Employee Engagement Strategy for Employees Working in Virtual Environment in the IT Industry

Dr. Shachi Yadav
Anshuman Dubey, Pulkit Chawla, Saurav Jha
ABVSME

Jawaharlal Nehru University

Abstract

In the new normal created by the COVID-19 pandemic many businesses have made arrangements for a remote work culture. Due to this pandemic, there is greater shift from traditional work environment to the virtual environment. The purpose of the paper is to understand the influence of virtual workplace on employee engagement. The shift raises the need for developing a new employee engagement strategy which can help even in post-pandemic era. The paper explores the secondary data to identify different parameters after which thematic analysis of data took place that was gathered through the Delphi technique. Trends were analyzed and strategy is deployed which helps in understanding the engagement and working on performance measurement.

Keywords: Virtual Workplace, Employee Engagement, Performance Level, Work from home

Introduction

Work from home during COVID-19 time has become the new normal for companies in the IT sector. But work from home is not a new concept. Instead, it has evolved with the evolution of technology. This new work environment was first practiced during the oil crises in 1970, due to computers' presence led to the start of "telecommuting" for white collars jobs. But around the 1980s, with advancements in computers, high managers, executives started using work from home more and more. Work from home grew due to fast telecommunication using fax, telephones. Also, in the United States, Govt. offered incentives to companies who provided work from home to physically disabled employees. Presently it is prevalent in IT sectors, and post COVID-19 scenarios have shown increasing acceptability to work from home culture. With this, it is essential to develop strategies to foster employee engagement in the new work environment.

Researchers Perspective

Employee engagement: Employee engagement is the work-oriented engagement of the employee with a positive and cheerful attitude towards the organization's work, workplace, and work culture. It is a practice, which tries to get better than the employee's average productivity through various engaging activities and atmosphere that the organization provides to the employee. The three main pillars which influence employee engagement are work, workplace, and work culture. With the change in the workplace for the IT sector post COVID-19, it is crucial to transform existing policies to strategically enhance employee engagement.

Virtual working environment: It is not a physical workplace simulation but a workbench with all the requirements necessary for the work. It does not have a physical presence, but employees are connected via the internet or intranet. The primary purpose of its introduction in the market was to make employees collaborate from various geographies on the same platform.

Problem Statement

Work from home is here to stay and not leaving anytime soon. It may be because of the current pandemic situation, many businesses have made arrangements for a remote work culture in a very short period, but the pandemic also accelerated the existing trends toward more flexible work

arrangements, especially for the millennials, who value the freedom to shift between work and life as they see fit. Work from home can cut down on the cost and lost time of long commutes, for both the organization as well as the employees. But there are some issues or rather challenges which came into the picture because of a sudden shift in work culture which certainly needs to be faced by an organization as soon as possible, to prevent any ill impact on the employees or their works.

The following challenges (research questions) needs to be addressed:

1. How would employee engagement work out for an organization in the long run?
2. How would an organization build team cohesiveness in remote work culture?
3. How would the organization engage employees at the same level, if some employees are working from the office and some are working from home?
4. What about the professional ethics in the organizations, which are transitioning to a largely remote work culture?

Objective

The research's motive is to define the process of creating the environment and analyzing the aspects that can play major roles in keeping employees engaged in the virtual working environment. The paper deals with engagement in a particular industry. The presence of a virtual environment is not a new thing; it was there in some of the big organizations, and employees were know the same. However, the need to create a virtual environment for employees has risen in every industry due to the CORONA pandemic, sudden lockdowns, and curfews. There are always pros and cons attached to some new implementations, so the workplace has no physical presence. As a virtual environment is the new normal in many corporations, so it is for the employees. However, the measuring factors of performance are the same; we also try to focus on them. We also analyze the industry trending practices for the same and try to understand the impact on productivity, benefits to employees, and the company, and how we can further grow in this new normal.

Literature Review

Factors Affecting the Productivity of IT Sector employees in Working from Home

To understand the concept of Employee engagement better, it is important and beneficial to know about Self-Determination Theory.
Self-Determination Theory, formally introduced by (Ryan & Deci, 2000), is now being used to understand the natural or intrinsic tendencies of an individual to behave in healthy and effective ways. In Self-Determination Theory (SDT; (Ryan & Deci, 2000)), Deci & Ryan distinguish between different types of motivation based on the different reasons or goals that give rise to an action. The most basic distinction is between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome. When employees begin to withdraw and hide their identities, ideas, and feelings, they become disengaged and defensive, resulting in an adverse effect on work performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Over three decades of research has shown that the quality of experience and performance can be very different when one is behaving for intrinsic versus extrinsic reasons.

