

A Study on Hesitancy among Information Technology Employees to Resume Work From Office Post COVID-19 Lockdowns

M P Somashekar ¹, Pruthvi Bharateeya ²

¹ HoD, ² MSW Student

PG Department of Social Work, JSS College of Arts, Commerce and Science,
Mysuru, Karnataka, India

Abstract

There is a belief that there is a latent hesitancy to return to work from office among Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Service employees who are used to working from home since the beginning of COVID-19 Lockdowns. There is a dearth of credible research on the hesitancy to return to work from office. Keeping this in mind, this study has been conducted to analyze the facts that why there is a latent hesitancy among Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services employees. Study surveyed about stress on employees about to return to work from office, their major concern areas, and safety measures expected by employees to be implemented by the employers. A well designed online questionnaire was rolled out to 51 Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services employees of different IT companies of Bangalore city currently working from their homes. Data analyzed using Pareto Analysis, Karl Pearson's coefficient of correlation. Results clearly show that, presumed latent hesitancy does exist among majority of employees. Working with masks on for longer period of time and risk of infection are two major concerns among employees to return to work from office.

Keywords: COVID-19, Work From Home, Work From Office, Pandemic

Introduction

Social Isolation, uncertainty of employment and the infections caused due to COVID-19 have combined together to create its impact on the overall wellbeing of employees across the world. 41.6% of respondents reported that their mental health has been decreased ever since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic.¹

The Corona virus pandemic (COVID-19) has resulted in bringing lot of changes in the working culture of employees round the globe. Millions of employees are continuing their work from home in different capacities for the foreseeable future. Employers are in a tricky situation and facing lot of difficulties to make the decisions on how to promote employees' professional health whilst working at home (WAH). They are in a state of dilemma to assess the needs based on the best available evidences to optimize the employee's outcomes. The aim of this rapid review was to review the impact of WAH

on individual workers' mental and physical health, and determine any gender differences and also to suggest recommendations for employers and employees to optimize employees' health.²

In a survey conducted by American Psychological Association (March, 2021) titled "Stress in America: One Year Later, A New Wave of Pandemic Health Concerns", it was reported that 49% of American adults feel uneasy about returning to in-person interaction even if pandemic is over. 48% of vaccinated adults also reported that they are also not comfortable returning to in-person interactions³. This goes on to show that, people globally are still hesitant to return to pre-pandemic means of interactions.

An online survey conducted by Justin Dallaire of Strategy online Canada (2021) on 1,010 employees working from home identified the following results.

1. 94.00% of respondents believe COVID-19 is "Far from Over".
2. 54.00% of respondents are afraid to return to work.
3. 60.00% of respondents plan to refuse to return to going back to office.
4. 60.00% of respondents believe their relationship with their co-workers have suffered due to interactions limited to online/virtual meets.
5. 83.00% of respondents are worried about risk of infection at work place/office.⁴

The prospect of returning to the office brings up a range of reactions, from relief and excitement to fear and hesitation. Employees' adaptations during the pandemic increased their sense of perceived safety during a crisis and letting go of those feelings and behaviors won't be immediate. The authors offer four strategies that leaders can use to support their employees and to help ease this transition⁵. These strategies are:

1. **Importance of Communication:** Importance of giving detailed information about safety protocols and expectations.
2. **Allow Employees to Express their Concerns:** Listening to employees with calm and sincerity without attempting to fix everything, is extremely valuable in helping employees transition following disruptive events.
3. **Facilitating Interpersonal Connections:** After working remotely for a long period, employees feel profoundly disconnected from others. Leaders can suggest small gestures such as hosting "back to work" happy hours, group lunches, and suggesting employees talk to other colleagues having expertise in a certain area relevant to the project they are working.
4. **Monitor and Regulate Your Own Emotions:** Leaders should understand and acknowledge that their wellbeing affects their leadership skills and decision and more importantly the mood of the employees.

