

Experiences on Work from Home and its future potential among faculty of medical universities: An Exploratory Phenomenological Study

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Abstract:

Background:

Materials and Methods: This phenomenological qualitative study was done in four different public and private medical universities of Karachi from 15 October to 30th November, 2021 after getting approval from the IRB of Jinnah Sindh Medical University, Karachi. Two focus group discussions and seven in-depth interviews were conducted with heads and faculty members of medical universities. Participants were recruited purposively based on the experience of working from home during a pandemic. Thematic analysis was done by both deductive and inductive approaches.

Results: The five themes that emerged included effect on work focus and output, effect on teaching and learning, effect on personal and family life, effect on environment and economy and Suitability of WFH. The participants liked the flexibility of WFH in terms of saving commuting time, rescheduling their classes and spending quality time with their family. The major barriers identified in work productivity included distractions at home, poor internet connectivity and feeling of isolation.

Conclusion: The concept of work from home strategy in medical universities has its challenges and opportunities. A strategy needs to be developed so that potential opportunities that WFH provides are utilized.

Key Word: COVID-19 strategies, Work from home, medical universities.

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I. Introduction

World Health Organization officially declared the COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020 (1). Lockdowns were introduced globally to reduce the risk of spread and work from home (WFH) strategy was adopted by many organizations to ensure safety of employees (2). The alternative terms described by Nilles for WFH included telecommunicating, remote work, flexible workplace and e-working (3). Grant et al further elaborated and described it as an alternative working environment in which employees can perform tasks elsewhere/home that are normally done in primary and central workplaces for at least some portion of their schedule and interact with people inside and outside of organization by using electronic media (4).

Previous studies have suggested that work from home was evolving trend even before pandemic. Research conducted in UK reported that since 2006, workers willingness to work from home was increased by 20% (5). An experimental study conducted in 2015 by Chinese Travel Agency Company of 16000 workers revealed that the overall productivity of workers increased by 13% characterized by high work output, less breaks, fewer sick leaves and higher job satisfaction (6). An evidence based review also described that employers found it easier to navigate their employees and reduce their operational costs (7). On the contrary several adverse effects were also reported which included network problems, work overload, issues related to family, lack of proper place at home and decreased face to face interactions. Moreover, it can also increase chronic conditions like Musculoskeletal Disorders (8).

In Pakistan first lock down was implemented in March 2020 after which employees related to education, management and administration were directed to operate remotely from home. This also included faculty of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in medical universities. Working and teaching from home was a completely new experience for faculty of medical universities. No focused study is available in Pakistan to date to have investigated this new phenomenon in depth. This study aimed to explore this phenomenon of work from home among faculty of medical universities.

II. Material And Methods

This exploratory phenomenological qualitative study was done in four different public and private medical universities of Karachi from 15 October to 30th November, 2021 after getting approval from the IRB (JSMU/IRB/2021/555) of Jinnah Sindh Medical University, Karachi. Two focus group discussions and seven in-depth interviews were conducted with heads and faculty members of medical universities (Table 1). All interviews were conducted online via mobile and zoom. Participants were recruited purposively based on the experience of working from home during the pandemic.

Interviews were audiotaped after the consent of participants and then were transcribed by a professional transcriber. During inductive analysis first, three transcripts were read by three individual researchers to identify meaningful statements which were later merged into themes. Onwards data was analyzed deductively. i.e. statements favoring the finalized themes were written under a specific theme. The quotes supporting the themes were written under a specific theme.

