

Examining the advantages and disadvantages of working from home from the perspectives of employees following the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Background: Working from home (WFH) has become more popular and has spread rapidly around the world. This became especially noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic because most individuals had to work from home if they were not key workers (e.g., healthcare and public safety workers). However, further research is needed on the possible consequences of WFH, particularly in terms of benefits and challenges. **Objective:** The present study aimed to examine the advantages and disadvantages of WFH from an employee perspective. **Methods:** Two simple questions were asked to white-collar Turkish employees (N = 613) who experienced WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic: “What do you think are the advantages of working from home?” and “What do you think are the disadvantages of working from home?”. The answers to the questions were then content analyzed. **Results:** The key advantages identified were protection from COVID-19, saving time, better focus on work, more time for self-improvement, reduced personal expenses, and reduced social pressure. The key disadvantages included increased work-family conflict, alienation from work, non-ergonomic working conditions, technostress, miscommunication, social isolation, increased workload, inefficiency, and depression. **Conclusions:** The results indicate that although WFH has many advantages for employees, it also has many disadvantages that need to be carefully considered by both organizations and employees.

Keywords

teleworking, COVID-19, pandemics, workplace, occupational health, work-life balance, qualitative research

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to profound global changes in economic, technological, cultural, health, and psychological domains. One of the most affected areas was the workplace. Issues such as flexible working hours, work-life balance, and employee mental health emerged [1]. During this period, it became evident that leadership approaches needed to evolve, with virtual leadership and virtual team management skills becoming increasingly important [2, 3]. Traditional face-to-face meetings have now become more frequently conducted on virtual platforms. This shift has necessitated strengthening the technological infrastructure for both employees and organizations [4]. One of the most significant developments during the

pandemic was the widespread adoption of working from home (WFH), which was rarely used before the pandemic [5, 6].

Working from home means that employees fulfill their job-related duties and responsibilities by creating an office or work environment from where they live [7]. Although WFH is not a new concept [8], the pandemic made it more widespread, and since the end of the pandemic, many employees have continued to work from home more frequently [9, 10]. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 37% of the working population in Europe worked from home [11]. However, in 2019, the prevalence of WFH among employees aged 20-64 years in European Union countries was approximately 5.5% [12].

Much research has been conducted on WFH, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic [e.g., 1, 13, 14; 15]. These studies focused on topics such as how to make WFH more effective [16; 17], the outcomes of WFH for organizations [18, 19, 20] and effects of WFH on employees' performance and work-related attitudes [21, 22, 23, 24], and understanding the advantages and disadvantages of WFH [5, 25].

Based on existing research, WFH has several advantages and disadvantages for organizations and employees. For organizations, disadvantages include communication issues, team coordination difficulties, and cybersecurity threats [26]. On the other hand, a key advantage is cost reduction, which leads to savings in transportation, energy consumption, and physical office space costs [19]. Additionally, organizations can tap into the global labor market, hiring qualified talent without requiring relocation and avoiding expatriate costs [27].

For employees, WFH can lead to social isolation, decreased organizational commitment, and reduced professional satisfaction [25, 28]. The advantages of WFH for employees include spending more time with family, reduced commuting costs, and the comfort of working from home [5, 6]. These factors might positively impact work-life balance. While existing studies provide a preliminary overview of WFH's positive and negative aspects [6, 25], the advantages

and disadvantages of WFH can vary widely depending on several factors. These factors include country differences, national culture, industry, type of work, and individual characteristics [29]. Therefore, it is essential to study how WFH manifests in different contexts to implement it more effectively in the future. Given the expectation that WFH will become more prevalent in many fields in the coming years [30], it is crucial to conduct a more detailed examination of all aspects of WFH, especially post-pandemic [8].

Moreover, most research on WFH has been conducted in developed countries [31, 32], and is typically based on quantitative methods [5, 6]. Consequently, there is a limited perspective on understanding the implications of WFH in countries outside the developed countries, and the number of studies contributing a qualitative perspective is still limited. In Türkiye, where there are few WFH studies, many sectors did not commonly practice WFH before the COVID-19 pandemic [33]. Due to the pandemic, WFH became temporarily mandatory in many areas in Türkiye, and many organizations continue to operate remotely, partially or fully [9]. Because of these reasons and gaps in the literature, the present study examined the advantages and disadvantages of WFU among a sample of Turkish white-collar employees who experienced WFH for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was exploratory and used open-ended questions to provide new perspectives from different cultural and contextual backgrounds.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure, materials, and data collection

The research questions were examined through an online survey. In addition to the two WFH questions, the survey also included questions concerning basic demographic information such as participants' gender, marital status, age, education level, and level within the organization hierarchy. The data were collected in June 2023 (i.e., after the pandemic was over). It was explicitly stated in the information section of the online survey form that those who had

not engaged in WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic could not participate in the study. It was also stated that only the individuals who experienced WFH for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic should participate. Consequently, employees were asked to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of WFH based on their WFH experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants provided informed consent and were told that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

The two main questions were qualitative to obtain in-depth participant opinions regarding WFH. Qualitative questions were used to capture individuals' perspectives on the subject [34]. In the present study, the research team tried to understand and make sense of working from home from an employee perspective. By doing this, researchers can gain important information about the phenomenon [35].

