# Remote work: challenges and opportunities for increasing its effectiveness in Kuwait

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to generate new insights into the theory of remote work from the Arab region by exploring employees' experience on working away from office during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kuwait. The aim was to identify key challenges employees faced while working remotely and find opportunities for increasing the effectiveness of remote work practices. Using quantitative approach, 385 anonymous responses were collected. Findings show that employees had predominantly positive experience with the remote work. Employees were able to perform work tasks more efficiently and had more space for professional development. However, it was challenging to adapt to new working conditions, balance work and caring responsibilities and cope with feelings of loneliness and isolation. The article further discusses respondents' recommendation towards the management and identifies other strategies to improve remote employee experience.

**Keywords:** flexibility; remote work; employee; Kuwait; COVID-19; pandemic.

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# 1   Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to unanticipated changes and constraints that have had consequences for organisations and employees around the world. The restrictive measures forced most employees to move to the home environment. Remote work became a priority for most governments and organisations even in countries where flexible forms of employment have not yet been common, such as Kuwait.

Remote work is a flexible (alternative, non-standard, atypical, innovative) form of work organisation, which is currently given more emphasis. It can be described as a situation where the work is performed in an alternative place or work environment, different from the default place of work (defined as the employer's premises or the space where the work is usually performed). In principle, remote work could be performed anywhere and not necessarily in the employee's home (for example, in a shared third-party office). The profession and the position of the employee must be taken into account (Thevenon et al., 2016; Nijp et al., 2016).

While the pandemic situation has provided a unique opportunity to see how well this flexible form of employment works (Franken et al., 2021), many problems began to emerge during the chaos that ensued (de Lucas Ancillo et al., 2021). Questions have arisen about how to ensure the functioning of day-to-day activities. As not all organisations were perfectly prepared, the authors (DeFilippis et al., 2020; Fana et al., 2020) discussed how communication through digital platforms should take place. In many cases, the topic of work-life balance, or job satisfaction and the degree of workload of employees were also added, and later problems such as social isolation and loneliness were further reviewed (Sirola et al., 2021; Putri and Amran, 2021; Nemteanu et al., 2021; Galanti et al., 2021). In the later course and phases of the pandemic, the return of employees to the office was analysed (Kulik, 2022).

This paper analyses the importance of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the emphasis on this form of work has increased worldwide. Despite the technical complexity and frustration of employees in isolation, remote work is expected to play an important role even in the post-pandemic period, but it carries some risk. Inefficient management of remote workers can prevent them from reaping the benefits of this form of work, which can have the opposite effect on their productivity. In order to minimise the risk, it is necessary to analyse the current state of remote work and find ways to make it more effective. Thus, the aim of this study is to generate new insights into the theory of remote work by exploring employees' experience on working away from office during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to identify key challenges employees faced while working remotely and find opportunities for increasing the effectiveness of remote work practices. Since little attention has been paid to the Arab region, the aim is to explore the individual remote work experience caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Kuwait. Findings could lead to a better employee performance, reduced resistance to this flexible form of work organisation and the retention of qualified employees. This research is primarily focused on a form of remote work that would otherwise be performed at the employer's premises, and which has been common since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, that is work from home with the use of information technology.

The organisation of the paper is as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of related research on remote working. Section 3 introduces the methodology, data collection and data analysis as well as demographic characteristics of respondents. Section 4 describes the research findings. The discussion and recommendations for remote work improvement practices are provided in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 presents conclusions, limitations, and directions for future research.

## 2    Literature review

### 2.1    *Remote work and its effectiveness in the time of COVID-19*

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was necessary to overcome the initial shock of lockdown and find ways for organisations to continue operating. One of the most effective solutions seemed the transition to remote work.

An important benefit of remote work is that it provides employees with localisation and time flexibility. Flexibility of place and time can increase employees' perception of independence and autonomy in deciding how to organise and perform their work, as well as manage work tasks, thus provide a sense of autonomy (Gajendran et al., 2014). It also triggers conditions that lead to job satisfaction what is crucial for improving the performance of employees and organisations (Petcu et al., 2021). Moreover, reduced commuting time allows employees to have a spare time to spend on their family members or other leisure activities. The latter provides the opportunity to improve the balance between private and professional life, hence leading to an increased productivity (Kazekami, 2020; Adamovic, 2022). Employees also save on transportation costs or spending on coffee, breakfast, lunch or even clothes. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the protection of employees' health also becomes an advantage of remote working.

