A SWOT Analysis of Remote Working Based on Review of Literature

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Abstract

The extant literature on ‘remote working’ have mostly focused on its advantages, disadvantages and consequences from the employer, employee & social perspectives as separate parameters with little research exploring the context of remote working from an overall strategic management perspective. The fear and threat evolved from the COVID-19 pandemic have urged tens of millions of global workforce to work from home which was a way of working that had struggled to gain traction before the pandemic. In this ‘new normal’ there is a significant tendency for the remote working to continue in the long run which requires organizations to strategically plan and implement the remote working culture. In consistent with the strategic planning, this review paper explores the existing literature and aims to identify a SWOT Analysis of remote working that would be useful for the current ‘new normal’ context. The thematic analysis approach has taken and through that, four themes have identified and defined from the literature review towards achieving objective of the paper. Literature from the conceptual & empirical studies conducted over the past two decades on remote working have been considered for the review.

Key words: SWOT Analysis, Remote working

1. Introduction

The fear and threat evolved from the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the businesses and communities of all continents of the world in most unprecedent ways and the pandemic resulted in major trends on how the work is been performed. From the strategic management perspective, it’s vital that the top managements evaluate the impact and effect that each trend will have on the business continuity and strategic aims, distinguish immediate and long-term actions required, assess to what extent these trends have changed and will change the strategies that the company has been practicing before the COVID outbreak.

It was all visible that within overnight the workforce across the world was put into few definite working conditions – either frontline/essential employees, work from home employees and being furloughed/laid off following the countries lock downs and boarder closures. As most organizations shifted to remote work operations during the pandemic season it was expected from the strategy makers to be prepared to adjust employee experience strategies and make sure the employees have the competencies to collaborate remotely and digitally. This has led the urge for the strategy makers to consider about shifting performance goal setting and work evaluations for a remote working context given that the concept of working from home/remote working has become one of top trending work strategies worldwide as a result of the pandemic (Pennington & Stanford, 2020).

1.1. SWOT Analysis

In the current ‘new normal’, organizations worldwide engage in strategic planning to recover from the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Strategic planning is the solid foundation to a successful strategic management which is the continuous process of planning,
implementing and evaluating the decisions that will drive the organization towards achieving its objectives. An important phase of the strategic management is internal and external analysis which is the point where SWOT Analysis takes the center stage. The SWOT analysis framework was invented by Albert Humphery at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) back in the 1960s. The external analysis helps the strategy makers to identify the opportunities and threats related to the external factors while internal analysis helps to identify weaknesses and strengths in the internal environment of an organization.

1.2 Remote Working

Remote working though it came in various dimensions such as working from home, telework, telecommuting, virtual work etc. was already becoming popular even before the pandemic, reflecting a range of motivations for both employers and employees.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a lasting shift in the nature of work in organizations, now remote working is experiencing a huge attention and becoming more popular and powerful. Also, it’s identified that normal employment patterns will not be restored immediately even once the safety concerns of pandemic are at minimum because by then businesses will be battered financially and operationally by the pandemic and also certain percentage of the work force would opt for work from home in the long term. Given these reasons, remote working will become the ‘new normal’ for millions of employees worldwide (Pennington & Stanford, 2020). Remote working is defined as people working from their home or from other location of their choice other than the working area by payment which is provided by the employer (Reshma et al., 2015). Schall (2019) concludes that terms remote working, working remotely, working from home, teleworking and telecommuting are comparatively synonymous as their common idea is working outside the conventional office and communicating through technology.

1.3 SWOT Analysis of remote working

Remote working entails undertaking a significant digital transformation in any business organization. Hence in accurately identifying the strengths and weaknesses, the organizations would need to consider factors such as employees accessibility to company data remotely, the user level permissions placed on files and documents, scalability and flexibility of the current IT infrastructure to link or upgrade existing solutions to be compatible with new platforms used in remote work, compatibility of the business systems on cloud platforms, level of security measures for internal and external threats, investment in technologies that support the agility and mobility of the work force, whether the existing technologies help or frustrate the employees, number of platforms & apps that an average employee uses daily, whether software solutions blend well, presence of an existing system for making data-driven decisions and the availability of up-to-date technology to adapt to the changes in the setup of work (Traqq, 2020).