Table 1: Information of participants and codes

Interviews	Codes	Gender	Age	Profession	Type of institute
Focus	I 1	Female		Assistant Professor	Government 1
Group	I 2	Female		Senior Lecturer	
Discussion	I 3	Male		Assistant Professor	
1	I 4	Female		Lecturer	
	I 5	Female		Lecturer	
	I 6	Female		Director	
Focus	I 7	Male		Lecturer	Government 1
Group	I 8	Male		Lecturer	
Discussion	I 9	Female		Lecturer	
2	I 10	Female		Lecturer	
IDI 1	I 11	Female		Dean	Government 1
IDI 2	I 12	Female		Lecturer	Private 1
IDI 3	I 13	Female		Lecturer	Government 1
IDI 4	I 14	Female		Associate Professor	Government 2
IDI 5	I 15	Female		Associate Professor	Private 2
IDI 6	I 16	Female		Associate Professor	Private 2
IDI 7	I 17	Female		Assistant Professor	Government 2

Study Design: Exploratory Qualitative Study

Study Location: Four medical, two government and two private universities of Karachi, Pakistan.

Study Duration: 15th October 2021 to 30th November 2021

Sample size: 11 participants

Sample size: data collection was continued until saturation achieved.

Subjects & selection method:

Inclusion criteria:

1. Faculty of medical universities who experienced work from home during lockdown
2. Either sex
3. All faculty including demonstrators, lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors and professors.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Participant who denied to participate in our study.

Procedure methodology

After informed consent was obtained, a semi-structured questionnaire/interview was used to collect the data from the recruited participant. The interview guide collected information on the experiences of participants on the effect of WFH on their work, personal and family life, their organization and overall environment. They were also inquired about the future potential of WFH in the post-pandemic world.