It can be assumed that the pandemic remote work experience has been positive, but there are studies showing otherwise. Researchers in Japan found (Niu et al., 2021) that work-family conflict was more pronounced among remote workers. Other researchers (Campo et al., 2021) in Colombia studied the relationship between remote work, job performance and work-life balance during the pandemic. Their results do not indicate a correlation between remote work and work-life balance in the context of the pandemic and suggest that remote work does not necessarily improve productivity because the latter is negatively affected by family disruptions. On the contrary, the study from Latin America described that remote work in pandemic times increased perceived stress, reduced work-life balance and work satisfaction, however, increased productivity and engagement (Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2021).

An Indonesian experience with COVID-19 pointed to a strong link between work environment and job satisfaction, work-life balance and work stress. In essence, the quality of the work environment affects performance, satisfaction, and a long-term work-home environment can lead to a work-life imbalance and other problems (Irawanto et al., 2021). Caringal-Go et al. (2022) stated that if there is no separate work and home environment, as it was during the pandemic, then negativity and dissatisfaction increases while work performance decreases.

The research from Saudi Arabia, a country with similar cultural, custom, and technological context to Kuwait revealed that remote work environment was challenging for employees because of new work systems, software, and technologies (Aburas, 2021). If the work involves the use of specialised equipment, it can be difficult to replicate the same environment at home (Chung et al., 2020).

Furthermore, working from home may not be the ideal work environment for employees due to long working hours. This is also related to permanent connectivity and availability. Although a remote worker saves time to commute and has time flexibility, he often extends his working hours and works overnight or during the weekend. Employees also continue to work, even if they are ill, because they do not feel sick enough to take a

day off, are busy or are afraid of losing their jobs (Manokha, 2020; Karanika-Murray et al., 2021). Another reason for these negative effects was managers' insufficient experience with this long-term type of remote management (Pokojski et al., 2022).

The rapid adoption of remote work and closure of schools at the beginning of the pandemic imposed an increased housework, childcare and associated online learning demands on remote workers with children. This led to parental and gender disparities in the division of work and non-work related tasks leading to changes in perception of work-life balance, productivity and job satisfaction.

Remote work was initially considered to benefit women by enabling them to better manage the dual responsibilities of home and work in a way they prefer and to maximise their perception of work-life balance (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020). Nevertheless, the recent research found that the division of work and non-work related responsibilities tend to differ based on the family situation. Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. (2022) argued that managing work and non-work related responsibilities is challenging particularly for mothers, because they associate remote work with an opportunity to blend work and non-work related (family) responsibilities (Chung et al., 2021). Thus, it is likely that remote-working mothers are more likely to experience conflict between work and life than women without children.

Hypothesis 1    Mothers perceive the impact of remote working on work-life balance more negatively than women who do not have children.

Moreover, the COVID-19 remote work experience also created a gender gap in perceived work-life balance, productivity and job satisfaction. Study from Craig and Churchill (2021) revealed that mothers were more dissatisfied with work-life balance than fathers. Despite fathers' help with childcare, mothers spent significantly more time with children in addition to housework. Consequently, more remote-working mothers than fathers reported feeling anxious and depressed (Lyttelton et al., 2020). According to Zamarro and Prados (2021), it was more stressful experience for mothers and only mildly stressful for fathers and men without children. In line with this, women (with or without children) reported lower work productivity and job satisfaction than men (Carroll et al., 2020; Feng and Savani, 2020).

Since results of the previous studies vary or are sometimes contradictory, thus the remote work experience cannot be generalised. However, it can be argued that women were mostly impacted by the crisis, as they were the most vulnerable and this experience might have affected their overall attitude towards remote work compared to men.

Hypothesis 2    Women are less optimistic towards remote work than men.

## 3    Research methodology

A survey research (structured questionnaire) as a quantitative research method was used to collect primary data from respondents. According to Sukamolson (2007), quantitative research is useful to quantify attitudes, behaviours and opinions. Moreover, it is used to analyse how the whole population feels about a certain issue. Other than demographic, closed – multiple choice and four-point Likert scale questions, the questionnaire included open-ended questions, which allowed respondents to provide a wide range of answers

and minimised bias associated with closed-ended and rating scale questions (Desai and Reimers, 2018).

The questionnaire was designed on the basis of the studied literature to provide answers to the set of research questions and enable the fulfilment of the main goal of the research. According to the findings in literature about remote work environment, the following questions were formed:

1   What is the experience of employees working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic?

   a   What is the difference in perception of work-life balance between mothers and women without children?

   b   What is the attitude of women towards remote work compared to men?

2   What is the employees' perception of the challenges related to the remote work during COVID-19 pandemic?

3   From the employees' viewpoint, how it is possible to eliminate the problems and increase effectiveness of remote working?

### 3.1   *Data collection and demographic characteristics*

The electronic version of the questionnaire was distributed in October 2021. Questionnaire was sent mainly to schools, banks, and oil organisations (employing more than 1,000 employees), where the probability of enforced remote work was very high (sample frame). The target sample was drawn from employees working remotely (mainly, regularly or occasionally) since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021).

