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Work from Home: A conundrum for Human Resource Professionals during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The world is going through one of the most challenging phases in its modern history in the shape of Covid-19 pandemic. With changing regulations and work lifestyles, it has led to the booming of work from home culture. But along with itself, it has brought a lot of practical issues at work including the problems faced by human resource (HR) professionals. It has become difficult to calculate the working hours, fringe benefits and related compensation concerns apart from making new recruitments or downsizings. This research paper is intended to gauge the trepidations of HR professionals and tries to offer some solutions for the same. The methodology adopted in this paper is twofold. Firstly, an extensive literature review of concurrent problems faced by HR professionals was done to identify research gaps. Secondly, a digital questionnaire survey was designed and distributed among various HR professionals in the industry and academic experts on the subject matter. A total of 220 responses were received that were complete in all respects. The data generated from these responses was analysed and is presented in this paper. Some recommendations towards the rectification of the concerns have been offered. It is intended to develop a document which may serve as a reference tool for HR professions to aid them in overcoming their problems in these troubled times.

Keywords: compensation; Covid-19; human resources; questionnaire survey; work from home; working hours

Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with itself a plethora of problems in all walks of life. Human Resources (HR) professionals have been at the centre of action since the pandemic began.

Work from home (WFH) was a novel concept earlier, but now has become an integral part of life. COVID-19 has put trust at front and centre in human resources management [1]. Some researchers have measured productivity in WFH scenarios [2] and impact of e-HR on the human resource management function [3] but not much work is available in literature regarding the difficulties faced by HR professionals during COVID-19 pandemic. There is an ardent need for redefining, relooking, redesigning, and reincorporating HRD in the post COVID-19 context [4]. Employee adjustment and well-being is of paramount importance in the era of COVID-19 [5]. Equally vital are the effects of COVID-19 on HR management from the perspective of digitalization and work-life balance [6]. An interesting research was done where the importance of HR in a COVID-19 world was discussed paradoxically [7].

Another research dwelled upon the conduct of in-depth interviews with 24 middle and senior-level managers and analysed the data using MAXQDA software where the employees reported an increase in working hours, major changes in their roles, reduced levels of productivity, and increased levels of stress, etc. [8]. Another in-depth analysis reported the various dimensions of human resource management evolved with the outbreak of COVID-19 [9]. Some researchers worked upon negotiating time and space when working from home during COVID-19 [10]. In a study the impact of COVID-19 on employee behaviour, stress and coping mechanism during WFH among service industry employees [11] and COVID-19 challenges and human resource management in organized retail operations [12]. Online food delivery operators and essential Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) were allowed to operate during the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. The HR departments in them had to endure a lot of difficulties [13, 14]. The startups were affected a lot and the entrepreneurs and their HR heads had a very torrid time surviving the peak of pandemics [15]. It is imperative that more research be done to understand the issues of HR professionals during COVID-19 pandemic and suggest solutions for them. The present research in this paper aspires to contribute to the same cause.

Methodology:

The methodology adopted in this paper is twofold (Figure 1). Firstly, a literature review of concurrent problems faced by HR professionals was done to identify the research gaps. Secondly, a questionnaire was designed and survey conducted between August 2020 to December 2021 using telephonic and digital means with various HR professionals in the industry and academic experts on the subject matter. A total of 220 responses were received that were full in all respects. The data so generated through the survey was analysed and its results are presented in this paper. Based upon the results, some suggestions have been offered towards the rectification of the concerns.