When identifying threats and opportunities of working from home, the organizations require to conduct unbiased research on the industry in which it operates, the structure of the organization and the target market. Organizations will be able to determine whether a permanent shift to remote work will be profitable and sustainable only through a reliable and critical evaluation on the current position and performance of the organization. Also, reviewing of local labour laws on how the jurisdiction has covered the working from home in specific countries is also a must do by employers (Traqq, 2020).

Leaders in organizations have a vital role to support and guide the workforce to ensure a successful work from home setup. And the strategy makers will have to acknowledge the
threats and opportunities that this setup would bring. In a geographically scattered team, some employees are independent enough to quickly adopt to the changes in the way of working while some find the transition quite challenging. Hence efficient communication is crucial in successful implementation of a working from home strategy. There are number of communication tools available that would make the teams connect together from different locations and also some project management programs will help the management in monitoring tasks and progress of employees who are working from home. Hence with the right tools and preparation, organizations can ensure a smooth transition which was once seemed like a big hurdle in the organizational environment (Traqq, 2020).

1.4 Aim of the review paper

The existing researches conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic predict that the method of working from home/remote working would continue even after the pandemic crisis ends. The working from home was not something new, it has been in practice in few organizations in the world even before the pandemic but becoming it mandatory working strategy as a safety measure during the pandemic made the business world realize the benefits and value additions to the organization of working from home. Hence, organizations and wider working communities are being realizing the advantages of remote working at this phase of time in the ‘new normal’.

There are several areas that organizations should consider when implementing a sustainable work from home/remote working strategy and becoming successful with it. Strategic planning being crucial the aim of this review paper is to fit the advantages and disadvantages identified through the empirical and conceptual researches related to remote working into a SWOT framework through a thematic analysis.

1.5 Objective of the Review Paper

To identify a SWOT analysis of remote working from the existing literature through reviewing the selected literature based on thematic analysis approach.

2 Literature Review

2.1. Advantages and benefits of remote working

Since the inception of remote working/ work from home, over the decades a considerable number of studies have conducted to examine the advantages/ benefits of remote working. Reshma et al., (2015) have significantly contributed to this scope of literature through the findings based on their ABCD analysis framework. According to Reshma et al., (2015), remote working involves less investment, supports diversified workforce, moves into a new pattern to work and supports organizational profits. Further identified advantages and benefits of remote working by Reshma et al.,(2015) are being cost effective, less time consuming, flexible, enabled optimum utilization of resources, provide higher return from less cost, saves commute time, enabled flexi time, empowered employees, reduced staff costs, less costs on office space maintenance, positive effect on the company earnings, flexible work option, enabling employees to be more productive and satisfied, more employment generation, strengthened employee -employee relationship, many stake holders being satisfied, ecofriendly, comparatively hazardless, attracts staff, improved quality of work, increased efficiency, speedy outputs, privilege for employees to work with latest technologies, reduced

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absenteeism, less pollution, reduced traffic congestion, better living conditions and promotes greener habitat. Flores (2019) also has come up with similar findings that having more flexible hours was considered as the most beneficial factor of working from home followed by greater responsibility for how employees manage their time, job satisfaction and better job prospects.

Remote work enables employees to work from home in case of sickness, and make it possible to work during the most productive time, offers subjective career opportunities (Nakrosiene et al., 2019). As Reshma et al., (2015) have found that remote working results in job satisfaction of employees, Schall (2019) also found that job satisfaction of employees would increase with the increase of telecommuting intensity along with two other benefits – greater perceptions of autonomy and fewer work family disruptions. Among many other empirical studies which identified that telecommuting facilitates job satisfaction are Baard & Thomas (2010), Gajendran & Haririson (2007) and Felstead and Henseke (2017).