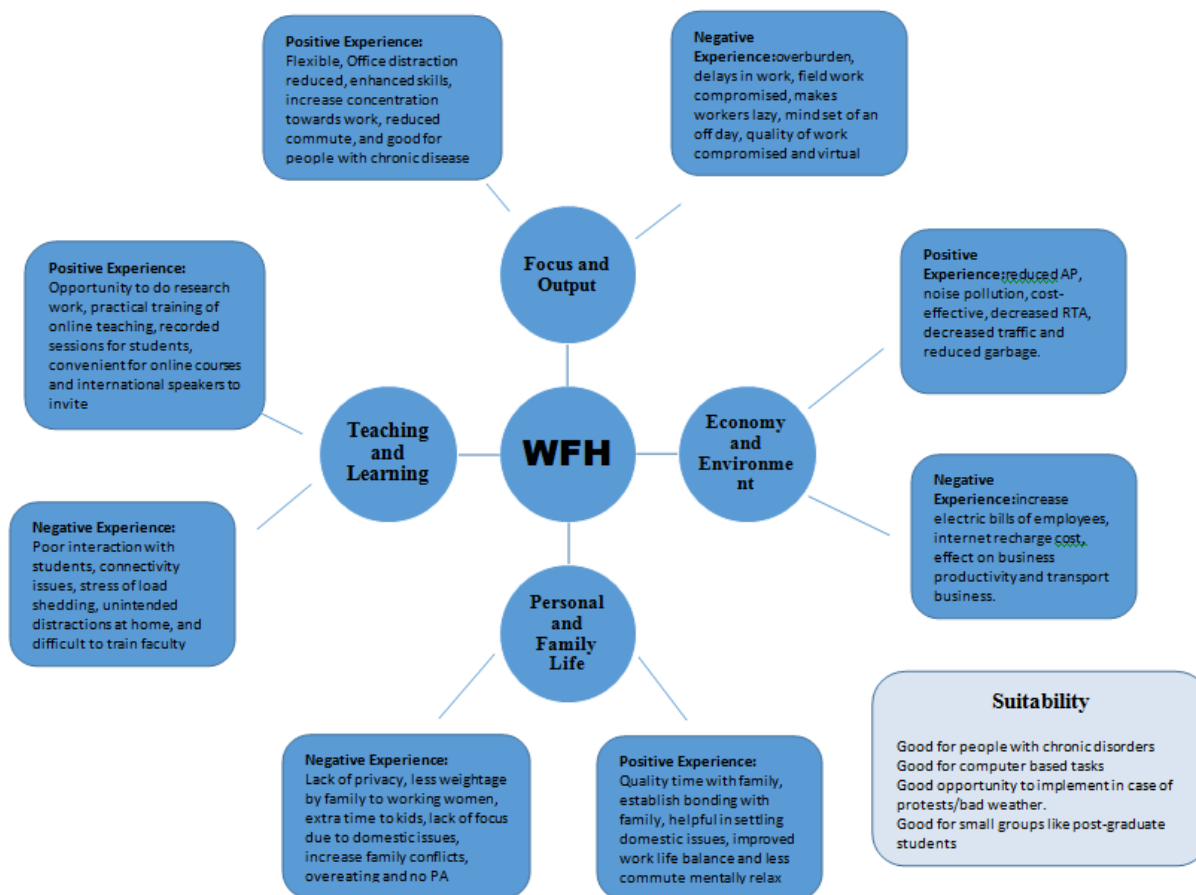
Statistical analysis

During inductive analysis first, three transcripts were read by three individual researchers to identify meaningful statements which were later merged into themes. Onwards data was analyzed deductively i.e. statements favoring the finalized themes were written under a specific theme. The quotes supporting the themes were written under a specific theme.

III. Result

Five major themes emerged and positive and negative experiences related to them were summarized. The themes included effect on work focus and output, effect on teaching and learning, effect on personal and family life, effect on environment and economy and Suitability of WFH (Fig 1)

Figure1: Framework of WFH



Effect on Work Focus and Output: Some participants reported that their focus and output were positively affected in the sense of saving time as stated by a faculty member, “WFH strategy reduced my time to prepare for office and commute. Moreover it increased the flexibility to work at the time of my convenience”. On the contrary, some believed that WFH disorganized their schedule as there was no fixed time for work and they felt like working all the day.

Similarly, some of the participants were able to focus more on their work as they thought that it reduced the unnecessary office distractions as commented by one of the participants, “when you are in office the administration assigns you tasks that are not your responsibility”. On the other hand, some found it difficult to focus at home due to domestic distractions like dealing with family members, maids and children. This was particularly raised by female faculty members who thought that work responsibilities of women were given less weight at home by their family and it was particularly difficult to focus for women with small children as stated by a female faculty member, “the family was not coming to terms with how online work takes place, so every time I had to beg for privacy to take my lecture but still somebody would come and knock without realizing that I was doing official work”

Effect on Teaching and Learning: With regards to teaching, online teaching brought abrupt and unexpected challenges for the faculty. One of the major positives reported by them was enhancement of their capacity to teach online as stated by one participant, “we became more tech savvy as we learnt about using LMS software’s like Moodle, Google meet, Zoom and Teams.” Moreover, they found it interesting to incorporate special effects in their lectures by adding pictures and videos. Some of them found its flexibility interesting in terms of easily rescheduling their classes. A few also thought that online tools make it easy to reach out national and international experts and invite them as guest speakers. The research-oriented faculty members were of the view that they got more time to work on their papers and connect with their teams online.

The negatives reported in terms of teaching included dealing with distractions at home, connectivity issues and difficulty in monitoring and engaging students online. One of them said, "Noise of surroundings was major distraction like there was chicken of my neighbor who used to cluck whole the time during class and my students made fun of it". Another one stated, "Loss of connectivity was one of the common excuse of students to miss classes"

The pros related to learning included convenience for students who are at long distances from their universities. The faculty members also thought that it was easier for students to access learning materials on online resources and also had the advantage of replaying the recorded lectures. However, the biggest barriers for effective online learning were lack of access to laptops, poor internet connectivity and load shedding.

Effect on Family and Personal Life: Some of the participants saw WFH as a great opportunity to spend quality time with the family and increase family bonding as stated by a mother, "I felt like a responsible mother as I was able to spend quality time with them by engaging them in physical activities, indoor games, and reading stories". While others thought that WFH increased the internal family conflicts and office brought more balance to their life as expressed by another participant, "Sitting and facing each other whole the day can lead to conflicts and arguments among family members"

In terms of effect on lifestyle some found it helpful in providing time for physical activity and improving the diet by eating healthy home-made food while others thought that lack of office pressure made them sleep more and overeat. Moreover, for some, WFH brought mental stability by avoiding rush hours in traffic, for others, not socializing in office gave them feeling of isolation.