Generally, attempting a data collection among employees within an organisational context is challenging because, in many cases, it requires organisation's management consent. Moreover, the Middle Eastern countries have problematic environment for research (Romano, 2006). Fear and distrust discourage population from taking part in the research. Therefore, use of snowball sampling, as a non-probability sampling method seemed the most suitable. It can help researcher access the hard to reach population (Valdez and Kaplan, 1998) and can serve as an alternative sampling strategy due to challenging circumstances in the research environment (Cohen and Arieli, 2011).

LinkedIn network and personal contacts have been utilised to target the potential respondents. In order to establish a contact, each individual organisational representative was contacted with an invitation to participate in the survey. The representatives received the survey purpose, brief introduction of researchers and the description of the study. They were asked to distribute the questionnaire to other organisational members who met the predefined criteria. Additionally, a clear benefit of the study and assurance of confidentiality were articulated to eliminate concerns and build trust (Cohen and Arieli, 2011). To improve the survey's accuracy the structured questionnaire was designed in English and Arabic language.

The goal was to collect at least 1,000 fully answered questionnaires. Yet, only 385 employees completed the questionnaire, which was the determined sample size. As the number of employees working remotely during the pandemic (population size) in Kuwait was unknown, therefore the sample size was calculated for an unknown population using

z-score (1.96) with a 95% confidence level, 0.5 standard deviation and margin error of +/-5% (Sapra, 2022).

The vast majority of employees were women 240 (62%) out of which 169 (70%) were mothers. A smaller part of 145 employees (38%) were men, of whom 105 (72%) were parents. More than half of employees were parents 274 (71%) compared to 111 (29%) non-parents.

## 3.2 *Data analysis*

The processing of primary data was divided into several steps. The first step was to save the obtained data to an electronic database in MS Excel (for Mac 2011, MS Office). Subsequently, through descriptive analysis, we evaluated the data after reformatting the dataset. We calculated absolute and relative frequencies to answer the individual questions. Due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures. Four-point Likert scale questions (strongly disagree – strongly agree) were converted to numerical and the weighted arithmetic means calculated. Open-ended questions were analysed using representational approach of the thematic text analysis (Popping, 2015). The method is time consuming, but allows capturing the latent meaning of text, which can be understood by taking sender's (respondent's) view into account.

## 4    Results

### 4.1    *Employees' remote work experience*

Almost half of the 192 (50%) employees worked mainly remotely (from home), that means most often or several times a week. 68 (18%) employees worked remotely (from home) regularly – at least once a week and 125 (32%) employees worked occasionally – at least once a month. It is clear from Figure 1 that the differences between the demographic groups were not significant. More than 60% of employees in all categories worked remotely (from home) mainly or at least once a week.

Based on the findings summarised in Figure 2, it can be argued that more than half of the employees (on average 52%) had a positive experience working remotely during the pandemic. The new work environment has enabled them to perform their work tasks more efficiently (64%) and has also had a positive impact on work-life balance (60%), which has been reflected on their overall job satisfaction (57%). The opportunity to work from home also had a positive impact on the professional development of employees (51%). In terms of demographic groups, opinions did not differ significantly.

Among all the aspects examined, the chances of promotion and motivation (29%) were negatively affected, while the relationship with the manager remained unchanged (32%).

Men (32%) claimed that remote work experience negatively affected professional development. It is noteworthy that mothers (27%) compared to women without children (27%) perceived that working remotely negatively affected their work-life balance. This result supports the first hypothesis.