According to (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017), the bond between leaders and employees is an essential element for engaging employees, increasing organizational profitability. Improving employee engagement strategies is critical to an organization's profitability. Disengaged employees will result in reduced workplace productivity and decreased customer service skills. A leader's capability to successfully leverage employee engagement strategies is essential to organizational achievement.

Development Dimensions International (DDI, 2005, as cited by (Tripathi & Sharma, 2016)) states that a manager or leader must do the following five things to create a highly engaged workforce -
- Align efforts with strategy
- Empower
- Promote and encourage teamwork and collaboration
- Help people grow and develop
- Provide support and recognition where appropriate

As mentioned by (Lockwood N. R, 2007), without a workplace environment for employee engagement, turnover will increase, and efficiency will decline, leading to low customer loyalty and decreased stakeholder value. Consequently, because the cost of low employee engagement will be detrimental to organizational success, it is essential for HR to foster optimistic, effective people managers along with workplace policies and practices that focuses on employees well-being, health and work/life balance

As per **(Bathini & Kandathil, 2015),** employee cost has been defined in factors that are
- Increase work stress.
- Loss of health.
- Social and professional isolation.
- Negative appraisal impacted on career growth.

While the cost incurred by the employer as
- The technical setup is provided to the individual employee.
- Individual monitoring.
- Changes in HR policy.

Referring to a study by (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Jenny, 2015) illustrating an experiment conducted at CTrip (a NASDAQ listed Chinese travel agency), home working was shown a deliver a 13% improvement in performance. There were other positives too, including greater job satisfaction, and significantly less staff absence and turnover.

(Airtasker, 2020) According to a study, telecommuters "worked 1.4 more days every month or 16.8 days more every year" than people who worked in an office.

As per (Zhao, 2020), access to work from home in the US has increased from 28% in 2011 to 54% in 2020. And also satisfaction with work from home benefits has increased now reaching 4.3 out of 5. According to (Bloom N. , 2014), we found that people working from home completed 13.5% more calls than the office staff did. It estimated that it saved $1900 per employee for the nine months.

(Dixon, 2019) Yahoo's recently banned on work from home is telling as it resulted in a debate in the media and subsequent corporate actions. However, indicating work from as a costly business.

Marissa Mayer, Yahoo's chief executive officer, defend the ban. She argued that people are more collaborative and innovative when working together in the office.

Gaps in literature

Previous academic and professional work on work from home employee has been mainly focused on determining the efficiency and cost associated with this workplace alternative.

Work from home research is more associated with employee and organization convenience of performing tasks. But in research, it will be focusing on factors affecting the employee's productivity working from home, and the location chosen will be Delhi NCR. I have drawn inspiration from JOHN Elton Mayo's experiment of "Hawthrone," which was on industrial workers.

Methodology

This section contains the method design for gathering necessary data and information for analysis to address the research objectives and questions. The method design for the collection of data and information is document analysis and Delphi Technique. As the research is qualitative, it is important to take Industry experts' input along with document analysis. The experts' input is taken through a structured interview to gather information about the industry relevant to the research for analysis.

The method design for the analysis of data and information is thematic analysis to determine and compare the employees' productivity and level of engagement with the organization in the IT sector when they work from home.

In this paper, we will conduct exploratory research for the understanding of employee engagement in the virtual environment. The research is flexible, versatile, interactive, and helps us understand the underlying opinions and motivation in the new normal created by the covid pandemic. It also helps us uncover the new potential parameters that are not been tapped and provide a more insightful exposure to problems to develop ideas. This qualitative research, by both working on primary data as well as exploring secondary data, will be a key to map the engagement levels. Delphi technique helps us understand the views of an expert on research problems and future developments that may develop in this area of business.

Structured interview

The researchers interacted with industry experts to get insight into virtual workplaces and new trends emerging from them. The researchers asked them about: View on the virtual workplace, performance comparison (offline vs. online workplace), employee perception of virtual workplace, problems faced by employees in the virtual workplace, employee feedback on this new working environment, and how to make virtual workplace more employee-friendly and engaged.

The questions that were asked were an attempt to understand the virtual workplace practices at firms to make it more employee-friendly. Based on the responses, this paper tries to formulate a strategy to enhance the level of employee engagement.

