



THE RISE AND RISE OF “ANYTIME, ANYWHERE” SYSTEM OF WORKING DURING ADVERSITY: A STUDY OF FLEXI WORK SYSTEMS AND EMPLOYEES’ PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

There is a partial curfew in Kenya from 7.00pm to 5.00am and employees in Kenya are hustling and bustling to keep this presidential decree. Public transport stop operating by 4.00pm. Employers are forced to let their employees go by 3.00pm. Employees, on the other hand, prepare to go home by 2.00pm. They had started working at 8.00pm with a 1.30hours short break and lunch break. It leaves one wondering how many hours are spent by the employees working? What is their level of productivity? The study was done specifically during Covid-19 adversity that Kenya and the world at large was experiencing. Data was collected through semi structured questionnaires through employee survey in a telecommunication company. 76 employees responded to the questionnaire items on flexible work systems. Secondary data for performance was used by using overall performance appraisal results of the employees. Linear regression analysis was used to determine the influence of Telecommuting on employee performance. The results indicated that telecommuting influences employee performance significantly. The paper concludes that the rise and rise of “anytime, anywhere: system of working is an important aspect of organizational operations and leads to high employee performance. The study contributes to practice in that managers should embrace this system of working for better productivity.

Keywords: Flexiwork System, Telecommuting, Covid-19, Performance, Pandemic, Curfew



INTRODUCTION

Flexible work systems have always been on the rise and many researchers have written about it (Mweresa and Mwandih, 2015, Solanki, 2013, Abid and Barech 2017). The concept has recently been gaining more popularity since the world is experiencing a global pandemic of COVID-19 (Cao et .al, 2020, Hunter, 2020), many institutions, public and private organizations have never found a more useful way to make use of flexitime. Abid and Barech (2017) talk about the flexible hours as instruments that enables employees to amend their schedules based on circumstances. It can be used to increase productivity and enhance performance. The different types of Flexible work systems include compressed work weeks, job sharing, flexitime, non-standard employment including part time working and Telecommuting among other types.

Mweresa and Mwandih (2015) conducted a study on impact of flexitime on work arrangement on employee performance in Nairobi Business District Commercial Banks and the results showed a positive connection between the two concepts. This study supports the concept of flexiwork systems however, it did not specifically consider flexi location type of work since all the employees were required to be at their workstation. It might not work very well especially during adversity times like currently where there is corona virus pandemic, making employees not to meet at all. To cover this gap, the current study will specifically deal with employees working from home away from their work station using technology.

Abid and Birech's (2017) comments on 21st century technological advancement, noted that increased the need of workplace flexibility has been fueled by the recurrent changes in the corporate world. During adversities, flexiwork systems become one of, or sometimes the only way of organizational surviving tactics. This paper will be based mostly on telecommuting. This is a type of flexible work system that entails working away from the usual workstation using technological advancements. It includes emails, teleconferencing, skype, WhatsApp video and Audio call, among others.

Kenya, and the world as whole has been faced with a pandemic of Corona Virus 2019. March 11th, 2020 World Health Organization (WHO), officially, declared Corona Virus a global pandemic. What started as a disease only in China has currently become a worldwide epidemic. The virus is said to be spread when an infected person sneezes produces tiny droplets of saliva and mucus and they land into another person's mouth, nose or eyes, they can be infected. People are encouraged to social distance, avoid handshakes or any personal contacts to avoid infections. Furthermore, Bai et al (2020) notes that people can spread the virus while they are asymptomatic. Employees working in the office are at risk of spreading this virus quickly and to a large audience. This has seen many countries completely banning foreign travels, Schools were closed and public gatherings were prohibited. Many organizations closed their offices.