Furthermore, while women (32%) and parents (31%) stated that remote working did not affect their relationships with colleagues, employees without children (35%) claimed that this experience did not affect their chances of promotion.
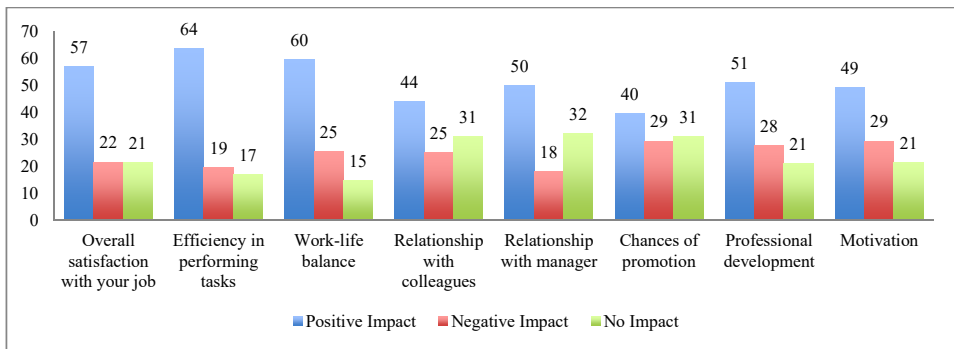
**Figure 1**   Remote work during the pandemic – frequency of use (%) (see online version for colours)
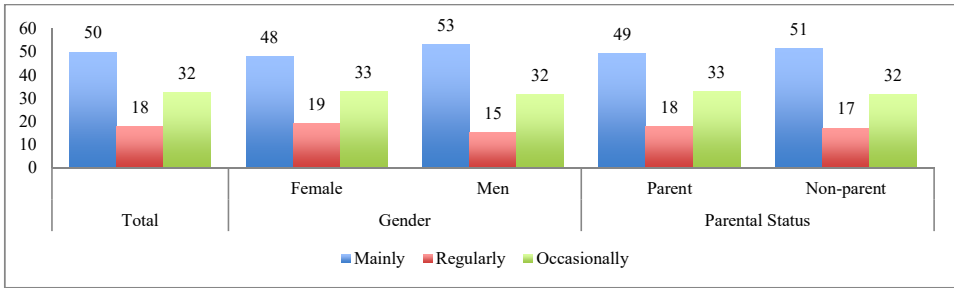


*Source:*   Authors

**Figure 2**   Remote work during the pandemic – impact on aspects of working life (%) (see online version for colours)



*Source:*   Authors

**Figure 3**   Remote work during the pandemic – employees' feelings and attitude (%) (see online version for colours)
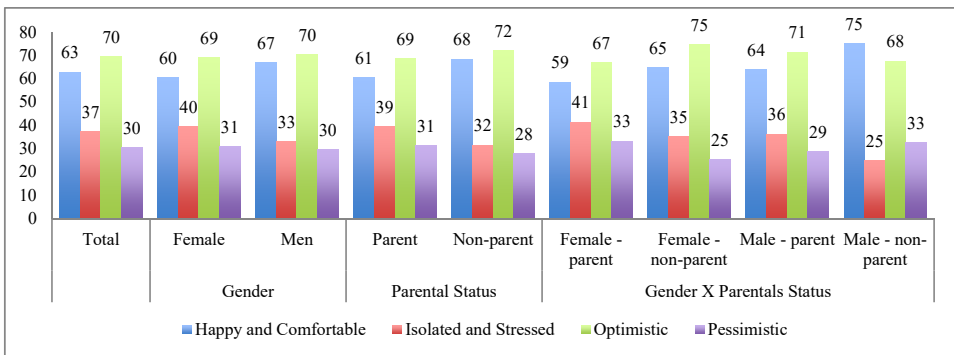


*Source:*   Authors

Remote work experience also had positive effect on the overall well-being of employees who felt happy and comfortable (63%). However, it is important to note that men (67%)

felt happier than women (60%) as well as non-parents compared to parents. As seen in Figure 3, parents (61%), especially mothers (59%), but also fathers (64%) felt less happy compared to men (75%) and women (65%) without children. In terms of isolation and stress, women (40%) and mothers (41%) felt more isolated and stressed than men (33%) and women without children (35%) as well as fathers (36%) compared to men without children (25%).

At the same time, the pandemic experience of remote working has led to a more optimistic attitude (70%) of employees towards this form of work. With only 1% difference in responses men (70%) were more optimistic than women (69%) what supports the second hypothesis. Figure 3 shows that there is an interesting contrast between fathers and men without children. The attitude of fathers (71%) to remote work was more optimistic than the attitude of men without children (68%). For women, it was the other way around. Women without children (75%) had more optimistic attitude towards remote work than mothers (67%).

## 4.2 Employees' perception of remote work challenges

Overall, employees' perception on the challenges of remote working was very low (2.39). In eight out of ten responses there was a slight disagreement (weighted average <2.50), and thus employees slightly disagreed that the experience of working remotely during the pandemic led to the mentioned problems or challenges. As seen in Figure 4, employees only slightly agreed that adapting to new working conditions (2.56) and balancing work and caring responsibilities (2.52) were the main problems or challenges associated with remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 4** Remote work during the pandemic – perceived challenges (see online version for colours)
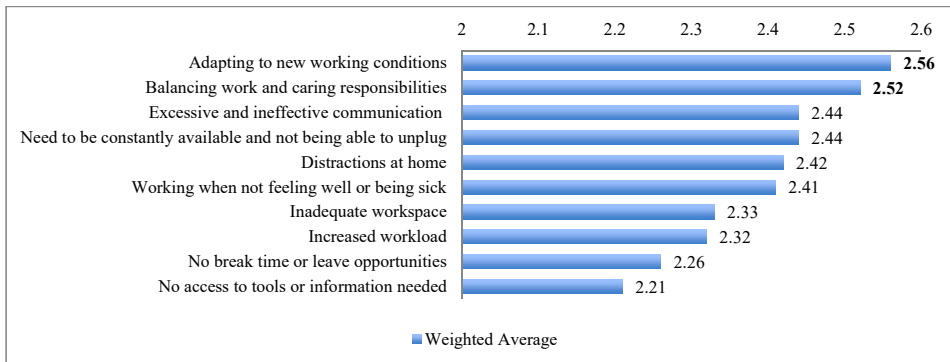


