

I miss my Office in my home Office: Challenges with work from home

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has sent many employees to home offices. Some employees enjoy their home office, while for various reasons others experience challenges working from home. Qualitative investigations show that new employees who have been recruited and hired during the COVID-19 pandemic can find life in the home office quite challenging. Despite adequate technological solutions that make it possible to perform the work tasks from home, these employees want to be able to physically attend at their workplace. Our data indicate that it is important that the company not only sees technology and digitalization as "hard core" skills, but that the digital and technological are woven into other aspects of organizational life, for example, structures, culture and social interaction. New employees need to feel that they are valued, and that the business wants to establish personal and social bonds that support the development of loyalty to the company and quality of the production. These are conditions that are often tied to informal learning in the workplace. Relational development and maintenance are vital for having newcomers to not only function in the digital arena, but also within the physical sphere at the workplace.

Keywords: work from home, digital onboarding, KM challenges, home office, remote work, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

When the governmental restrictions following the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in most employees having to work from home (WFH), even any newcomers had to stay at home, having just started in a new job. Knowing that onboarding processes may be of vital importance regarding reducing turnover among newcomers (Bauer, 2010; Feldman, 1981; Filstad, 2016), the newcomers still needed to be onboarded. Today's digital tools allow meeting online and even seeing each other, but does it weigh up for the personal presence in the office?

WFH is not new and different crisis has sparked the need for it. In the 1970s it was the oil crisis, with Jack Nilles presenting the idea of "move the work to the people" (Nilles, 1997). Since then, there has been different developments enhancing the possibilities of working from home.

However, there is an increasing focus on knowledge as an important asset within an organization (Mårtensson, 2000). The attention to how knowledge is shared, and the research on knowledge sharing, emphasize the personal interaction between the employees (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Filstad, 2016). The knowledge sharing not only contributes towards the development in the organization, but also towards how the employees experience their work-life. For instance, Senge (2006) describes how team learning and personal mastery contribute towards the individual's personal development. This is also tied to what Bauer and Erdogan (1996) call establishing connections within the organization when they are discussing what is needed in onboarding processes. But how does one facilitate for knowledge sharing, team learning, personal development and personal mastery in order to keep the newcomers, in addition to knowing that it is a huge cost for the organization to not have fully operative employees (Filstad, 2016). The organization will benefit from a short but effective onboarding that secures the newcomers staying on.

Our research is done in a large service-providing governmental organization. They have hired approximately 50 people during the time of the pandemic, as they had to expand due to widened work tasks. According to Navrbjerg and Minbaeva (2020), it is difficult to establish and keep personal ties when we are not physically in the same place. However, most of the literature on organizational development is based on a personal presence in the office. For example, both theory on Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and theory on tacit and explicit knowledge and knowledge sharing (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) describe cooperation, collaboration and communication in a proximity. Even theory on organizational socialization and onboarding (Bauer and Erdogan, 1996) describe how the personal interaction between leader and newcomer,

between newcomer and the organizational members can be facilitated. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has not been an option, neither to onboard or socialize in a personal (face-to-face) way and hence our research questions are:

How have new employees experienced being hired during the COVID-19 pandemic?

How can these experiences contribute toward facilitating for the employees' connection with their organization?

We will first present the theory that will enlighten our study. We will then elaborate on our choice of method for data collection and analysis, before we conclude and suggest further research.