Another study by Baard & Thomas (2010) have found similar advantages of remote working to what Reshma et al., (2015) have revealed such as less distraction & improved productivity, greater work flexibility, increased morale & loyalty, less stress and reduced monthly expenses. Also, remote working is proved to result in beneficial consequences such as lowered turnover intent and work stress (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007, Reshma et al., 2015).

One significant advantage of remote working is that it enables employees to strike a balance between work and life. This is evidenced from the studies by Reshma et al., (2015), Flores (2019), Baard & Thomas (2010). Findings of Crosbie & Moore (2004) supports the same as they have identified that working from home offers employees a greater flexibility in using time between work & family. Nakrosiene et al., (2019) also support this as their study suggests that remote working provides the employees the possibility to take care of family members. Krasulja et al., (2015) specifically examined this scope of association between remote working and work life balance upon generation Y employees and have found that generation Y considers remote working as an alternative in balancing work – life.

Remote working can be identified as a good opportunity for employees who have kids and elderly parents/relatives who need to be taken care of while working from home. This is supported by the findings of Baard and Thomas (2010) who found a significant association between no. of dependents at home and an improvement in work life balance due to telework.

In ways like saved the time otherwise spent on commuting, employees will get the opportunity to have more time to strengthen the relationships with family, colleagues and society due to remote working. Also, the employees can enjoy the virtual organization structure with frequent networking with colleagues through sophisticated technology. This benefit was evidenced from the studies by Reshma et al., (2015) and Gajendran and Harrison (2007). However, this was challenged by the findings of Crosbie and Moore (2004) which is discussed under the review of disadvantages of remote working.

By adopting remote working strategy, the organizations will get the opportunity to experience higher organizational commitment and work efforts from employees and also employees would get the opportunity uplift their job well-being and satisfaction (Rupietta & Beckmann, 2016; Felstead & Henseke, 2017).

Belzunegui and Erro (2020) found that large number of organizations implemented teleworking as a response to Covid-19 crisis. Out of them, majority are large or multinational companies. Organizations that have not yet implemented remote working are businesses that focus more on present than future and also ones that lack technological innovation. Hence taking this findings into consideration, working from home can emerge as an opportunity in the ‘new normal’ for the organizations to continue their businesses in a more realistic and promising way in the wake up of post pandemic.
2.2 Disadvantages and challenges of remote working

Just as two sides of a coin, remote working has its drawbacks as well as its positive side. Many researchers have attempted to identify the negative consequences of remote working. According to Flores (2019), Crosbie and Moore (2004) and Walton et al., (2020), remote working challenges collaboration with colleagues and creates difficulties in developing and maintaining social relationships which can result in reduced social contact, if it’s not carefully planned.

There is a risk of remote employees not being evaluated fairly despite their commitment and efforts due to the fact that they are not in the visibility of managers physically. In a study, Flores (2019) has tried to investigate this and found that there’s less visibility on the fairness in performance evaluation of remote employees. Several researchers (Flores, 2019; Baard & Thomas, 2010; Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Walton et al., 2020) have highlighted the greater inability of remote employees in organizing time and to switch off from work and emphasized the negative effects of working long hours and getting late to switch off from daily work.

Bonacini et al., (2020) in their research, ‘Working from home and income inequality: risks of a ‘new normal’ with COVID-19’ have examined the relationships between Work from home feasibility, labour income distribution and inequality. The results indicated that work from home strategy can risk the exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in the labor market, if it’s not adequately regulated.

It's identified that remote working has a negative effect on subjective well-being and the effect of working from home on subjective well-being varies by parental status and gender (Song & Gao, 2019). Another interesting finding is that increased number of children can make it difficult to manage the work while working from home and there can be too many distractions including children and difficulties to concentrate on work (Nakrosiene et al., 2019; Walton et al., 2020).