*Source:* Authors

In order to get more accurate picture of the problems and challenges, employees had the opportunity to point out other problems that were not mentioned in the questionnaire. The question was voluntary and only 42% of employees responded. Most employees (15%) said that they felt lonely and isolated when working remotely. These feelings may have resulted from restraint measures. Other common problems were job insecurity (10%), financial insecurity (7%), performance issues (6%), workplace relocation and communication (6%). Other problems included internet problems, increased workload,

continuous connectivity, long working hours, micro-management, stress, health problems, work-life balance and the presence of children in the 'home work' environment, stated by less than 5% of employees. These and other issues reported by less than 2% of employees are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1**      Remote work during the pandemic – other perceived challenges

|  | N | %* |  | N | %* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Loneliness | 25 | 15 | Distractions at home | 4 | 2 |
| Job insecurity | 16 | 10 | Lack of tools in work space | 3 | 2 |
| Financial insecurity | 11 | 7 | Concentration issues | 3 | 2 |
| Performance issues | 10 | 6 | Technology, technical skills | 3 | 2 |
| Change of workplace | 9 | 6 | Loss of team spirit | 3 | 2 |
| Communication issues | 9 | 6 | Creativity issues | 3 | 2 |
| Internet issues | 8 | 5 | Administration issues | 2 | 1 |
| Work demands | 8 | 5 | Role ambiguity | 2 | 1 |
| Connectivity 24/7 | 7 | 4 | Lack of management support | 2 | 1 |
| Long and irregular working hours | 7 | 4 | Loss of motivation | 2 | 1 |
| Being micromanaged | 5 | 3 | Performance evaluation | 2 | 1 |
| Stress | 5 | 3 | Confidence issues | 2 | 1 |
| Health issues | 4 | 2 | Ignored employee rights | 1 | 1 |
| Work-life imbalance | 4 | 2 | Insecurity from the pandemic | 1 | 1 |
|  |  |  | Lack of on the job learning | 1 | 1 |

Note: *Out of 162 answers.
          *Source:*   Authors

### 4.3   Employees' perception of improvement opportunities

The overall weighted average had a value of 2.39. The answers did not differ significantly. The employees slightly agreed that the mentioned management measures could eliminate the problems and thus make the remote work (from home) more effective. Given the values of the weighted arithmetic average (Figure 5), one of the best measures would be for management to respect working hours (2.75). Subsequently, management should allow leave or day off when necessary (2.74); to show confidence and strengthen the position of employees, granting greater autonomy (2.73); focus on results rather than where and when the work is done (2.72) and ensure regular and effective communication (2.70); take into account the needs and well-being of employees (2.70); take into account responsibility for family care and workload (2.68); provide better home office hardware (2.66); digitise work processes (2.62) and provide clearer instructions for remote work (2.60).

Employees were asked to propose other measures that could improve the remote work experience. The question was voluntary. Only 24% of employees answered the question. Most, 45% of employees would welcome training and coaching programs focused on knowledge in the field of remote work. 11% of employees stated that support from management would also help eliminate problems associated with this form of work. 7% of employees pointed to the need for equal treatment of employees working remotely

(from home) and from the office, as well as the introduction of a hybrid form of work. 5% of employees would welcome the use of new technologies and the digitisation of work processes, which could make work productivity more efficient. Other solutions included faster Internet, a greater emphasis on quality than on the amount of work and benefits for employees (such as reimbursed home office costs). Less than 5% of employees stated this. Other proposals reported by less than 2% of employees are summarised in Table 2.