Due to the aforementioned discussion, Organizations in Kenya, with a directive from the government, has urged employees to work from home. The study sought to find out whether employees' performance would be affected, thus research question, Does Flexible work systems, specifically telecommuting, influence employee performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Flexibility is about swiftness at the workplace so that both the employees' and the employer could meet employee and business needs (Commonwealth Fairwork, 2013). Office flexibility is a contemporary approach in regulating office hours, where and how jobs function on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. This approach has numerous merits, from boosting employee motivation and productivity to breaking the monotony of the standard 8 hours per day, 40-hour work per week and 160 hours per month. Office flexibility needs great attention to detail for it to function effectively and efficiently managing time. In reference to Tang and Wardsworth (2008) work, flexibility, they noted, is vastly appreciated by workers in which most of the workers indicated that they needed flexibility to manage work-life balance. Workplace flexibility, posits Pruchno, Litchfield and Fried (1997), mostly turns into a win-win situation for both the employer and employee. Abid and Birech (2017), citing a survey that was conducted by the World at Work members in 2010, note that workplace flexibility assistance and approach differ extensively from organization to organization, representing the needs of the workforce.

Modern work systems like telework and shifts brings about efficiency effectiveness in employees' performance for both individual and business' advantage (South Australia Public Sector, 2013). Ransta's (2011) study found out that 55% of employees' working tables are idle in an office at any one point in time. Nearly 80% of employers agreed that improved technology, at affordable costs, gives room for a flexible workforce in Australia. Regus (2012) did a study and noted that, 63% of staff were motivated because of access to flexible work. 26% of employees in Australia, planned to remain with their present institutions because of positive work-life balance practiced in their workplace.

Mercer (2011) found out that flexible work is in relation to gender, that 60% of men and 69% of women found it imperative. Young employees aged between 55-67 years preferred this system of work. Research proved that if applied as required, flexible working arrangements is valuable for corporates. In New Zealand, 70% of proprietors, conveyed to practice flexible work arrangements with their employees. Out of these, 76% stated that there were no extra costs and 87% noted that flexiwork systems had a positive effect on firms' performance. The employers that noted to have incurred some costs associated with flexible work arrangements, most of them said that, the costs were moderate (Skinner and Chapman, 2013). In an article by Skinner

and Chapman, it was found that 'flexible working practices was associated with positive work-life outcomes for their employees.

Some of the challenges experienced in designing flexible work arrangements include filling of duty rosters, influenced the importance of flexiwork on businesses. It is the responsibility of the managers to ensure fairness in the allocation of hours and coverage of shifts for effective day to day operations. An important question to be raised is how to know if individuals are working if the supervisors can't see them? The answer to this lies on the focus of output and outcomes rather than employees being present. Performance is key and that's the essence of flexiwork system. Based on 'Managers guide to flexible working relations (2013)', it explains that there is a case, to some extent, for a level of informality in carrying out workplace flexibility. However, mostly, formal measures warrant transparency, fairness and consistency. This is a drawback of flexiwork system and supervisors and employees need the protection of formal measures to ensure acquiescence with statutory requirements.

According to the managers guide (2013), 48% of firms in Australia, agree that flexible work is more affordable in cost compared to fixed work location. 70% of Australian firms think that flexible work provides employees with better work-life balance. On the other hand, 68% of businesses in Australia, agrees that flexible work lets the business to make more returns than in the past. 64% of businesses in Australia agree that employees experience increased morale and this is directly linked to flexible work.

Several studies done have established that Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) enables incorporation of family and job responsibility. A study conducted by Boston College Center on Family and Work, casing 6 large companies, reported that 70% of the managers that employed FWA, improved productivity positively. 66% of managers and 88% of employees described that FWA positively influences the quality of job. 77% of managers and 81% of employees noted that FWA significantly influences retention of employees. Iscan and Naktiyok (2005) on telework case study established numerous contingency factors and established that management small enterprises opted to practice telework as opposed to train their employees reaped higher profits. Turning to external flexibility, Vandermeer et, al. (2008) points out that the connection between several factors of flexibility and performance, strategy of the organizations is an important factor of contingency. This is because there was a negative correlation between pursuing an innovator/quality approach and the use of externally flexible labour.