2.2. Participants

The participants were recruited through the research team's social networks. A total of 627 individuals responded to the online survey. However, 14 of these did not respond to all of the questions and were therefore excluded from the analysis. The remaining 613 completed surveys underwent content and frequency analysis. The final sample comprised slightly more males (53.7% males, 47.3% females), 58.2% single individuals, and 64.9% public sector employees. Regarding education levels, 72.2% had a university degree, 15% had a high school degree, 11.1% had a secondary school degree, 1% had a primary school degree, and 0.7% had a master's degree. The mean age was 29.9 years (range 18-64 years; SD=8.10). Finally, 16.2% of the participants worked at the bottom level of the organizational hierarchy (employees primarily engaged in operational and task-oriented roles, typically performed by entry-level staff), 65.9% at the middle level (employees responsible for tactical implementation and coordination, typically involving mid-level management or supervisory roles), and 17.9 at the

upper level (employees in strategic roles, typically held by senior management or executives responsible for long-term decision-making).

2.3. Data analysis

The data were first combined into codes and then into themes. The strategies followed at this stage were first to create initial ideas each for survey return. Then, codes were determined. The data collection process ended when no new codes emerged, and the relevant codes were transformed into themes.

The collected data were transferred to a *Word* file and then into the *NVivo 12* qualitative data analysis program. Content analysis was used to analyze the data. In content analysis, the basic process is to combine similar data within the framework of specific concepts and themes [36]. The primary purpose of content analysis is to identify concepts and relationships that can explain the collected data. Here, data are defined, and facts that may be hidden in the data may be revealed [36]. In addition, Guba and Lincoln's trustworthiness perspective [37] was taken into account to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis. In order to ensure trustworthiness, care was taken to ensure that the criteria of credibility, trustworthiness, approvability, and transferability were adhered to.

Firstly, in order to increase credibility, the data were analyzed by two researchers, and different codes and themes were discussed. Jaccard's similarity coefficient [38] was the chosen statistical method used to determine the correlation between the themes in the study. The final codes and themes were then reached. *Nvivo* helped to identify similarities in the attribute values based on the data categorized by the themes. The main purpose of this process was to ensure that the themes were formed correctly and that the relationships between them were identified. The code similarity coefficient among researchers was 0.85. Additionally, participant confirmation was sought to increase credibility in case the participant's comments were not understood or could be interpreted differently.

The themes and sub-themes were sent to the participants after they were determined by the researchers. The reason for this was to get their opinions on the analysis results again. In order to increase trustworthiness, an effort was made to increase the sample size to the point where no more different codes emerged during the data collection process and analysis (i.e., data saturation). The codes and themes were extracted and examined by an academic who had no vested interest in the research (i.e., not one the authors). In order to increase confirmability and transferability, the themes and codes obtained are shown in Table 1.

2.4. Results

Table 1 shows the themes and sub-theme. In addition, word clouds illustrating the advantages and disadvantages of WFH were also created (Figure 1). Word clouds present an image where the size of each word indicates its frequency in the data.

Insert Table 1 about here

As can be seen in Table 1, employees reported WFH very positively on issues such as the opportunity to be protected from diseases, having more time for personal development, concentrating on work, and reducing expenses. On the other hand, issues such as increased tension in family life caused by moving work to home, alienation from work, inadequacy of physical facilities in the office environment, distress caused by the use of technological communication devices, increasing communication problems, loneliness, low efficiency, inability to meet the need for socialization, and increase in depression were reported as negative reflections of WFH. While the most prominent issue regarding advantages was that employees can create more time for themselves, the most emphasized issue among the disadvantages was the increase in work-family conflicts.

Insert Figure 1 about here

3. Discussion

After the COVID-19 pandemic began to have a marked and unprecedented impact worldwide in the first quarter of 2020, the foundations of radical change were laid in many

areas. One of these was working from home (WFH) [39]. Some research was conducted on WFH during the pandemic, especially in developed countries [40, 41]. In the present study, data concerning the advantages and disadvantages of WFH were collected during June 2023, when the unprecedented repercussions of the pandemic had diminished. These were examined from an employee perspective among a sample of Turkish white-collar employees who had experienced WFH for the first time during the pandemic.