2. Theoretical foundation

The discussion about the importance of Knowledge Management (KM) has been ongoing for several years (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Mårtensson, 2000), as has the importance of knowledge and knowledge sharing as a prerequisite for the “learning organization” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Malik and Garg, 2020). Yet, the persons in the organizations are the ones who learn (Irgens, 2011; Filstad, 2016), so it is therefore important to have a workforce that is engaged and resilient (Lee, Vargo and Seville, 2013; Malik and Garg, 2020). According to Malik and Garg (2020), the role of the learning organization and employee resilience is a driver for work engagement. Marsick et al. (1996) presented seven points regarding learning organizations: *continuous learning* (creating learning opportunities), *inquiry and dialog* (culture for questioning and feedback), *team learning* (collaboration), *empowerment* (creating and sharing vision and motivate for fulfilling obligations), *embedded system* (acquire and share information and mutual learning), *system connection* (connection between internal and external environment) and *strategic leadership* (shaping, improving and supporting learning). Malik and Garg (2020, p. 1076) claim that “resilience can be taught, practiced and developed as a skill among employees”, though this does not only apply to the people already within the organization. Employees who are not fully into their jobs represent a cost to the organizations (Filstad, 2016). It is thus important to get the newcomers up to speed with the culture and way of working. Hence, there is an important focus on onboarding the newcomers.

Feldman (1981) claims that it is important to establish expectations from both sides, both for the organization and the newcomers, as a mismatch between expectations and factual work may lead to higher turnover. If the job is more difficult than the level of education and competences are, or the opposite, if the work is too easy or does not match the level of difficulty expected due to background and skills, the chance that the newcomer leaves due to this mismatch is high.

Bauer (2010) has developed a framework of 6 C's regarding the onboarding of newcomers: Compliance, Clarify, Confidence, Culture, Connection and Checkback. *Compliance* is about how the organization facilitates for the newcomers to become acquainted with the necessary routines and rules of the organization. *Clarify* is about how the organization facilitates for the proper understanding and expectations regarding the work tasks, much like Feldman (1981) claimed was important. The *Confidence* is about how the organization contributes toward the sense of mastery. *Culture* is about how quickly the newcomers are introduced to the organizational culture. *Connection* is about how the organization facilitates for the necessary connections and develops an internal network. *Checkback* is about how the organization continuously monitors how onboarding is perceived with the different approaches. These C's may support enhancing engagement, resilience and motivation.

Motivation is about the “biological, psychological and social factors that activate, direct and maintain behaviour of a different degree of intensity to reach a goal” (Kaufmann and Kaufmann, 2015, p. 113). There are four main types of motivational theory: Behavioural theories (based on basic needs), Cognitive theories (based on expected goal achievement), Social theories (based on the perception of justice and the distribution of goods at the workplace) and Job characteristics (based on factors that are motivational or demotivational) (Kaufmann and Kaufmann, 2015). Another motivational theory is the self-determination theory (Deci, Olafsen and Ryan, 2017). The psychological needs that the self-determination theory is based on are autonomy, competence and social belonging, which feed intrinsic motivation. Autonomy in the workplace is about a lack of detailed managing, that you can influence how tasks should be executed, that there are possibilities for coming up with suggestions and options for influence on one's own work situation. When the action is self-determined and free from pressure, the intrinsic motivation will be present (Løvaas, 2017, p. 228). While autonomy is often connected to individualism and independence, self-determination theory points towards being dependent on others in a controlling or autonomous way, and that the need for autonomy is universal – that it is a cross-cultural

phenomenon (Løvaas, 2017, p. 228, 229). The need for competence includes the mastering of tasks. Experiencing mastery may make some of the tasks be perceived as fun or exciting, something that promotes intrinsic motivation. The underlying assumptions are that the human being is an active organism who explores, learns and experiences satisfaction by learning (Løvaas, 2017, p. 229), and that the experience and mastery of competence affects the motivation has empirical support in one's work-life (Lai, 2013). Senge (2006) presented five disciplines where learning through teams (social learning), personal mastery, shared visions and shared mental models are important regarding being a learning organization, as well as the systems thinking and putting the disciplines together to make up the learning organization. According to Spurkeland (2013), this also applies to newcomers, as it is important to make sure that they are brought into the organizational "system" (Løvaas, 2017).