According to Walton et al., (2020), remote employees may find it difficult to stay motivated when they are away from work stations. This was supported by Crosbie and Moore (2004) who have found that working from home can result in loneliness, lack of self-esteem and motivation.

An empirical study by Nakrosiene et al., (2019) has an interesting finding associated with demographic factors that older employees perceived less advantages of remote working. Possible lack of organizational and manager support on remote working in the long run was predicted by Walton et al., (2020).

According to Felstead and Henseke (2017), remote working can result in higher work intensification. This finding was supported by Flores (2019) through the finding of inability of remote employees to balance work and life demands.

Further drawbacks such as absence of training for remote employees by Baard and Thomas (2010), difficulties in making technology work and finding timely information in a remote environment by Flores (2019) and possibility of inadequate equipment and resources required for a remote working context by Walton et al., (2020) are identified from the literature.

3. Methodology

The methodology used in this paper for identifying and classifying the SWOT analysis factors of remote working has been developed as shown in Figure 1. According to the framework, in the first step, review of selected literature that explored the advantages and
disadvantages of remote working has been conducted followed by thematic analysis for identifying and classifying of SWOT factors of remote working and finally determining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of remote working strategy has taken place as the final step.

Figure 1. Methodology framework

3.1 Approach to Data Collection

This paper has taken thematic analysis approach in consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006) and Almaiah (2020), to identify the SWOT factors of remote working strategy from the existing selected literature.

3.2 Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the prior studies on the outcomes of remote working was analyzed using the thematic analysis technique. As per Braun & Clarke (2006), the author tried to absorb something important from the selected existing literature in relation to the objective of this review paper. The widely used steps involved in thematic analysis – familiarization with data, generating codes, searching, defining and naming themes and write up was followed as shown in Table 1.
4. Findings

The analysis produced four themes.

4.1 Strengths

The empirically evidenced advantages of remote working such as more flexible hours, better work-life balance, greater productivity & responsibility, cost savings, increased job satisfaction, reduced absenteeism, increased retention, reduced traffic congestion & air pollution, increased trust between superior – subordinate, increased autonomy for employees, greater flexibility with time between work & family can be identified as strengths based on their similar nature of providing the positive experiences in the present time to employees, employers and other stakeholders.

Table 1. Codes and themes developed from thematic analysis

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings from Review of Literature</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Objective</th>
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<tr>
<td>More flexible hours</td>
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<td>Better work life balance</td>
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<td>Greater productivity and responsibility &amp; cost savings</td>
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<td>Increased job satisfaction</td>
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<td>Reduced absenteeism &amp; increased retention</td>
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<td>Reduced traffic congestions &amp; air pollution</td>
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<td>Increased superior-subordinate trust</td>
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<td>Increased perceived autonomy</td>
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<td>Greater flexibility with time between work &amp; family</td>
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<td>Possibility to work during most productive time</td>
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<td>Suitability of work place at home</td>
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<td>Time saving due to reduced time to commute</td>
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<td>Productive time due to reduced time for communication with colleagues</td>
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<td>Subjective career opportunities</td>
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<td>Able to look after dependents at home</td>
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<td>Viewed as an alternative for work life balance by gen Y employees</td>
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<td>Higher organizational commitment</td>
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<td>Allows entities to upgrade in terms of technology</td>
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<td>Get access to high tech and better equipments</td>
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<td>Difficulty to collaborate with colleagues</td>
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<td>Tendency for higher work intensity</td>
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<td>Making the technology up and running</td>
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<td>Inability to access timely information</td>
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<td>Difficulty with organizing time</td>
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<td>Tendency to work longer hours</td>
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<td>Negative effects on subjective well-being</td>
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<td>Reduced social contact</td>
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<td>Resulted loneliness</td>
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<td>Deteriorating self esteem and motivation</td>
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<td>Can be exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in labour market</td>
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<td>Results in higher work intensification</td>
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<td>Inability to separate work and home life</td>
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<td>Too many distractions at work including children</td>
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<td>Lack of organizational and manager support in the long run</td>
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<td>Health issues</td>
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<td>Less visibility on fairness in performance review</td>
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Strengths