Although many studies have been conducted on the advantages and disadvantages of WFH [e.g., 6, 25], the outcomes of WFH depend (among others) on technological infrastructure, culture, nature of work, personality traits of employees, infrastructure, and technology equipment of organizations [29]. For this reason, new findings obtained from different cultures and samples will likely contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of WFH. In the present study, participants were able to provide detailed answers through open-ended questions which provided rich content in understanding the advantages and disadvantages of WHF.

In the present study, the most prominent issues from a positive perspective were saving time, spending more time on self-improvement, more resting opportunities, and increasing motivation and productivity. Although the findings obtained from other studies are consistent [25, 28], issues such as protection from COVID-19, decreases in expenses for employees, and more personal time were more prominent in the present study's Turkish sample compared to previous research [5]. The decrease in expenses for employees as an advantage is expected in Türkiye, where the minimum wage is lower than in most other European countries, except for a few Balkan countries [42]. Moreover, although most participants emphasized increased productivity, relatively few participants emphasized that inefficiency increased. Therefore, as in previous studies [e.g., 26], there is still no clear conclusion regarding productivity increases.

In more collectivist societies like Türkiye, compared to Western societies [43], the physical presence in the workplace can potentially create ambiguity in job roles. Although collectivist cultures promote cooperation and solidarity in social life and family ties [44], this tendency may lead to a lack of professionalism and confusion in work settings. Employees' physical presence in the workplace can sometimes result in them taking on tasks outside their designated roles [45]. WFH may have alleviated this, allowing employees to focus solely on their own tasks and allocate more time to themselves and their specific work role.

In regards to the disadvantages, issues such as work-family conflict, work alienation, non-ergonomic working conditions, communication problems, and technostress were emphasized. These findings are broadly consistent with previous similar research [6, 25]. However, contrary to previous findings [5], although some participants considered work-life balance an advantage, work-family conflict was the most frequently emphasized disadvantage. Many domestic processes, such as limiting spouses' personal space, potential problems between working spouses, and children's potential negative impact on working conditions, can be considered the potential factors that can create tension while working from home. Additionally, the fertility rate in Türkiye is higher than in many European countries [46] which may complicate working from home in households with more children and increase work-family conflict compared to other European societies.

Unlike other similar studies, an emphasis on technostress as a disadvantage was prominent. Although this is a possible type of stress that employees may encounter while WFH [8], technostress has yet to be found to be a prominent disadvantage in previous studies. If the WFH infrastructure is not yet strong, there may be more problems adapting to technology in both organizations and among employees [47]. Technostress can be seen more frequently among those less experienced using information technologies [48]. The fact that the infrastructure and IT skills among a large part of the Turkish working population are not yet up-to-date suggests

that technostress is a significant disadvantage for employees. Many employees in Türkiye still need to gain sufficient knowledge of even essential information technology use via personal training programs funded by employers. If such training is not implemented, this situation might continue to create a potential source of stress in activities such as sending e-mails, attending remote meetings, online group conversations, and remote resolution of customer complaints.

3.1. Practical implications

Because WFH is likely increase further in the near future and will likely become the dominant way of working in many jobs in the long-term [49], there are issues that countries, organizations, and current and prospective employees should consider. In developing and underdeveloped countries, the education system needs to be strengthened in terms of technology use and technology literacy to prepare the new generation for work in the future. Delayed policy formulation and investments in these areas may negatively affect Türkiye's future in the long-term. When considered from the perspective of organizations, deep-rooted and progressive policies should be determined on issues such as organizing training on the use of information technologies and digital leadership for existing employees.

As WFH becomes more common it brings risks and opportunities for employees [50]. One of the critical problems of middle-aged and older individuals, especially in developing countries such as Türkiye, is adaptation to technology [51]. Employees must make personal efforts to adapt to technology to achieve their career goals more efficiently.

In Türkiye, due to the prevalence of family-owned businesses and the lack of full corporate institutionalization [52], organizations must adapt their structures to accommodate WFH. In this regard, steps should be taken to reduce bureaucracy, enhance empowerment, and promote virtual teamwork. To address the work-family conflict, a notable disadvantage of WFH, it is essential to manage working hours professionally, even in a WFH setting [53].

Additionally, it is crucial to strengthen the infrastructure by implementing hybrid models and gradually transitioning to WFH to mitigate job alienation [54]. Additionally, developing policies that ensure WFH employees have periodic physical presence in the workplace is recommended.