Most of the theory above is based on times of being physically present within an organization (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic when most people were working from home, this may have led to both social and professional isolation as the employees (both newcomers and others) were missing the social interaction (Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020). Even if the infrastructure for WFH or even remote work existed before the COVID-19 pandemic and teleworking was growing globally (Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020), there are still some limitations regarding "e-leadership". Contreras et al. (2020, p. 3) claim that there are studies that show that WFH is more productive, and that WFH also leads to less turnover and stress. Also, the less formal working atmosphere, as well as the "absence of an immediate supervisor", reduces stress. Nevertheless, they also refer to the risk of social isolation leading to a "lower performance and gradual demotivation" (Contreras et al., 2020, p. 3).

Cooper and Kurland (2002) refer to interpersonal networking, informal learning and mentoring as important informal developmental activities. For instance, managers may "use the grapevine to disseminate information" (Cooper and Kurland, 2002, p. 513). This, in addition to what Navrbjerg and Minbaeva (2020) refer to as "the watercooler talk", are informal ways of obtaining information about the employees that are more difficult with the employees in home offices. Cooper and Kurland's investigations showed that if the employees were in the office often enough they would be able to compensate for the possibilities of missing out on important information, and also that communication needs to be open and that the necessary information needs to be communicated through formal channels (Cooper and Kurland, 2002, p. 528). They also claim that employees need to be trained for WFH. Again, during a complete lockdown and with newcomers, this may prove difficult to obtain.

Another issue that has gotten a lot of attention in the past decades is a work-life balance (Kelliher, Richardson and Boiarintseva, 2019). While some research has found that some employees have high levels of job satisfaction working remotely, other studies have found that some employees experience isolation, which is negative regarding job satisfaction (Kelliher, et al., 2019, p. 84). Additionally, mental well-being and stress have surfaced in the research (Kelliher, et al., 2019, p. 85). According to Kompier, et al. (2012, p. 238), long hours and stressful conditions may also lead to ill-health.

Knowledge workers often rely on interaction with their colleagues (Lautsch, Kossek and Eaton, 2009), something that has been difficult during the pandemic. According to Davenport (2005, p. 3) "knowledge workers" are "responsible for sparking innovation and growth in an organization" Employees have experienced missing what Grant et al. (2013) refer to as office interactions. Not being able to share their concerns with colleagues may leave them feeling isolated (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003). Bentley and Yoong (2000, p. 351) claim that knowledge workers need a high level of communication with supervisors and colleagues, and to interact and collaborate.

The work-related, well-being dimensions are: affective, social cognitive, professional and psychosomatic (Charalampous, et al., 2019, p. 51). Psychosomatic symptoms may be pains experienced in the neck, back and generally the upper body (Charalampous, et al., 2022, p. 341).

3. Method of inquiry

This initially started as a pilot study where we wanted to investigate how organizations handled the long-term COVID crisis. In this paper, we present the data from a follow-up study, where we looked into how newcomers experienced digital onboarding and the WFH situation. This is a case-study approach in combination with a

longitudinal design. According to Yin (2003, 2014), the case study definition is “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in real-life and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident”. The use of a case design approach also gives us the possibility to acquire a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in question, whether it is organizations, events or people, see Geertz (1973).

We interviewed a total of six employees (see Table 1 below). The informants were selected by the top manager based on the criteria that they were newcomers recruited and onboarded during the pandemic. The data of the study was collected by doing semi-structured individual interviews, using a digital programme (ZOOM). The interviews lasted for about 1 hour, and were recorded with written approval from the informants. As most people by now are used to communicating digitally, the informants were open and responsive to our questions, and we found the conversations interesting and elaborated, although with digital communication we missed the body language. The datamaterial has been analysed by qualitative content analysis. We started by reading through the transcribed text and coding the interviews by highlighting sentences with relevance to issues and themes central to our research questions. Furthermore, we discussed our findings against the theoretical perspectives presented above.

Although the number of informants is limited, we believe that their stories have given us an insight regarding digital onboarding during the pandemic.