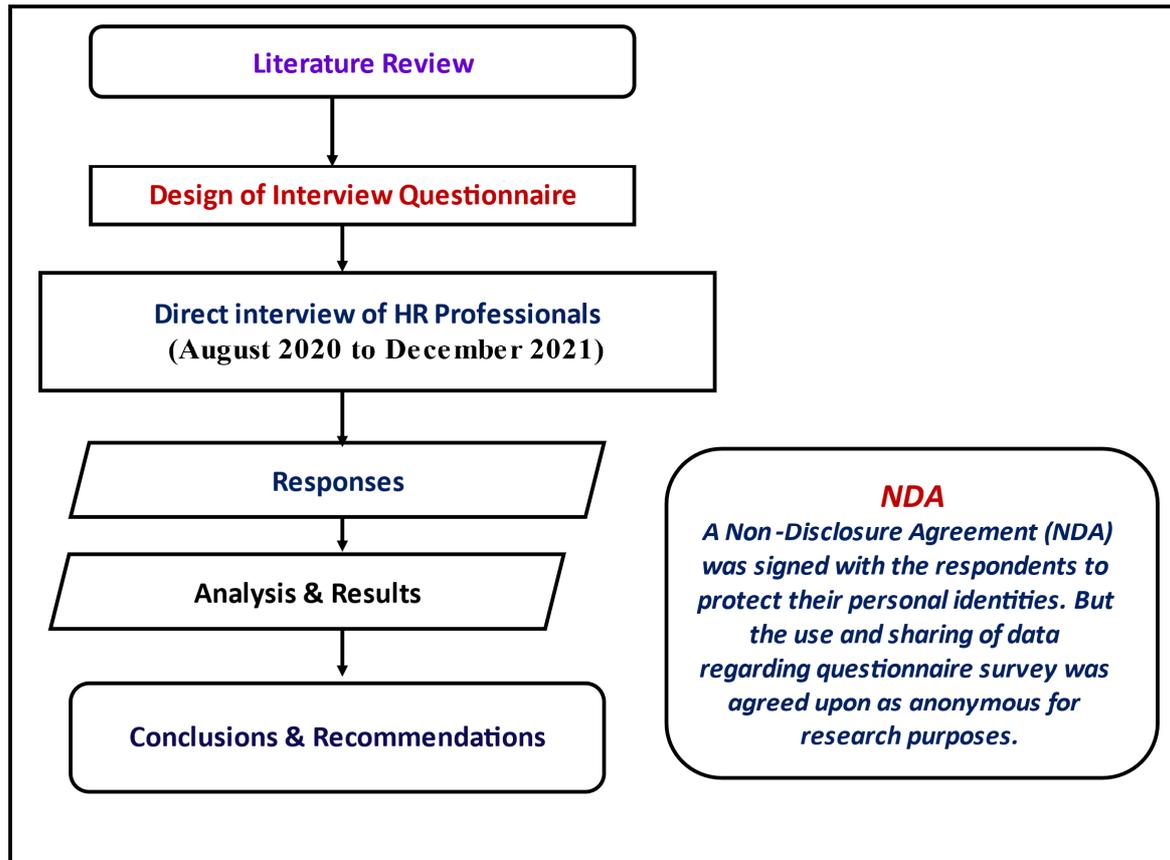


Figure 1. Methodology diagram

Results and Discussion:

The demographic profile of all respondents of the interview questionnaire has been tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

S. No	Demographic Factor	Result (in figure)	Result (in %)
1	Total Number of Respondents	220	100
2	Sex		
	Male	121	55
	Female	99	45
	Others	0	0
3	Age Group (in years)		
	Upto 30	33	15
	31-40	136	62
	41-55	39	18
	Above 55	12	5
4	Work Experience (in years)		
	0-5	22	10
	6-10	48	22
	10-20	123	56
	Above 20	27	12

An overwhelming 98% of the respondents reported that their work culture was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and they were caught off guard (figure 2). The rest of the respondents said that they already had a system that helped their smooth transition to WFH.