Advantages and benefits

Opportunities

Weaknesses

Disadvantages and challenges

Threats

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4.2 Weaknesses

The negative consequences of remote working such as tendency to work long hours, difficulty to collaborate with colleagues, tendency for higher work intensity, constraints with making the technology set up and running, inability to access timely information, difficulty with organizing time, negative effects on subjective well-being, reduced social contact, resulted loneliness, deteriorating self-esteem & motivation are identified under the theme ‘weaknesses’ from the thematic analysis based on their similar nature that stakeholders tend to experience these negative outcomes in the short term.

4.3 Opportunities

Out of the benefits/advantages of remote working evidenced from the literature, thematic analysis tried to extract the benefits that can be experienced in the longer term and which cover wider scope including external environments and defined such benefits/advantages as ‘opportunities’. Possibility to work during most productive time, suitability of work location at home, time saving due to reduced time to commute, productive time due to reduced time otherwise spent on hanging with colleagues, subjective career opportunities, being able to look after dependents at home, viewed as an alternative for work-life balance by generation Y employees, higher organizational commitment, allow entities to upgrade in terms of technology, employees being able to access sophisticated high tech and better enhanced equipments are among the factors identified under the theme ‘opportunities’.

4.4 Threats

The challenges of remote working identified from the literature review which are more of external in nature and experienced in the longer term are categorized under the theme ‘threats’. Such included health issues of employees, resulting in higher work intensification, could be exacerbating pre-existing inequalities in labor market, inability to separate work and home life, possible too many distractions including children, lack of organizational & manager support in the long run and less visibility on fairness in performance review.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this review paper is to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with organizations adopting the strategy of working remotely/working from home through a thematic analysis from the available literature. From the selected literature, the review attempt made by the author has been able to draw four themes. Having said that, the overall conclusion is that the review paper has accomplished its objective of suggesting a SWOT Analysis of remote working to support the future investigations of remote working/work from home from a strategic management perspective.

6. Directions for future research

Despite the significant upward trend in empirical studies focusing remote working, very few researches have examined or analyzed the remote working in a SWOT Analysis context that would support and contribute to the strategic management. Not much literature is available to prove that empirically evidenced advantages of remote working/WFH can be identified as strengths and opportunities of remote working in a SWOT analysis context. Likewise, very few literature was available to prove that empirically evidenced disadvantages of remote working.
working/WFH can be identified as weaknesses or threats of remote working from a SWOT analysis perspective. Hence future research can focus on deriving strengths & opportunities from positive outcomes and deriving weaknesses & threats from negative outcomes of remote working through empirical studies.

Some positive outcomes of remote working identified through the literature are found to be difficult to clearly distinguish between strengths and opportunities of remote working as some may fall into both criteria’s. The same concern is with the constraints/ negative outcomes of remote working as there was a difficulty in distinguishing them between weaknesses and threats. Hence more researches are required in this scope to get a better understanding between four components of SWOT analysis on remote working.

Also, the positive outcomes identified as strengths and opportunities through the literature may not be effective or available in practical scenarios if the remote working strategy is not properly planned and managed in a given business environment. Hence, future researches need to be conducted on this area to examine whether the employees/employers truly perceive or accept the positive outcomes as strengths and opportunities. The negative outcomes identified as weaknesses and threats based on the literature may not be general to everyone working remotely. There can be job specific and industry specific threats and weaknesses where further researches are required to get an understanding about this area in a broader view. Finally, it’s vital that researchers need to work collaboratively hand in hand with industry experts and HR practitioners to better understand the practical context of the internal and external environmental factors discussed in SWOT analysis of remote working.

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