In Table 1, we show an overview of the respondents and the timeline of the data collection:

Table 1: Overview of respondents

Respondent/ gender	Period of interview
Employee1 (Female)	November 2021
Employee 2 (Female)	November 2021
Employee 3 (Female)	November 2021
Employee 4 (Female)	November 2021
Employee 5 (Female)	November 2021
Employee 6 (Male)	November 2021

The case we studied is a governmental organization that delivers services produced through digital systems to large governmental institutions. However, pre-COVID, the staff worked daily at the employer’s office. When the lock-down was implemented, there was a rapid reorganizing/change to use digital systems for administration and meetings. Today, the use of Microsoft Teams is vital to all administrative communications and meetings in the organization. The organization has implemented an organizational change, which implied that each of the four departments had a sublevel of two-three sections. As every leader has the responsibility for 12-15 employees, this would make it easier to follow up their employees during the lockdown when almost all members of the staff were working from home.

Approximately 50 new employees were recruited during the pandemic, with most of the recruiting and onboarding processes being digitally implemented. The onboarding programme started on the first day at the employer’s office, where the newcomer met the nearest leader and the head of department, in addition to an assigned mentor. In some cases, there were a few other newcomers present. The introduction lasted a few hours; the newcomer then returned to WFH bringing PC equipment. The first weeks of training consisted of e-learning courses, in addition to having contact with the mentor and nearest leader via Teams. They were gradually introduced to the job, sitting in at Teams meetings and working in the different systems. Because the employees started in the organization at various times, the WFH period differed from five months to some weeks.

4. Results and discussion

The programme for onboarding was digitalized, and the newcomers could easily learn about the organization and how it worked. To have contact with their nearest leader and a mentor was of importance in order to get to know the organization and be trained for work (Bauer, 2013), as for most of the informants, this seems to have functioned well. Unfortunately, not all the newcomers had the advantage of a close follow-up by the mentor. One informant contacted her nearest leader when she felt the mentor did not have time for her, and the leader arranged for her to have more regular training by other colleagues. When returning to the office, the situation was improved (4):

But it was not until I was back at the office ...then it was easier to ask someone and just: Can you show me how to do this? Because it was not that simple to explain everything over Teams. (4)

This shows that with newcomers the threshold is high for asking questions when working in a digital system, and that there is an experienced distance to mentors and colleagues. This again can have an impact on their process of getting to master their work, and feeling that they belong (being connected) in the organization (Bauer et al., 2021).

Another informant experienced that the digital work training was not sufficient for doing her tasks when she was back at the office:

*So, in some ways I have wished for a more thorough training, it would have made me feel more confident. ...at one time during summer, I felt like I had a breakdownI didn't know what to do, felt helpless. **It would have been different if the job-training had been face-to face at the office... and I could have learned from listening to my mentor when she was on the phone.** You learn a lot from listening to each other. Overall, I feel lucky, others have been worse off when starting in a new job during the pandemic. (2)*

The digital training did not provide the newcomer with the qualifications for doing the job; hence, it was not clarified what was to be done, as suggested by Bauer (2010). This made her feel unable to master the tasks and left her with a lack of self-confidence. Bauer's (2010) description of the importance of confidence to do the work, and Senge's (2006) reference to personal mastery is not what this respondent was conveying. In addition, missing the proximity regarding having the connectedness to the organizational members did not improve the situation. The lack of connection also seems to have reduce the chances of utilizing checkbacks, which is one of the core themes described by Bauer (2010). Moreover, there seems to be the lack of a checkback. The statement also points to a lack of work-life balance (Lautsch, Kossek and Eaton, 2009).

How did the newcomers experience WFH?