Insights from Industry: An Analysis

When we interviewed experts from different organizations about their experience with working on virtual environment considering different parameters (appendix attached below), we get different opinions, but a general perception is that the new virtual work culture has an impact on the mental level. Virtual workplace has reduced their movement, interaction, expression, and development. When we compare virtual workplace and traditional workplace, we find that in traditional work environment, face-to-face interaction and collaboration is there, which makes it more effective. Virtual work environment doesn't feel like an actual office work environment, which makes it sometimes difficult to adjust, especially when working from home mentally. According to Meddhans (Manager at OYO), "We spent our life developing soft skills, but now use of soft skills has reduced drastically at the virtual workplace because now meetings are more objective-based. We barely get a chance to express ourselves. This is hampering our individual development." Also, traditional workplaces allow employees to maintain their grooming and develop them. At a traditional workplace, it is mandatory to work on grooming and personality development part for a virtual workplace it is an optional activity where all are not interested to put effort. Especially for new employees who find it difficult to bond with their new team members, they barely have any interactions except from team meetings. But virtual workplace also comes with few positive outcomes. During our interview with employees, employees' common positive perception is that since they don't have to travel for 2-4 hours, it's like they are getting 4 hours in their life to explore other opportunities. They also feel that even though stress level has not reduced but now, it is more manageable, and with a healthier diet, they are feeling energetic at home. From employers' perspective, one can say that in an IT-base, it has not created any problem. Their office expenses have reduced and have pushed the employees to work for a few extra hours, which was not easy in traditional workplaces where time-bound slots were given.

When we asked the expert regarding the performance and productivity of employees working in a virtual environment, we observed that different jobs have different outcomes. For jobs that are more programmed and structured, like coding or in the IT sector, performance and productivity have increased, if not constant, from the company's perspective as the employees are available for the tasks anytime. .For the IT sector, the work is not that much affected by the pandemic; only the work culture sees the change. Initially, employees were enthusiastic about work from home, but they got bored at home with time. Employees could play games, go to cafes or just gossip during their breaks but now, they do their jobs or doze off during their breaks. According to an internal survey at the company, it was found out that the employees who are parents or are stable with their current jobs have more likability towards work from home than singles or people who want to learn and grow.

For jobs, which need creativity and consultation from different verticals, have faced productivity challenges. Although achieved through virtual calls, their coordination is achieved through virtual calls, but an expression of ideas is yet to find the traditional match. The employee often turn off their mic and camera due to home disturbances and avoid speaking and contributing until it is very important. This has made even creative task monotonous.

The employee engagement at a virtual workplace is largely influenced by the employee's family equations while working from home. People who are unmarried and are living at home working at an abrupt work shift find it monotonous and challenging working for hours. But there are few who are happy with the virtual workplace because they are getting more time to spend with family. But

what remains common for all employees is that they want to change in work culture, like the hybrid model is a good option, where it is optional for employees to work from home or office.

According to the experts, one of the employees' major concerns is associated with their work-life balance. Because the concept of work from home is practically new for most of the employees, they are trying to do their best, but employees are facing difficulty in maintaining equilibrium between their work-life or career and their family or social life at an individual level. It is not that they don't know about the problem; it is just that, they don't know how to handle or solve it. With time, the employees may get adjusted to this kind of work culture, but it is also a responsibility of the organization to support their employees in adapting to work from home while maintaining work-life balance.

For learning and growth of employees at the virtual workplace, companies in IT Industry are taking major steps to provide the employees necessary resources and materials online, but it is not that engaging or effective in case of most of the companies. Which can slow down the employees' growth rate instead of boosting it and may become sheer wastage of capital and resources, if not done properly.

Traditionally, the very important notices were displayed at the company's Notice board physically, but now daily employees are getting those critical notices along with hundreds of other company mails. Even if an employee knows that he would be getting an important mail, he would have to search for it in the mail inbox, and if he/she is not aware of the information about the notice, he/she may not get to know about it.

With the pandemic, the way of celebrating achievements has changed for the companies. Now, the companies can't have their celebration or company event, where everyone from the company used to gather and interact. The employees even can't have their adventure trips, picnics, team gatherings, team lunch, and other interactive or engaging events that they usually waited for and used to think about. In any virtual company event, only the guests and the event coordinators can speak. The others who don't know each other in the same virtual room can't have personal interaction or conversation with each other was traditionally how people used to interact at an event.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The engagement of an employee at a virtual workplace is a difficult task. The employee-employer interaction through a virtual platform has restricted every non-work-related interaction, which earlier engaged employees. Team interaction, team gathering, individual development opportunities have reduced due to which work has become monotonous, boring, non-creative. Those who are happy with this new work culture, also agree to issues of lack of belongingness for work and organization. Work is more like an assignment that needs more interaction and expression for communicating ideas. Companies are working through various programs to make the virtual workplace more engaged, offering games, interactive sessions, video call celebration, and many more. But still, they need to work more so that employee soft skills are used more and more while they work.