Solanki (2013) conducted a study on flexitime association with job satisfaction, work productivity, motivation and employees stress levels and found out that flexitime significantly influences Work Productivity. The R^2 was however, quite low. This could be because the author took flexible work systems as a whole and the other types of flexible work systems were probably

not being used by the organization. Again, the study was not done under any adverse condition. The study meant to create awareness of flexible work systems and its importance in organizations. The current study, is different from this, since it sought to find out if employees, who have no option but to embrace flexiwork systems would perform better in adverse conditions.

In an economy downturn, many businesses must consider alternative work schedule to ensure improved performance, increase employee's motivation in order to gain competitive advantage. SMEs find it easier than larger organizations to survey the influence of flexible working on the performance of their employees. In order to provide the manager with great flexibility during bad economy, flexible work system would give employer an advantage. SME's occasionally, lead when it comes to adopting substitute ways of operating that builds a healthy relationship of the managers with employees (O'Connell, and McGinnity, 2009).

Kelliher and Anderson (2008) researched on the influence of Flexible Working Practices on Employees' Perceptions of Job Quality, the results showed a positive relation between flexible work systems and perceived job quality, though they noted the presence of perceived costs to job quality, mostly in longer term prospects for development and career progression, signifying the relation is more complex. Cooper and Kurland (2002) noted that remote workers were concerned on less opportunities of career development, as well as informal learning and mentorship from coworkers. In Career advancement, Frank and Lowe (2003) noted that flexible employees were alleged to have few long-term career chances, nonetheless, McCloskey and Igbaria (2003) found indirect impact on career projections. Many studies have acknowledged the costs to career advancement particularly for part-time workers (Need *et al*, 2005; Sigala, 2005). Cohen and Single (2001) noted in their study, that working less hours for specialized staff means that employees were unable to devote time on skill development and fetching new business - factors considered important for career accomplishment. Likewise, Edwards and Robinson (2004) found that nurses who worked less hours had less responsibility and reduced prospects to learn new skills. Edwards and Robinson (1999) posited that where part-time police officers are under-utilised they risk skill corrosion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Descriptive survey was the research design of this paper. The target population was 821 employees of a large telecommunication company based in Kenya. Its headquarters is in Nairobi, Kenya. The researcher used this organization because over the years, they have been employing flexible work system, in terms of having job sharing, compressed work weeks and flexitime. However, telecommuting had not been employed until this pandemic of corona virus. The researcher also, chose this company because they had indicated that they facilitate their

employees with free internet for as long as it is used for work. This was quite difficult with other companies that had do not offer their employees with free internet. Mugenda and Mugenda (2009) suggest that 10% of the entire population would be sufficient sample for data analysis. This, therefore led to a sample of 82 respondents, whereby 82 questionnaires were distributed among the respondents. The organization was divided into strata and each department formed a stratum. Random sampling was then employed to get the respondents from each department. Primary data was collected using semi structured questionnaires. Employees were asked to respond to statements on flexible work systems. Secondary data was used as well to get information on performance of employees. Since employees were working from home, they were subjected to report their performance to their line managers on weekly basis. The line managers would then categorize the employees' performance using the following categories: Excellent; Above Target; Met Target; Below Target; Poor.

The researcher collected these results for every employee who responded to the questionnaire items on flexible work systems every week for four weeks. An average of the performance was calculated on each employee and the index used for analysis.

Since employees were working from home, data was sent through emails which were obtained from their line managers that the researcher had privy to. Selected employees were briefed by their line managers about the research. Questionnaires were then sent to the selected employees by the researcher, which were then required to send back to the researcher for confidentiality purposes. These questionnaires were coded in order to link each respondents' questionnaire with their performance appraisals from their line managers. The researcher then got performance appraisal results from the respondents' line managers. Data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Linear regression was employed to determine the influence of flexible work systems on employee performance. It is worth noting that, at no one point did the researcher met any of the respondent in person. All communications were done through phone calls, videocalls and emails.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Response rate was 92.7%. The researcher was able to get 76 performance appraisal results from the line managers of the employees. This is what the researcher used for analysis. The high response rate was attributed by the fact that the researcher was able to follow through.