In our material, we find that working from home had consequences regarding the employees' health. There were no natural pauses when sitting in your home, with the computer on all day long:

At first, I didn't take breaks, so I got problems with my neck, shoulder and back. I was very tired; my eyes and head were tired. After a while I started to go for a short walk in the neighbourhood to have a pause. (6)

This statement also seems to imply that there is a work-life imbalance, and as found by Charalampous et al. (2021, p. 342), this may lead to be psychosomatic symptoms of deteriorating health. However, they also found that some employees developed healthy habits during the pandemic. Kompier et al. (2012, p. 238) also found a connection with long hours and ill-health. On the other hand, Contreras et al. (2020) claimed that an environment away from the office would contribute towards less stress. This may also be a case of not having a lot of experience with WFH, something which Cooper and Kurland (2002) claim needs some getting used to, which was not the case when hired during the time of the pandemic.

When is WFH to be preferred?

On the positive side, there is the possibility of working continuously without being disturbed. This is in line with what Contreras et al. (2020) claim. This may also be seen as a sign of autonomy (Deci, Olafsen and Ryan, 2017; Løvaas, 2017), which supports the resilience and work motivation:

I had a lot to do in that period, so it was convenient [to WFH]. I worked a lot, and was not as disturbed as I would have been working in the office. (6)

But then you miss many things. Because in the office you can do a quick direct clarification with someone, and you lose that in WHF. It's a higher threshold. (6)

These statements show the ambiguity of working from home versus working in the office. This is also what Cooper and Kurland (2002) claim regarding having enough time at work so as not to miss out on developmental activities, such as informal learning. Knowledge workers also need to interact with their colleagues (Bentley and Yoong, 2000, p. 351), and not being able to discuss with colleagues make them feel isolated (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003; Lautsch, Kossek and Eaton, 2009).

At the time of the interview, the “normal” in the organization was to be back in the office. Our informants were in unison in their preference of being at the office over WFH:

I think its ok. You have a whole different communication when everyone is present. And the meetings..., ...the meetings are much better now, we are sitting together, so it works much better professionally. (6)

So, I find it more advantageous to work at the office, then. I find that both being social, to have lunch with colleagues, and it's easy to ask questions, and it's fun in a way to be at the office in our line of work. So, there are only advantages with sitting in at the office. (4)

This point towards a desire to keep up a social proximity towards their work colleagues. The social interaction supplies them with the knowledge sharing, the social interaction and the team learning, which allows for shared visions and mental models. In this way, they also support Senge's (2006) learning organization, where the employees are learning and helping to develop the organization. The statements also imply that being at the office is intrinsically motivating (Deci and Ryan, 2012), as well as being a part of the “system” (Spurkeland, 2013).

How can these experiences contribute towards facilitating for the employees' connection with their organization?

It seems that to WFH is to prefer when the tasks demand to work in a concentrated manner, and being undisturbed (Cooper and Kurland, 2002; Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020):

We are placed in an open space, so it is some disturbance, then there are settings where you are supposed to work concentrated, then it is better to WFH... (6)

To others, the advantage would be to save time when not having to use much time in commuting (Nilles, 1988)

I can't see any advantage for WFH other than as I have a long distance to commute to the office, I save time when working from home, and I can sleep longer. (4)

One of the informants reports on being taken care of from the start by her colleagues, who had the same educational background:

They called me, and they were very nice and including ... and I was introduced, we agreed to set up a meeting every morning [digitally] – to have a chat, and they called me frequently. So, it was really ... that was nice, but it was strange to sit at home to look at my home office, thinking – here am I to sit in solitude. (1)

This is an example of digital tools not making up for what is missed in the face-to-face meeting with other colleagues. Still, it may also refer to a sense of team learning (Senge, 2006) and some connectedness, which supports the developmental activities even if they are not meeting physically. There may also be a “sense of belonging”, as they feel part of a group, but at the same time the proximity is missing.