**Figure 5** Remote work during the pandemic – opportunities for improvement (%) (see online version for colours)
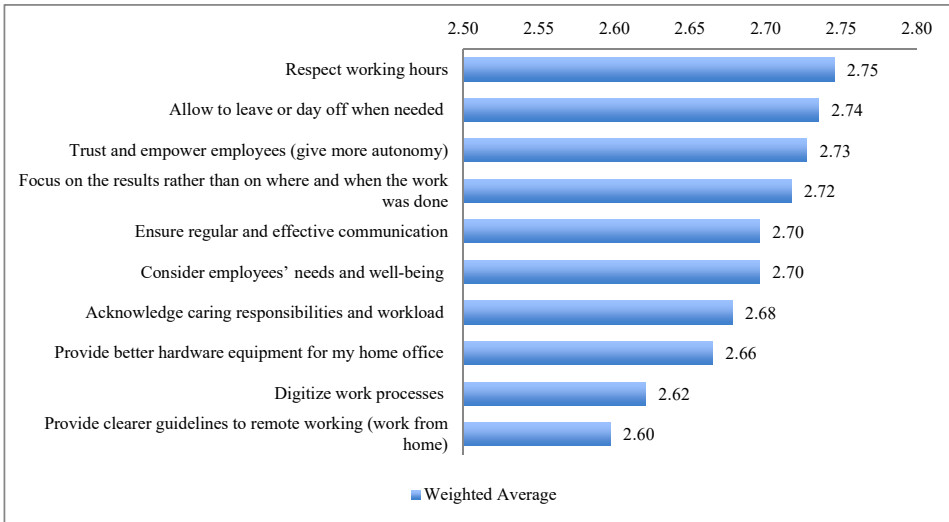


*Source:* Authors

**Table 2** Remote work during the pandemic – other opportunities for improvement

|  | N | %* |  | N | %* |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Training courses | 41 | 45 | Focus on quality of work | 3 | 3 |
| Management support | 10 | 11 | Benefits | 3 | 3 |
| Policies that ensure equality between employees working from home and office | 6 | 7 | New communication channels | 2 | 2 |
| Hybrid work | 6 | 7 | Fun activities | 2 | 2 |
| New technologies | 5 | 5 | Cloud platforms | 2 | 2 |
| Digitalisation and optimisation | 5 | 5 | Better communication | 1 | 1 |
| Improved internet | 4 | 4 | 4 day work week. | 1 | 1 |

Note: *Out of 91 answers.

*Source:* Authors

## 5    Discussion and recommendations for improvement of remote work practices

Through a gradual analysis of the obtained data provided answers to the established research questions and hypothesis. The key findings of this study are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3**      Remote work during the pandemic – experience, challenges and opportunities for improvement

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Impact on aspects of working life | Positive | Efficiency in performing tasks |
| | | Work-life balance |
| | | Overall satisfaction with the job |
| | | Professional development |
| | | Mental well-being (happy and comfortable feelings) |
| | | Attitude (positive) towards remote work |
| | Negative | Chances of promotion |
| | | Motivation |
| | Neutral | Relationship with manager |
| Key challenges | General | Adapting to new working conditions |
| | | Balancing work and caring responsibilities |
| | Others (>5% answers) | Loneliness |
| | | Job insecurity |
| | | Financial insecurity |
| | | Performance issues |
| | | Change of workplace |
| | | Communication issues |
| Opportunities for improvement | General | Respect working hours |
| | | Allow to leave or day off when needed |
| | | Trust and empower employees (give more autonomy) |
| | | Focus on the results rather than on where and when the work was done |
| | | Ensure regular and effective communication |
| | | Consider employees' needs and well-being |
| | | Acknowledge caring responsibilities and workload |
| | | Provide better hardware equipment for my home office |
| | | Digitise work processes |
| | | Provide clearer guidelines to remote working (work from home) |

**Table 3**     Remote work during the pandemic – experience, challenges and opportunities for
                improvement (continued)

| Opportunities for improvement | Others (>5% answers) | Training courses |
|---|---|---|
| | | Management support |
| | | Policies that ensure equality between employees working from home and office |
| | | Hybrid work |
| | | New technologies |
| | | Digitalisation and optimisation |

Source:    Authors

The findings suggest that the predominantly positive experience of individual employees with the remote work during the pandemic affected several aspects of working life, employees' feelings and attitudes towards this form of work. The present results partly support previous study of Beck and Hensher (2021) who demonstrated that most employees who worked remotely (from home) during the pandemic had positive experience.

According to the results, the remote work experience negatively affected employees' promotion opportunities and motivation. Golden and Eddleston (2020) argued that it is not remote work that effects career success, but rather the extent of remote working and work context. Extensive remote workers with higher supplemental work and higher face-to-face contact with their supervisor had greater chances of promotions. Unfortunately, during the pandemic the face-to-face contact was minimised mainly due to imposed lockdowns. This can partly explain the lack of motivation as a result of unsatisfied needs. It could be ranging from low chances of promotion, weak Internet connection, ineffective meetings, inappropriate workspace and lack of information or social interaction.