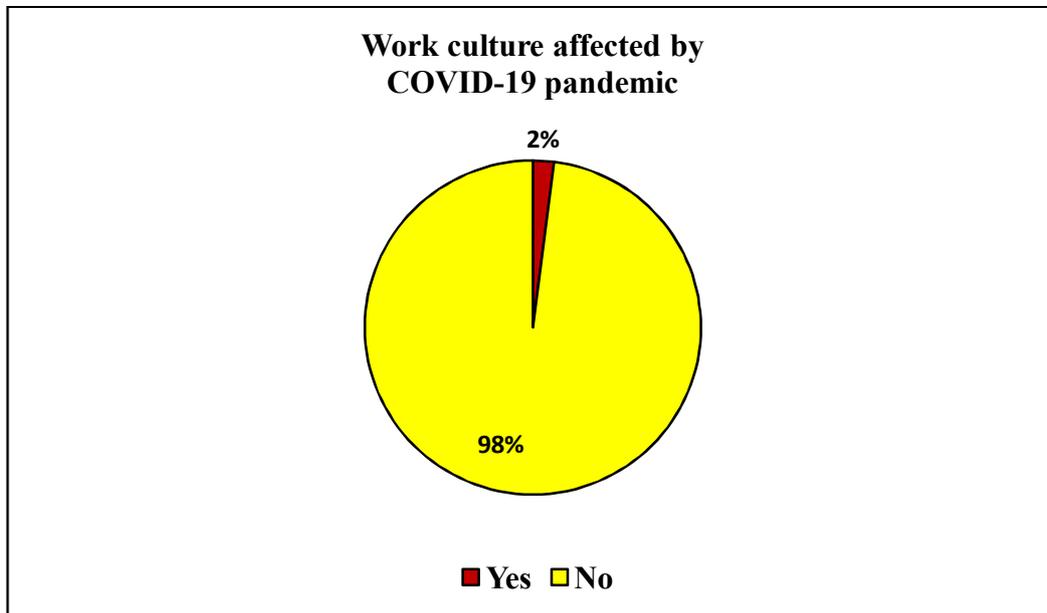


Figure 2. Work culture affected by COVID-19 Pandemic

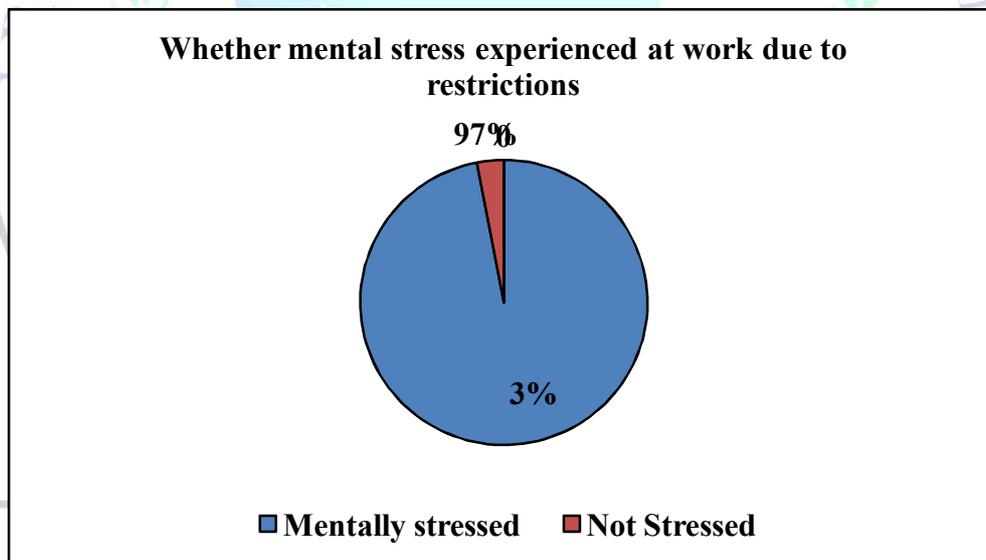


Figure 3. Mental Stress experienced by the respondents

A bulk of respondents complained of work-related mental stress due to WFH restrictions (figure 3). Some of the most common work-related problems identified by the HR professionals have been shown in figure 4. An astonishing 100% of all the respondents accepted that communication was the major issue faced by them at the work place due to WFH culture. It was not easy to get to the staff for a quick chat/discussion while working remotely. The communication is limited to team communication channels like Slack or MS-Teams. A majority of respondents (89%) had issues in wage, compensation, bonus and benefits calculations due to a lot of changes to the work schedules

and working hours of employees. Conducting urgent meetings is also an issue faced by most respondents (85%) especially if team members are from different time zones and working on more than one task. Managing attendance (82%) and annual appraisals (80%) are also very complicated in the WFH culture as mostly they have no idea at what time of the day the team members are working, as the online visibility doesn't guarantee the employee/team is working or not, since using the team communication channels can be accessed from mobile phone on the go too. Burn outs (77%) and generating compliance reports (66%) were also reported as troublesome in WFH. Burn outs results if the employee is not only working from home but also doing household chores there only every day and forgetting to take breaks leading to demotivation and mental burn outs. mental state kicks in. Also, getting work updates in WFH is not easy as most time is wasted in waiting for the replies to emails and other reminders since availability from both the ends are mostly time consuming. Other issues include managing household works with office work and no fixed real time schedules for work as even after office hours one is expected to work as if WFH is no work at all! In an ideal situation most respondents wanted a 4-day working week and the travel time to and from work included in calculation of working hours per day whenever there is work from office.