A study by McKinsey & Company (2021) on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on the IT employees of China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Spain, United Kingdom and USA investigated the possible ways of outcome from the existing pandemic and to understand the requirement of human capital.⁶

Amy Gallo, author of a research article, involving more than 2,000 employees, which was published

in the Harvard Business Review (2021) found out that 58.00% of respondents look for a new job if the companies are not permitting to working from home, while 65.00% of respondents wanted to continue full-time remote working, and 33.00% of respondents preferred hybrid working module.⁷

Rajesh Gopinatha (2021) of Tata Consultancy Services, expressed his opinion on the issue while announcing the details of quarter 4 earnings of the company, said “senior associates will resume work from office starting three days a week”. He also unveiled plans for calling employees to office by the middle of the year.⁸

Naryana Murthy, the founding member of Infosys, in a virtual meeting of Bengaluru 2040 summit organized by Deccan Herald said that, “I am not a great fan of working from home at all” citing the impacts on the company culture due to work from home practice. It can be understood from his words that, if employees continue to work from home, it will be difficult to build the culture of hard work, excellence, meritocracy and discussion. He has made a clarity call to the employees to return to office as pandemic is behind us and working from home is not at all the part of the organizational culture.⁹

Hypothesis

1. Prospect of returning to work from office, causes stress.
2. Wearing of mask for long time and working in centralized air conditioned environment are the major concerns of employees.

Research Methodology

In this study, an extensive method is used to include all relevant questions related to identify latent hesitancy among Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services Employees to resume work from office. This Study also aims to understand the major concerns of employees to resume work from office, expectation of employees by the organization to return to work from office, and precautionary measures adopted by employees or willingness to stay safe to work from home or office. A semi structure questionnaire was prepared after having detailed discussion with both the representatives of management and employees working from home. Pilot survey was conducted and alterations were made based on the observations. Due to the pandemic and travel restrictions, finalized questionnaire in the form of Google Form were rolled out to Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Service employees working from home. Respondents were selected by employing Random Sampling method. A total of 51 employees answered the questionnaire. They are the employees of Bengaluru based different IT companies working from their homes. Informed consent was obtained by explaining the importance of the study through mobile phones and email. Employees with minimum of two years of experience of working in an IT company is the inclusion criteria, and employees are not having experience of two years is the exclusion criteria for the study. Gathered data were entered into Microsoft Office Excel. Descriptive statistics such as percentage, frequency, Pareto analysis and Karl Pearson coefficient of correlation were adopted for analysis of data.

Results

Survey Demographics

Table 1: Demography of Survey Respondents

Sex	Count	%	Marital Status	Count	%
Male	34	66.67%	Single	18	35.29%
Female	17	33.33%	Married	32	62.75%
Total	51	100.00%	Prefer Not Disclose	1	1.96%
Age Bucket	No. of Respondents	%	Experience	Count	%
21-25 Years	7	13.73%	Less than a year	2	3.92%
26-30 Years	10	19.61%	1-3 Years	4	7.84%
31-35 Years	17	33.33%	3-5 Years	4	7.84%
36-40 Years	14	27.45%	5-7 Years	4	7.84%
41-45 Years	2	3.92%	7-10 Years	8	15.69%
46-50 Years	1	1.96%	More 10 years	29	56.86%
Total	51	100.00%	Total	51	100.00%

From the above table, it can be concluded that sample was heterogeneous and spread across different age group, experience level and gender. It can also shows that hesitancy to return to work was spread across sex, age, marital Status and experience of employees.

Preferred Working Mode

Table 2: Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services Employees Preferred Mode of Working

Preference of Work	No of Responses	%
Continue working from home	27	52.94%
Return to workplace	17	33.33%
Not yet decided	6	11.76%
Not answered	1	1.96%
Grand Total	51	100.00%

From the above table, it is evident that more than 50% (27 out of 51 respondents) of the employees are preferred to continue their work from home.