Despite negative impact of this experience on the chances of promotion and motivation, remote working had a positive impact on work-life balance, which was reflected in employees' overall job satisfaction and well-being. Remote working in the times of crisis was seen as an important step in creating a healthy work-life balance (Szulc et al., 2021). Similarly, remote work was found to be positively related to work-life balance in the study of Dolot (2020). However, as stated previously, there are adverse effects found in studies of Niu et al. (2021), Campo et al. (2021) and Sandoval-Reyes et al. (2021), where no association between remote work and work-life balance was mostly explained by the presence of the family members and other distractions related to home environment.

Moreover, employees working remotely during the pandemic were able to perform work tasks more efficiently. Improved work efficiency might be the result of flexibility and autonomy (Jamal et al., 2021) associated with remote working, reduced commuting time or eliminated office distractions. Hence, employees had more space for professional development.

Among all the examined aspects of working life, relationship with the manager remained unchanged. Conversely, this outcome is contrary to that of Chang et al. (2021) who stated that employees working outside the workplace tend to have more difficulty building relationships with their manager and co-workers. The reason for this is not clear,

but it may be related to the cultural factor (traditions and social norms in the Arab world) that affects interpersonal relationships and human behaviour (Ali and Al-Kazemi, 2005).

It is noteworthy to emphasise that mothers perceived the impact of remote working on work-life balance more negatively than women who did not have children. Similar trend can be observed in other studies of Del Boca et al. (2020), Chauhan (2021), Farré et al. (2020) and Lonska et al. (2021). The cause of work-family conflict experienced by women is attributed to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of schools that caused many mothers to reconcile childcare and work responsibilities leading to feelings of conflict between work and life (Petts at el., 2020).

Furthermore, similarly with the research conducted by Erro-Garcés et al. (2022) this study found that remote work experience had positive impact on employees' well-being who felt happy and comfortable, however, men more than women, non-parents compared to parents as well as fathers compared to mothers. These findings also broadly support the research findings of Lyttelton et al. (2020) and Zamarro and Prados (2021). Working women (who had not probably worked out of office before) were more likely to feel stressed than men as they handled most of the housework. Moreover, the pandemic remote work added demands on working parents who had to do the paid job that collided with their parental responsibilities. The findings of Stefanova et al. (2021) also showed a significant gender imbalance. In particular, mothers spent significantly less time on work and significantly more time on caregiving compared to fathers during the pandemic. However, the result partially differs from Isac et al. (2021) who found that women felt more comfortable working remotely than men. This may be due to the fact that remote work can be sometimes more convenient for women who want both – career and family.

Remote work also led to more optimistic attitude of male employees towards this form of work. This finding supports the second hypothesis. Surprisingly, fathers were found to be more optimistic than men without children. For women, it was the other way around. This may partly be explained by the fact that fathers had more time to devote to their jobs than mothers. Even though the pandemic increased men's domestic responsibilities, yet not as much as women's (Carli, 2020).

## 5.1   Recommendations for improvement of remote work practices

Findings identified several known as well as a number of new issues arising from the way work was organised during the pandemic. This section focuses on four main issues. Taking into account the suggestions and needs of employees resulting from the survey, possible solutions are discussed.

As aforesaid, the pandemic remote working *negatively affected employees' chances of promotion and motivation*. Employees working remotely do not spend enough time with colleagues and managers and thus have fewer opportunities to demonstrate their skills. This results in reduced chance of promotion and may ultimately affect the career. It is also easy to lose motivation when working remotely. Likewise, a lack of interaction with colleagues can cause employees to lose interest in their long-term career goals. Ultimately, they lose motivation. Performance appraisal is a key part of supporting employee motivation and career advancement, hence, one option is to implement evaluation systems that guarantee equal career opportunities for remote workers as well as those working from the office. Providing training, educational courses and access to other development resources (Chambel et al., 2022) could be another effective form of motivation (Wiradendi Wolor et al., 2020).

Employees had difficulty *adapting to new working conditions* what presented challenge also for HR professionals (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). Employees need time to adapt to new working conditions. Therefore, it is essential that managers set clear guidelines and goals regarding quality, deadlines and work procedure, provide training that facilitates adaptation and maintain regular and transparent communication through innovative methods – various applications and platforms. An important way to help employees adapt and succeed remotely is to provide them with better home office hardware, digitise work processes or invest in new technologies. There are various types of software and cloud platforms available today that make remote work much easier. In this case, it is also necessary to teach employees how to comprehensively use not only new but also existing technologies as best as possible.