3.2. Limitations and conclusion

The present study has some limitations. The first was the assessing of the advantages and disadvantages of WFH with only two basic questions. Participants were not interviewed face-to-face, and supplementary questions were not asked. Also, the study was not focused on a specific sector or occupation. Another issue is that employees retrospectively assessed their remote work experiences during COVID-19 after the pandemic has ended. This retrospective assessment may result in biases (e.g., memory recall). These limitations did not allow in-depth analysis and to make clear inferences regarding the advantages and disadvantages of WFH. In future studies, employees' opinions on solving the problems they experience in WFH should be examined more comprehensively. Then, it can be understood what organizations can do for employees to have fewer disadvantages. In addition, in-depth interviews involving employees and decision-makers in organizations where jobs are performed remotely can be developed to understand the bigger picture of how WFH is evaluated in terms of organizations and employees.

4. Conclusion

Although WFH has many advantages, WFH can lead to a number of negative consequences for employees and organizations if the necessary infrastructure and preparation work is not carried out. In this respect, employers need to examine WFH practices with a benefit-cost analysis and take significant precautions against the negative consequences that WFH may cause. In addition, unless necessary, deciding to make WFH culture widespread in many sectors in the near future may have undesirable and challenging consequences for

employers. Organizations aiming to make WFH widespread for jobs where the nature of the work is suitable for WFH need to implement the necessary infrastructure and provide their employees with the training they need.

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Table 1. Themes, descriptions and frequency of sub-theme occurrence

<i>Advantages</i>		
Themes and Subthemes	Descriptions	Frequency of occurrence
<i>Protection from diseases</i>	WFH allowed employees to be safer from the virus	345 (56.28%)
<i>Saving time</i>		
Increased personal time	WFH meant not spending time commuting to the workplace allowed for more time for personal hobbies and interests.	610 (99.95%)
More rest time	WFH meant not spending time commuting to the workplace allowed for more time to rest.	370 (60.35%)
Less time fatigued	WFH meant not spending time commuting to the workplace, ensured that employees remained less fatigued.	250 (40.78%)
<i>Better focus on work</i>		
Increased productivity	WFH increased individual productivity in the short-term.	250 (40.78%)
Flexible hours	WFH allowed employees to set their working hours and to work when they want to	210 (34.26%)
<i>Self-improvement</i>		
Healthy eating	WFH provided the opportunity to eat according to individual needs instead of ready-made meals.	210 (34.26%)
Exercise	WFH created more opportunities to exercise for a healthier life.	180 (29.36%)
Self-trainings	WFH meant the time savings brought by working at home allowed employees to spend more time on the issues to train themselves.	130 (21.20%)
<i>Decrease in expenses</i>		
Food expenses	WFH significantly reduced the costs of eating out.	120 (19.58%)
Travel expenses	Distance working meant reduced expenses on fuel or public transportation in going to and from the workplace.	91 (14.84%)
Personal care expense	WFH meant reduced spending on make-up and clothes.	126 (20.55%)
<i>Work-life balance</i>	WFH meant being able to devote more time to both work and family.	110 (17.94%)
<i>Less social pressure</i>		
Group pressure	WFH meant not being exposed to negative behavior etc.) by formal and informal groups in the workplace.	103 (16.80%)
No pressure on dressing	WFH meant freedom in choosing what clothes to wear	57 (9.30%)
<i>Disadvantages</i>		

Increased work-family conflict	WFH meant an inability to prioritize tasks at home and work.	481 (78.47%)
Alienation	WFH meant experiencing alienation from both themselves and their work.	403 (65.74%)
Non-ergonomic conditions	WFH meant not being able to have ergonomic working conditions at home and being exposed to more physical pain.	328 (53.51%)
Technostress	WFH meant constantly being with technology and controlling technological communication tools which caused stress.	212 (34.58%)
Miscommunication		
Weakening of teamwork	WFH meant decreased working together and loss of team spirit.	321 (52.37%)
Role ambiguity	WFH meant due to the decrease and disruption in communication, it was difficult to determine who was responsible for which tasks.	132 (21.53%)
Decreased cooperation	WFH meant not being together physically, which reduced cooperation within the organization.	103 (16.80%)
Decreased peer training	WFH meant the transformation of face-face communication into digital communication, which made it difficult for individuals to learn some tasks on the job from their colleagues within the organization.	71 (11.58%)
Increased isolation	WFH meant increased individual isolation due to insufficient satisfaction of social and psychological needs such as socialization and conversation.	197 (32.14%)
Overtime/Increased workload	WFH meant increased workload and working beyond routine working hours.	179 (29.20%)
Inefficiency	WFH meant working inefficiently and with low performance	87 (14.19%)
Increased asociality	WFH meant insufficient satisfaction with the need for socialization.	87 (14.19%)
Loneliness and depression	WFH meant increased loneliness leading to depression.	51 (8.32%)



Figure 1. Word clouds of the advantages (left side) and disadvantages (right side) of WFH