about 45 percent of US employees were telecommuting and mostly occurred from employee homes (Lister and Harnish, 2011). There have been some studies on the impact of telecommuting on productivity for specific occupations, Tamunomiebi et al, (2018), investigated the relationship between telecommuting and organizational performance of mobile telecommunication companies in Port Harcourt Nigeria. They concluded that telecommuting influences the organizational performance of telecommunications companies as it increases profitability, timeliness and efficient service delivery of the company. Ansong and Boateng (2017), revealed that adopting telecommuting in the operations of a telecommunication company in Ghana led to increased productivity and increased revenue for the organization. On the part of the employees, it has reduced absenteeism, reduced traffic congestion and air pollution while conserving car fuel. Telecommuting also provided less pressure on employees, as they had flexible work hours, better social life and improved ability to think clearly and analyse issues logically. Glenn-Dutcher (2016), studied the productivity of telecommuting among students. Two sets of experiments were carried out, a set was controlled in the laboratory (office) and the other was in the field. They found that the out of laboratory environment increased productivity while the laboratory environment (office) reduced productivity.

At the wake of the pandemic, one of the ways governments sought to curb the spread of the coronavirus was to close down the economy, this meant people had to stay indoors for a period of time. Many organizations had to explore the avenue of teleworking to continue economic activities. Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garces (2020), analysed the implementation of teleworking as a security practice to face the COVID-19 spread. They revealed that many companies in Spain embraced teleworking to ensure their employees safety and provide continuity in economic activity during the outbreak of the pandemic. However, on the effect of teleworking on these firms, Morikawa (2020) also affirmed that Japanese firms adopted teleworking during the COVID-19 lockdown, he studied the effect of teleworking on these firms. He revealed that there are limits to productivity when working from home, because for firms some tasks requires working in an office area and having face to face contact with other colleagues. Notwithstanding the foregoing, he concluded that working from home is best for now because of the risk of being infected with covid-19. Hence, expanding teleworking will help to reduce costs to the economy and society.

Although working from home is quite flexible for employees, Singh et al (2017) is of the view that it poses both positive and negative issues for employee professionalism. Furthermore, Harbert and Tucker-Tatlow (2013), in a survey of literature reported that though telecommuting has its own challenges, many researches has pointed to the positive cost benefit of telecommuting such as, saving cost on maintenance, utility bills, rents and others. Other quantified benefits to employer included increased productivity, decreased turnover and reduced absenteeism. Working remotely has gained a wide acceptance during this pandemic and it could prove to be an economic and more flexible work option, but it poses a major challenge related to employees' productivity and willingness to continue working from home.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was based on the responses of fifty (50) employees working from home, belonging to different sectors of the economy during the COVID-19 lockdown. The

respondents used for this survey were from various locations such as Lagos, Ibadan and Abuja. An online survey platform was used to get information from respondents. The online survey questions were sent to over 100 respondents via WhatsApp but only 50 responses were retrieved. Data was collected when employees were compelled to stay and work from home. Majority of the respondents of this study are from the private sector, that is, financial, industrial and educational sectors. The survey monkey online survey form was used to elicit information from respondents on their willingness to work from home and how they rated their productivity while working from home. Other questions included if the nature of their job allowed for telecommuting, how often they engaged in virtual meetings, rate their desk job productivity now that they work from home and preference to work from home or not.

5.   RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A total of 50 respondents participated in this online survey, of this 26 (52%) of the respondents were females and 24 (48%) were males. 2 (4%) of the respondents fall within the age group 18 to 24 years, 10 (20%) of the respondents belong to the age group 25 to 34 years. 9 (18%) of the respondents fall within the 35 to 44 age group, while 27 (54%) of the respondents are within the age group of 45 to 54 years. Only 2 (4%) of the respondents fall within the 55 to 64 years age group. This clearly shows that the most active age group involved in telecommuting is the 45 to 54 years' age group. This is in line with previous research that has shown that telework was more attractive to older people as they had fewer ambitious for career prospects (Lister and Harnish, 2011). Younger people may also appreciate telework as they value the freedom to plan their time and work autonomy.
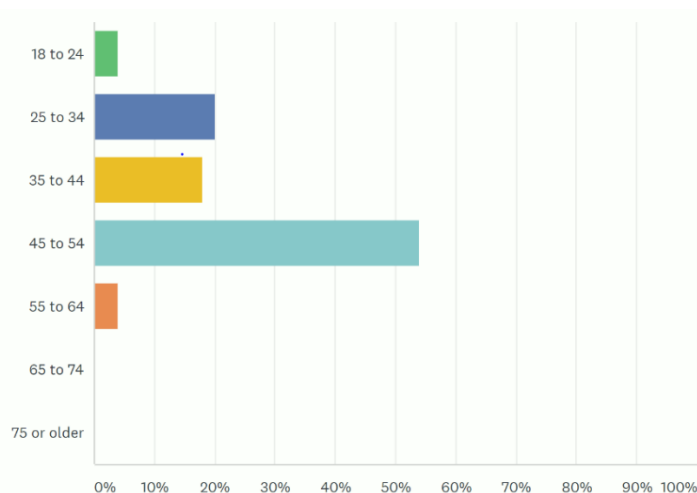