Being at a home office may also contribute towards more independence:

It wasn't always that easy to ask the neighbour, so I used some extra time to learn things on my own, looking into and checking an extra time before I call a colleague. That sort of thing. So, on my part it has had a positive effect on being more independent. (1)

This points toward a sense of autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 2012; Løvaas, 2017); this can also be tied to personal mastery (Senge, 2006), which may promote the intrinsic motivation that enhances the wish to stay in the organization. If it is perceived as overwhelming or not promoting the sense of personal mastery, one may feel the urge to terminate their employment (Feldman, 1981).

According to our informants there are several advantages when it comes to the use of digital systems:

1) For administration and meetings inside the organization:

It works very well using Teams. You share a screen and can raise your hand to ask questions, and it's possible to have good discussions as well. So, I don't see why we shouldn't continue using it, when it works so well. (1)

The Teams tool also works for sharing knowledge (Watkins and Marsick, 2014). So, even if the digital systems are not completely supporting the connectedness (Bauer, 2013), it does work for knowledge sharing and for communication and some interaction.

2) Also, when it comes to customers, there is the advantage of saving time, money and the environment - and at the same time being more efficient:

And to have Teams meetings with customers...it is so much more efficient to have a Teams meeting ... but at the same time being able to have physical meetings, well, there is something there..." (1)

This implies that there are some financial advantages regarding utilizing digital tools for communications, but that it does not fully cover for the physical meeting.

3) Flexibility

Yes, I hope we can continue to have the flexibility in working from home. That I hope. (1)

Digital work tools (such as, for example, Teams from Microsoft) are used for sharing and distributing important information, and also for sharing workspaces. Cooper and Kurland (2002) claim that it is important that vital information is distributed and suggest regular meetings, which may also be conducted in Teams, but also could be distributed via Teams as written material. The importance of the information provided is twofold, as it provides information that the employees need, but also provides a sense of inclusion, which in return enhances the intrinsic motivation and self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 2012), as well as work motivation and resilience (Malik and Garg, 2020).

The seven points by Marsick et al. (1996) regarding learning organizations has created learning opportunities, and sought to develop a culture for questioning and feedback by organizing for mentors for easier/better checkbacks. They have also started using Teams as a tool for communication as a basis for both working and learning, and sought to develop a system connection. The organization has also changed their management structure, as middle managers now have fewer employees to manage, thereby facilitating for a more strategic leadership. By this, they hope to support the development of resilience that Malik and Garg (2020) refer to.

5. Conclusion

The newcomers are provided with online courses and a mentor. The firm has also reorganized in order to be able to clarify, connect and to do checkbacks with their newcomers (Bauer, 2013), so that they are able to comply and be confident, and be a part of the culture. However, although finding the digital courses sufficient, the newcomers still fail to feel the connection, and being a part of the culture. Some of them are also not feeling that they have a full clarification of the job they are supposed to do. The newcomers show various degrees of self-determination, from the ones who rather quickly master their work tasks, to the ones who struggle longer before they experience any mastery.

Some of the newcomers even find it best to WFH, particularly if there are tasks that require concentration. Also, not having to commute is put forward as an advantage, just as claimed by Nilles (1998).

Because they are not trained to be at a home office, some work-life imbalance is reported. Also, some report on psychosomatic issues, such as feeling mentally unwell, regarding being uncertain on how to execute their work.

However, the onboarded employees want to spend most of their office time in the office. They refer to the ease of knowledge sharing and socializing in order to connect, and the sense of belonging. Some of the newcomers envision a flexibility that has been enabled by the hybrid way of working. Being able to do meetings online, learn online and share online workspaces is perceived as providing flexibility. WFH is not necessarily regarded as a benefit, but the flexibility is viewed as a beneficiary factor contributing to a future work-life.

5.1 Future research

We have two suggestions for further research: 1) To follow up the interviewees in order to acquire an understanding of how they now perceive their situation would help to provide insights to how the firm could provide sufficient onboarding mixing the digital support with personal in office support.

2) The other is to further investigate the work-life balance of newcomers who have been onboarded during the COVID-19 pandemic, how this affected them and how their present work-life is affected by these experiences.

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