The internal consistency was measured using Cronbach alpha coefficient. 0.70 and above was used as a rule of thumb (Kothari, 2008). Experts at the University of Nairobi were used to confirm validity of the instrument. Kolmogorov Smirnov test was used to test normality and the results in this study were above 0.05 confirming normality.

Table 1: Respondents Demographics

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	36	47.37
Female	40	52.63
Total	76	100
Number of years worked with the organization		
0-5 years	11	14.47
6-10 years	41	53.95
11-15years	24	31.58
Total	76	100
Position in the Company		
Officer	46	60.53
Manager	30	39.47
Total	76	100
Current level of education		
Diploma	7	9.21
Bachelor	36	47.37
Postgraduate	30	39.47
Graduate	3	3.95
Total	76	100

The study findings presented in table 1 showed that majority of the respondents (52.63%) were female while (47.37%) were male. Concerning the length of service in the telecommunication firm, the results indicate that 14.47% of the respondents had worked for the company between 0-5 years, 53.95% had worked for this firm for a period between 6-10years while 31.58% of the respondents had worked for the firm for a period of 11-15years of service.

The study also established that 90.79% of the respondents had attained bachelors, graduate and postgraduate degrees. The results show that the respondents had a relatively high level of qualifications. This gave the researcher assurance that the respondents understood the questions they were answering concerning workplace flexibility.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics entailing the means and standard deviations are as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Showing the Results of Mean, Standard Deviation and Coefficient of Variation of Telecommuting Statements by Respondents

Statements	Mean	Std. Dev.	Coefficient of Variation
I am more satisfied working in a flexible work system	4.08	0.75	0.19
I am happy with Telecommuting conditions	3.14	0.95	0.30
I have an opportunity to balance work with family with Telecommuting work System	3.92	0.89	0.23
I work better with telecommuting work system	3.97	0.88	0.22
I am more effective because of Telecommuting Work System	3.42	1.06	0.31
I am more Efficient with Telecommuting Work System	3.39	1.01	0.30
I perform better working from home	3.83	0.90	0.24
I find it better working in a homely environment	3.39	1.06	0.31
I perform better by practicing job sharing with my colleagues online	3.97	0.93	0.23
I find it easier sharing work with my colleagues online than in the office	3.86	0.96	0.25
I express myself better using emails as a means of communication	3.88	1.05	0.27
I work better when am given freedom of hours I would want to work	3.59	1.09	0.30
My performance has improved since I started working from home	3.67	1.05	0.29
I feel less stress by working from home	3.66	0.97	0.27
I waste less time working away from office	2.82	1.22	0.43
I perform better working on part time than on full time basis	3.51	1.01	0.29
I am more committed knowing my organization has embraced Telecommuting	3.68	1.04	0.28
Grand Average	3.64	0.99	0.28

As shown in table 2 above, the grand mean is 3.64. This means that the respondents agreed to a large extent with the statements on telecommuting concerning their place of work. The mean had an overall standard deviation of 0.99, with a coefficient of variation of 0.28. This

meant that the respondents' perceptions about telecommuting were less variations from the mean. Therefore, majority of the respondents agreed to a large extent with the statements on telecommuting.

The statement with the highest mean is "I am more satisfied working in a flexible work system, with a mean score of 4.08, Standard deviation of 0.75 and Coefficient of Variation of 0.19. This means that employees are happy with flexible work system as a whole, they are taking it positively.

The statement with the lowest mean is "I waste less time working away from office", with a mean of 2.82, a standard deviation of 1.22 and coefficient of variation on 0.43. Majority of the respondents are family persons therefore; it means that there could be a lot of disruptions working from home.