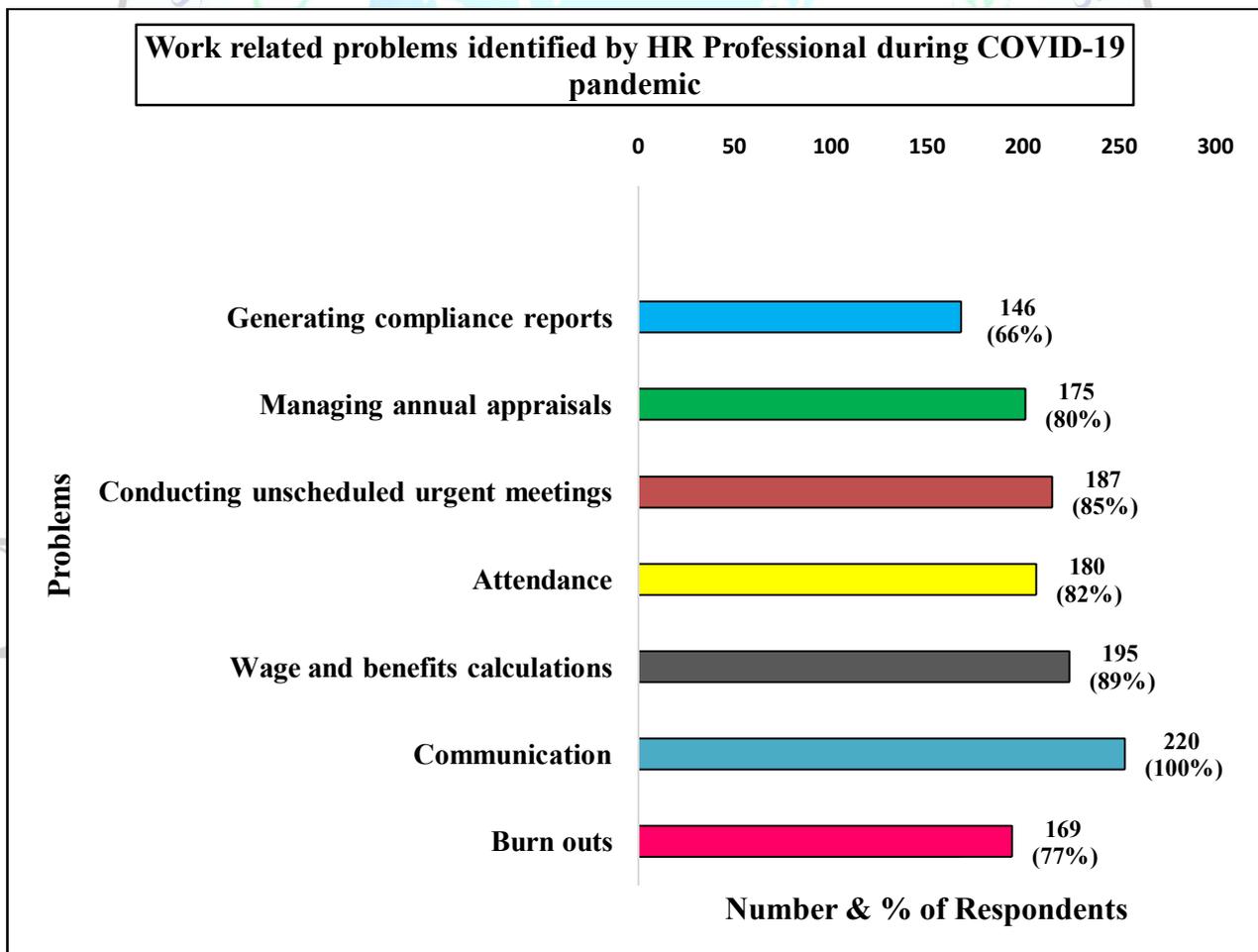


Figure 4. Work related problems identified by HR Professional during COVID-19 pandemic

Conclusion

It can be concluded that work from home culture imposed due to COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenge for the HR Professionals and more research needs to be done to help these professionals to tide the situation and evolve new techniques for the post pandemic era.

Recommendations:

1. Common minimum acceptable work-regulations must be evolved for WFH culture.
2. Humane aspects must be respected by all in WFH culture, as everyone is affected by the pandemic in one way or the other.
3. Guidance and counselling sessions for HR professionals need to be conducted periodically.
4. Scientific calculation methods, software, apps, etc. must be devised and installed to aid the HR professionals in computing wages, benefits, appraisals, etc. during WFH period.
5. More research involving HR professionals on the subject must be conducted.

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Declaration:

The authors declare no known financial or otherwise conflict of interest.

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