Virtual Work Environment can become convenient if work-life balance can be maintained at employee's level, and company's level, appropriate support to the employees and engagement of the employees is carried out properly, most of the employees would get satisfied.

To increase employee engagement, a company can use a Hybrid model (Phadnis, 2020). The work environment is the combination of a traditional office-based work environment and the virtual

work environment. Further, the company can develop a hybrid model on three different bases or based on their combinations. The three other bases for the Hybrid model are as specified below-

1. They give the employees the option to choose which kind of work environment they are convenient with and want to work in, for the company with their highest performance level.
2. Having a fixed number of employees engaged in both traditional office work environment and virtual work environment on a rotation basis (e.g., 40% employees in traditional office work environment and 60 % virtual work environment) either daily, weekly, monthly, or any other time period, which the company is comfortable with.
3. Based on four degrees, i.e., not satisfactory, satisfactory, good and excellent for performance levels of employees' in the last six months i.e., when employees worked traditionally and in the last six months, when they have worked virtually. A comparison is made to help the company in making the decision to call the employees. A decision would be taken on whether calling employees to traditional office work environment would be advantageous or disadvantageous for the company.

A table to represent one of the aspects in which employees before the pandemic were working well is given below:-

Employee	Performance in Office Environment (last 6 months before pandemic)	Performance in Virtual Environment (last 6 months)	Effect on company
A	Good	Not Satisfactory	Disadvantageous
B	Good	Satisfactory	Disadvantageous
C	Good	Good	No Effect
D	Good	Excellent	Advantageous

Similarly, it can be done for all the employees and each degree of performance levels for an organization using a simple computer program, keeping in mind the simple logic.
Excellent > Good > Satisfactory > Not Satisfactory

An increase in employee-employer interaction and conversation can lead to better communication among them, leading to better employee engagement as familiarity. The employee's inclusiveness with the organization can increase, resulting in internal motivation for the employee, which will encourage him/her to give more effort in his/her work, thus increasing the employee's performance level.

Since the team is dispersed worldwide, and can't have team gatherings or celebrate team achievement through a virtual meeting. Casual gatherings for friends in the same city, who are employees of either the same company or different companies can be promoted. Instead of giving the monetary compensation, the companies can provide them special lunch coupons which he/she can utilize with his/her friends who have the same coupon, which is given to them from their company for the same reason. It can be implemented by a tie-up between companies that favors this kind of compensation coupons. For example, company X and Y can make a hybrid compensation plan (Lunch budget, Team Party Budget). The employees of companies X and Y living in the same city can avail these coupons.

Employees' level of engagement can be improved by involving them in the decisions relating to overtime work, as now they are getting more tasks, the moment they complete one task well before the deadline, which makes them feel stressed more. To make it easier to understand, if an employee

has to complete a task in 5 days and he/she has achieved it in 3 days, then he/she has to start working on another task 4th day. They are monetarily compensated for that but not asked whether they would like to take a break and continue on the 5th day rather than the 4th day. If it goes on, they may not try to perform better if they are instructed to work, unwillingly, just because of some monetary benefits. Employees may start taking their work messages casually or neglecting them if things are not adequately handled.

According to the company's needs, employees now have to work on the weekends as well, and even have lesser break timings, which plays a large part in their work-life imbalance, not keeping both employees' mental and physical health in mind. Now, for the weekends as well, employees have to ask for leaves, frequently. To have all the work completed, well before time, disregarding employees' mental and physical health can reduce employee engagement in the company, which can be beneficial for the companies in the short term but not in the long term. So, a company should provide the employees regular holidays to help them maintain their work-life balance and should only be disturbed, if very urgent work is there, during the holidays, thus increasing the employees' level of engagement.

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APPENDIX I

The Semi structured questionnaire for the insights of expert

Section A: Views on Virtual Workplace

1. What are your views on virtual workplace environment compared to traditional workplace?
2. How do you see performance and productivity of employee in virtual workplace when compared to traditional workplace?

Section B: Observations and challenges faced by employee in virtual workplace

1. What is your observation regarding employee perception of virtual workplace?
2. What are the problems faced by employees in virtual workplace?

Section C: Feedback and Suggestion

1. What are employee's feedback on this new working environment and how comfortable they are in this new environment?
2. What are your suggestions to make virtual workplace more employee friendly and engaged?

Author for Correspondence

Saurav Jha (saurav17_sme@jnu.ac.in)