Presumed Stress Level on Prospect of Resuming Work from Office

Table 3: Presumed Stress Level on Prospect of Returning to Work From Office

Stress Level	No of Respondents
Not at all	15

Mildly Stress	15
Moderately Stressed	18
Severe Stress	3
Grand Total	51

Graph 1: Presumed Stress Level among Employees to Return to Work From Office



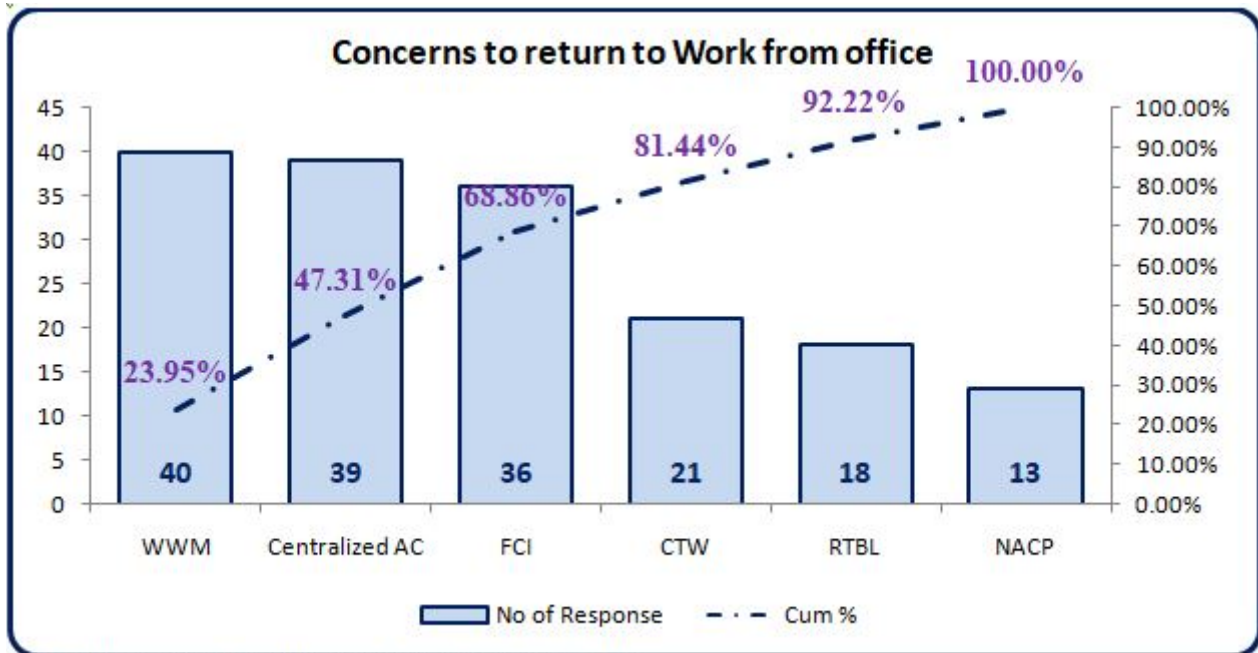
From the Table 3 and Graph 1, 59% (30 out of 55 respondents) have no stress or mild stress to return to work.

Major Concerns to Return to Work From Office

Table 4: Major Concern Areas among Employees to Return to Work From Office

Concern	No of Response	Cum %
WWM	40	23.95%
Centralized AC	39	47.31%
FCI	36	68.86%
CTW	21	81.44%
RTBL	18	92.22%
NACP	13	100.00%
Grand Total	167	

Graph 2: Major Concern Areas of Employees to Return to Work From Office



It is evident from the above graph wearing of masks for a longer time and to working in a air conditioned environment are the major concerns of employees.

Legend

- WWM - Working With Masks On for Long Period of Time
- Centralized AC - Working in Enclosed Spaces/Centralized Air Conditioning
- FCI - Fear of Catching Infection/Carrying Infection to Family
- CTW - Commuting To Work
- RTBL- Relocation to Base Location
- NACP - NonAdherence to COVID-19 Protocols or Inability to Adhere to COVID-19 Protocols due to Nature of Job

Discussion

1. From the Table 2, it is evident that more than 50% of employees preferred to continue their work from home while 33% of the employees preferred to return to work from office, and remaining 12% of the employees have not decided yet. As per Harvard Business Review Survey, 58% of employees preferred to quit their current job if they were called to resume work from office, 65% of respondents preferred to continue full-time work from home, only 35% respondents were willing to try hybrid working. As per the KPMG report published in strategyonline.ca, 4% of respondents believed that the pandemic is “far from over”, 54% of respondents were hesitant to return to work, and 60% of respondents planned to refuse to returning to office.⁴
2. From the Table 3 and Graph 1, it can be concluded that there is no latent or manifested stress among employees to return to work from office. However, KPMG report published in strategyonline.ca suggested that 83.00% of respondents are in a state of fear about risk of infection for their return to office for their work.⁴ No substantive research has comprehensively proven or observed any increased stress level of the employees for the prospect of returning to

work. Hence Hypothesis 1 is neither proved nor disproved.