Effect on Economy and Environment: The majority of the faculty thought that WFH had a lot of advantages in terms of improving environment and economy.

They expressed that decreased traffic was a great opportunity to limit air and noise pollution. One of them said, "We could see the clear blue sky which was so refreshing". Less traffic can also contribute in reducing road traffic injuries. Less people on roads also was helpful in reducing the garbage and keeping the roads clean.

The economic advantages reported included reduced operational cost of offices and decreased transport expenditure. However, few of them expressed concern over rising expenditure at home for internet connectivity. One of them also thought that WFH was detrimental for transport business.

Suitability of WFH: The participants expressed that WFH was suitable in medical universities for computer-based tasks like making sessions for courses or writing or reviewing research proposals while WFH cannot be an alternate for field work and laboratory demonstrations. They also thought in terms of teaching and learning, online mode was more effective in small group classes of undergraduate and postgraduate students whereas it was not good for high volume lectures of undergraduate students where it was impossible to make sure that everyone was listening.

Moreover, few participants also thought that WFH provided a unique opportunity in emergencies like tough weather conditions or in times of city protests/processions to keep the work uninterrupted. They also thought that it can help people with chronic disorders for whom daily exertion could be a challenge as expressed by one of the participate "I have a backache issue. So when I drive to and from the workplace, it requires a lot of energy and is physically exhaustive"

IV. Discussion

This current study has explored positive and negative experiences of WFH among faculty of medical universities and attempted to understand the potential future of WFH in the medical universities.

In terms of the effect of WFH on work focus and output, the majority of the female participants of the current study reported distractions at home made them feel overburdened which is similar to study conducted on female teachers and workers in which participants found it difficult to keep a balance between work and family which lead to delay in fulfilling their tasks (9). Communication gap and lack of supervision have also been reported to effect work productivity in previous literature (1). Whereas, positive findings on saving time, avoiding unwanted office distractions and flexible environment were similar to a previous study conducted in Indonesia on school teachers (10).

With regards to the effect of WFH on teaching and learning, issues of poor connectivity and difficulty in monitoring and engaging students have been reported (11). These issues are also highlighted in a study conducted on teachers of medical universities of Pakistan (12). Positive experiences like flexibility of scheduling classes have also been reported in literature (13). In another study consistent with our findings, it was reported that work from home was favorable for them in writing manuscripts, analyzing data and reading literature (10).

The effects of WFH on personal and family life in a previous article also emphasize the increased family bonding (14). Isolation due to lack of social interaction has also been highlighted in another study (15).

Economic benefits have also been reported in the previous study conducted on Indonesian teachers in which reduction in transport cost has been highlighted as a factor for reduced stress among employees (10). Another study conducted in South Africa reports cost-effectiveness of working from home in which savings for organization and employees have been reported (16).

V. Conclusion

The concept of work from home strategy in medical universities has its challenges and opportunities. A strategy needs to be developed so that potential opportunities that WFH provides are utilized.

VI. Limitations

The study was exploratory therefore no inferences can be drawn. However, the findings of this study can help in developing quantitative tools for studying the effects of WFH. In terms of teaching and learning, perceptions of only faculty are included.

VII. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study we recommend that WFH has the potential to be integrated alongside traditional office work in medical universities. However, the implementation of this hybrid model of work will require the development of home-based and office-based work plans so that faculty members are clear about their responsibilities while working from home and are also monitored effectively. Partial WFH shall also be a voluntary choice as those faculty members whose perceived efficiency is compromised working at home shall have the option of sticking to the old norm of office-based work only. Moreover, the potential benefits of online teaching and learning shall also be merged with traditional face-to-face teaching and learning. Once implemented, Future research projects should focus on studying the impact of a hybrid model of work on productivity, environment, and economy.

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