Fig 1: Percentage of Respondents by Age Distribution
Source: Author's Computation, 2020

The highest level of education attained by the respondents showed that 12 (24%) hold a Bachelor's Degree, 24 (48%) hold a Master's Degree while 13 (26%) hold a Doctor of Philosophy Degree and 1 (2%) completed Graduate School
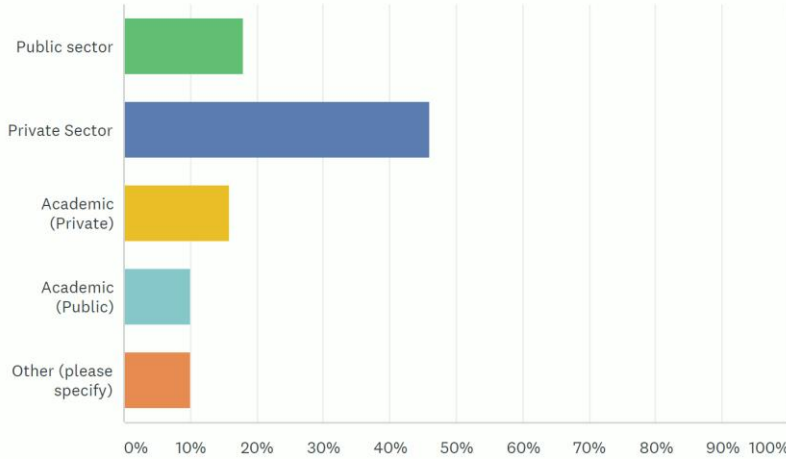
Fig 2: Percentage of Respondents by Sector
Source: Author's Computation, 2020

23 (46%) of the respondents work in the private sector, while 9 (18%) work in the public sector. Others are 8(16%) Academic (Private), 5 (10%) Academic (Public) and other sectors 5 (10%) respectively.
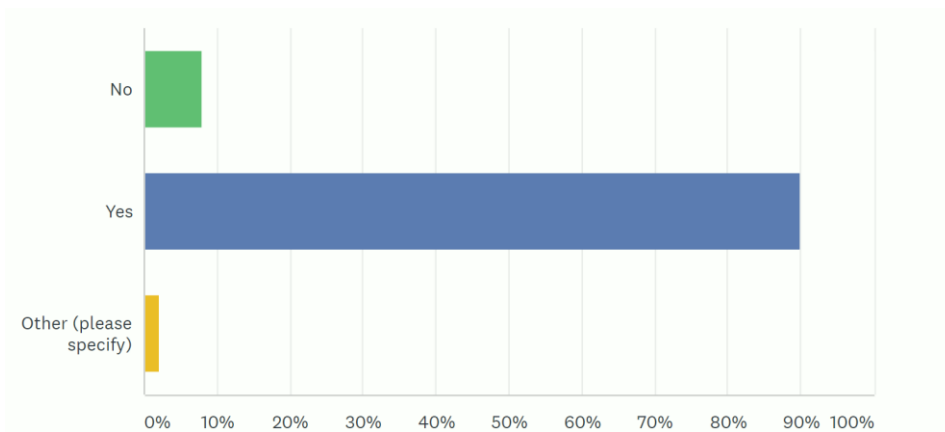

Fig 3: Percentage of Respondents Telecommuting
Source: Author's Computation, 2020