3. From the Table 4 and Graph 2, it can be shown that wearing of mask for long time working in a centralized air conditioned environment are the major concerns of employees (47.31%) to return to work from office. Researcher cannot find any research on the subject, meanwhile based on this study and the opinions of employees regarding this hypothesis and absence of any contrary findings, it can be concluded that Hypothesis 2 is proved.

Conclusion

1. As per the study, there are around 33.33% of employees willing to return to workplace. Organizations like Tata Consultancy Services are called upon their senior management employees to return to work from office in three staggered days. It seems to be a first step in right direction. This strategy helps organizations to build confidence among junior staff and employees with hesitancy to resume work from office without adding any stress on employees.
2. 23.95% of employees are having a major concern of wearing mask for a longer period of time in office and working in an air conditioned environment. Many states relaxing the rules on mask wearing might encourage employees to resume work from office in future.
3. As per the report published in the Harvard Business Review authored by Amy Gallo, 60% of the employees preferred to quit their job if they were forced to resume work from office. Employees of many western countries including America are shifting their jobs to the companies where there is an option to work from home or hybrid model of working atmosphere.
4. With COVID positive cases reducing and Government of India relaxing many COVID restrictions, hesitancy among Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services employees will subside, and more number of employees may be willing to resume work from office shortly.
5. Every major Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Service organizations have released plans to allow employees to implement hybrid working till end of the year. This should also encourage and allow employees to adjust to resuming work from office
6. Incentive schemes must be introduced as a part of encouragement for the employees to resume to work from office.
7. Organizations must look forward to make arrangements of accommodations for their stay to build confidence among employees to resume the work from office.
8. Organizations should organize campaigns addressing to bring nostalgic feeling of organizational culture, belongingness and the togetherness which can be felt only face-to-face to lure employees to return to work.

References

1. Qualtrics. April 14, 2020. The other COVID-19 crisis: Mental health. <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/confronting-mental-health/>
2. Jodi Oakman, Natasha Kinsman, Rwth Stuckey, Melissa Graham, Victoria Weale. November 30, 2020. A Rapid Review of mental & physical health effects of working at home: how do we optimize health? BMC Public Health, Volume 20. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-09875-z>

3. American Psychological Association. Stress in America: One Year Later, A New Wave of Pandemic Health Concerns. March 2021.
<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2021/sia-pandemic-report.pdf>
4. Justin Dallaire. August 18, 2020. Half of employees hesitant to return to the office as pandemic lingers on. Strategy. <https://strategyonline.ca/2020/08/18/half-of-employees-hesitant-to-return-to-the-office-as-pandemic-lingers-on/>
5. Dierickx Constance, Clark Dorie. August 5, 2021. Returning to the Office Will Be Hard. Here's How Managers Can Make It Easier. Harvard Business Review.
<https://hbr.org/2021/08/returning-to-the-office-will-be-hard-heres-how-managers-can-make-it-easier>
6. Susan Lund, Anu Madgavkar, James Manyika, Sven Smit, Kweilin Ellingrud, Olivia Robinson. The Future of Work after COVID-19. February 18, 2021. McKinsey Global Institute.
<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19>
7. Amy Gallo. Help your Employees who are anxious about returning to the office. July 6, 2021. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2021/07/help-your-employees-who-are-anxious-about-returning-to-the-office>
8. What TCS Management said on salary hikes, return-to-office plans for employees, April 12, 2022. Mint. <https://www.livemint.com/companies/people/when-will-tcs-employees-return-to-office- here-s-what-ceo-rajesh-gopinathan-said-11649738523322.html>
9. Reshab Shaw. March 11, 2022. Narayana Murthy wants employees back in offices at the earliest. Deccan Herald. <https://www.deccanherald.com/city/top-bengaluru-stories/narayana-murthy-wants-employees-back-in-offices-at-the-earliest-1090438.html>