Inferential Statistics

Inferential statistics were employed to determine the influence of telecommuting on the performance of employees at the telecommunication firm (Table 3).

Table 3 showing the Model Summary of Telecommuting and Employee Performance

Model Summary							
Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate			
1	.727 ^a	.529	.522	.67034			
a. Predictors: (Constant), Telecommuting							
ANOVA^a							
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	37.274	1	37.274	82.948	.000 ^b	
	Residual	33.253	74	.449			
	Total	70.526	75				
a. Dependent Variable: Performance Appraisal Results							
b. Predictors: (Constant), Telecommuting							
Coefficients^a							
Model		Unstandardized		Standardized		t	Sig.
		Coefficients		Coefficients			
		B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	-1.386	.551			-2.518	.014
	Telecommuting	1.366	.150	.727		9.108	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Performance Appraisal Results							

As shown in table 3 above, the Coefficient correlation is 0.727. This means that there is a positive relationship between telecommuting and employee performance. The coefficient of determination is 0.529. This therefore means that Telecommuting accounts for 52.9% of the employee performance, the remaining 47.1% is accounted for by other variables not considered in the study. This is above the threshold of 50% as advised by research scholars (Cooper and Schindler 2011, Mugenda and Mugenda 2009). The model shows (F, 82.948, with a p value of ≤ 0.05). This is significant because it has a p value of less than 0.05. It is therefore imperative to note that telecommuting as a system of flexible work, should be taken seriously in order to ensure employees performance.

Table 3 above, also shows a Beta coefficient of a non-standardized coefficient of 1.366. This means that with every one unit increase of telecommuting, employee performance increases by 36.6%. This is also significant because it has a p value of less than 0.05.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implication of the study to management practice is that with the results provided, managers of organizations are properly advised on what system of flexibility to employ. Managers are now aware that employees feel comfortable and prefer to work from home if they were to increase their productivity.

Policy-wise, the study's implication is that, managers can now put relevant and necessary policies in order to ensure a smooth execution and operation of flexible work system, especially telecommuting to increase employee's productivity and monitoring systems. Since employees are working with less supervision, it is important that some policies should be introduced in order for the system to be properly executed, some policies must be put in place for efficiency purposes.

This study contributes to theory, more so, the Theory of Performance (ToP). ToP mentions six components that holistically interact to establish level of performance. One of the components is context of performance. This does not exhaustively include telecommuting which this study embarked on and found out that, telecommuting contributes to reaching the level of performance. Another component of performance, established under ToP is personal factors whereby it states that an individual performance is impacted by the quality of his or her home/work environment. The current study on flexitime, specifically on telecommuting would influence one's level of performance as seen from the results of the study that the respondents agreed to a less extent that they waste less time working from home. This is a strong contribution to the Theory of Performance because it can be used as a specific example of personal factors as well as contextual factors.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings that employees feel more satisfied employing flexible work systems strategy, is a wakeup call to all managers that it is time to move to that direction. The study finding that Telecommuting accounts for 52.9% of the variance in employee performance, brings to conclusion that Telecommuting is a very important aspect in employee performance. This, therefore is a wake-up call that during adversity, managers should embrace Telecommuting as a way of increasing productivity. The study also proved that with every one unit increase of telecommuting, employee performance significantly increases by 36.6%. Managers should be aware that the more they practice Telecommuting, the higher employees' performance hence it's a wake-up call for managers to be aware and take it seriously. To sum it all up, "the rise and rise of anytime, anywhere system of working during adversity is getting more popular and is here to stay.

The study recommends that managers and owners of organization should embrace telecommuting system as its alternative work system especially during adversity like during this time where there is Covid-19 pandemic. Organizations will still continue with its "normal" operations as long as they embrace technological advancements including Telecommuting system of working.

Further studies can be done on Small and Medium Enterprises during Covid-19, as well as Challenges of business operations during Covid-19 Pandemic.

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