45 (90%) of the respondents attested that the nature of their jobs allowed for telecommuting, 4 (8%) were not telecommuting and no response from 1 (2%). When asked how often they engaged in virtual meetings, the following responses were given.
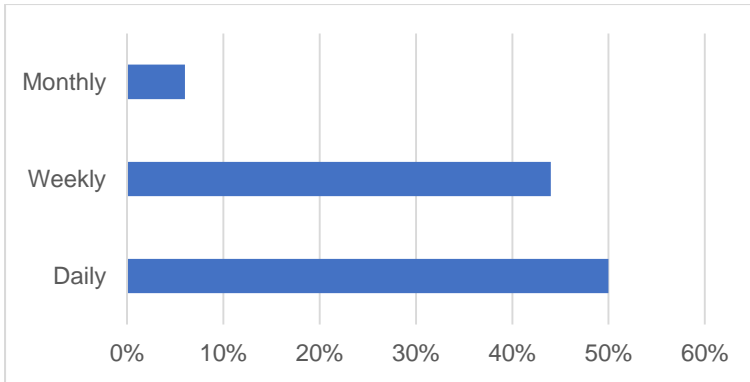
Fig. 4: Frequency of Telecommuting
Source: Author's Computation, 2020

25 (50%) of the respondents telecommuted daily, while 22 (44%) telecommuted weekly, only 3 (6%) telecommuted monthly.
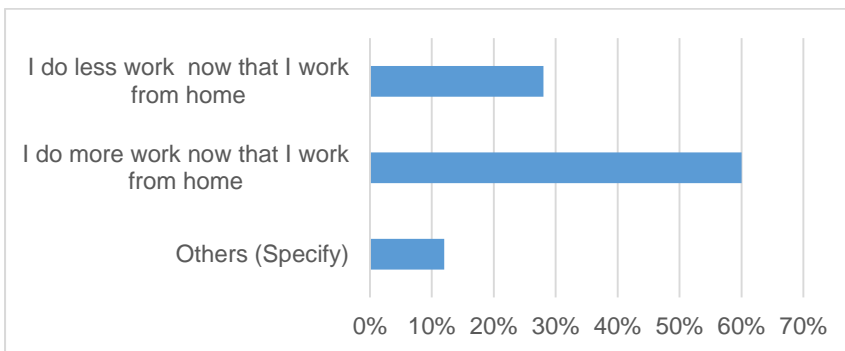

Fig 5: Productivity of Respondents working from home
Source: Author's Computation, 2020

With respect to employees rating their desk job productivity while working from home, about 30 (60%) of the respondents claimed to be more productive as they work more at home, this is because they worked more hours while working from home. While 14 (28%) of the respondents claimed to do less work now that they work from home and 6 (12%) were indifferent.
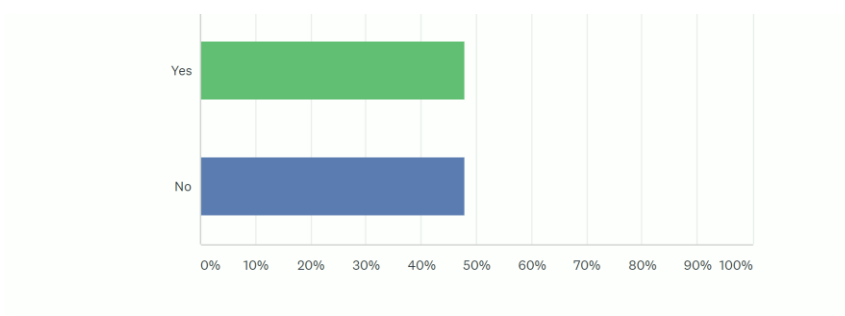

Fig 6: Willingness to work from Home
Source: Author's Computation, 2020

Interestingly 24 (48%) of the respondents preferred working from home, while 24 (48%) of the respondents do not prefer working from home. The remaining 4 (2%) respondents were indifferent.

6. CONCLUSION

This study addressed the need to understand the experience of employees working from home for the first time due to the lockdown. We also sought to know their productivity on the job and their willingness to work from home. The results showed that equal number of the respondents were willing to work from home and not work from home. About 60 percent of the respondents attested that they did more work while working from home. The study revealed that the nature of the respondents' jobs allowed them to telecommute. It is clear from the result of the study that telecommuting which was hitherto unacceptable in Nigeria had come to stay.

7. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

A key limitation of this study was the inability to reach out to employers so as to ascertain the productivity of their employees while working from home. Hence, we had to rely on the employees' self-assessed productivity level as provided by them. Therefore, an area of further research is to determine employee productivity while telecommuting from their employers and the ways they have been able to measure their employee productivity as they telecommute. In addition, people's nonchalant attitude to remote means of doing research resulted in the few responses received.

8. POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Studies have shown that telecommuting will continue even after the Coronavirus pandemic has abated, it is therefore, important to have policies that will allow employees to telecommute once or twice weekly. Employers should provide employees with the necessary tools and support they need to work from home.

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