It was also problematic to *balance work and caring responsibilities*. Flexibility and greater autonomy associated with remote working can result in a number of adverse effects. Although a higher level of flexibility and autonomy has a positive effect on employees, it can cause employees to work harder, longer or irregularly. Ongoing connectivity can lead to overwork, stress or work-family conflict and can negatively affect employees' mental and psychological health (Dong et al., 2022). According to employees, it would be beneficial if management respects working hours and provides training on remote working. Initial studies on remote work during the pandemic highlight the importance of employers to provide training supporting adaptation of employees, technical support or to create flexible organisational culture. It cannot only help employees to adapt and find balance, but also reduce stress, isolation and lack of well-being of employees (Eversole et al., 2012; Prasad et al., 2020; Costa and Tumagole, 2020; Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Prasad, 2021). Besides, existing gender inequalities have important implication for organisations who need to focus on creating suitable and fair working conditions as employees' well-being is associated with their commitment, workplace relationships, job satisfaction, dedication and overall career success (Harter et al., 2003; Boehm and Lyubomirsky, 2008; Waters and Stokes, 2015; Kern et al., 2015). As stated by Chung et al. (2020) remote work experience of mothers during the pandemic may result in reduced motivation or efficiency in fulfilling work tasks and cause an increase in the number of women leaving the labour market. It is therefore important to create internal rules and regulations (included in the contracts) concerning working hours and the availability of the employee outside working hours to enable fulfilment of caring responsibilities of parents in general.

Last but not least, employees had to *cope with feelings of loneliness and isolation*. Feelings of isolation are common during remote working due to reduced interaction between employees, but intensified during the pandemic (Prasad et al., 2020). In the long run, this can adversely affect their mental state. Consequently, it is important to create opportunities that optimise communication and promote collaboration of individual employees. One solution is a hybrid work model that combines remote working and office work. Hybrid work gives employees the opportunity to reconcile work and life in a way that suits them, as well as the opportunity to interact with others in the office work environment. Another option is to create a sense of connection between employees through regular virtual events such as teambuilding, brainstorming, webinars, playing online games or other activities. One of the more common sources of isolation is a lack of access to the information, materials or applications needed to perform tasks. Cooperation with employees and the IT department seems necessary. Especially in the context of the

sudden change that happened during the transition to remote work, it would be appropriate to setup a free helpline. Likewise, recognition for hard work is also needed.

Unfortunately, remote work has brought more serious problems than adjusting to new working conditions, ability to balance work and caring responsibilities or loneliness and isolation. Therefore, it is now time to pay more attention to all these negative aspects that remote workers face. As the phenomenon of remote working gains interest around the world, its potential harmful effects are also prone to increase. Pointing out the experiences and problems that employees have faced during remote working can help to create more suitable working conditions not only after, but also during a still unending pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic can lead to widespread changes in the way we work. It is therefore essential that organisations reconsider their labour policies and expectations and adapt to the emerging reality of remote working. Furthermore, organisations and governments have a moral obligation to combat the lack of awareness and indifference to these problems, which are increasingly and invisibly threatening in modern virtual workspaces. This situation requires an approach that takes into account various aspects. Attention must be paid to maintaining productivity, culture, work-related mental and physical health and social relations. It is essential to reconsider job design that also requires the application of new technologies, which became essential for remote work during the pandemic period.

One thing we should take away from this pandemic is that it will most likely not be the last crisis that will disrupt normal life. It is therefore essential that governments, organisations and professionals start thinking about how to enable more activities online – so that remote working is not just a benefit for a select few, but for everyone.

## 6    Conclusions, limitations and future research directions

The study described the experience of employees working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, identified key problems and possible solutions. Taking into account the suggestions and needs of employees resulting from the questionnaire survey, recommendations for improving the current situation and introducing new tools in order to make this form of work more effective were provided.

The findings of this study contribute to knowledge about the importance of remote working from the Arab region, particularly Kuwait where flexible forms of work organisation are not defined by law and formally used. Therefore, this sudden shift to remote work was a relatively new experience for most employees and managers. The findings provide many opportunities to test different theories. Despite limitations, the research should still provide important information that can be further explored.

Moreover, the findings can also help organisations, managers and even policy makers to find strategies to make this old-fashioned form of work more effective and attractive, thus adapting to changing labour market requirements. These findings benefit society in general because they provide evidence that changes are taking place and in some cases, positively affect more than one element of normal work expectations. If we show that remote working has clear benefits, we could inspire policy-makers and organisations to adopt sustainable solutions in the workplace and thus contribute to positive environmental changes.

## 6.1 Limitations

Despite the contribution of this study, it has some limitations. The main limitation of this research lies in its methodology, namely the sampling strategy and sample size. Snowball sampling has become very popular in organisational research (Marcus et al., 2017); however, it is criticised for a lack of representativeness (Parker et al., 2019). This can occur when many potential respondents are excluded from the study either because they are not part of the specific network or because of the personal preferences of the referral. With a small sample size (n = 385) the validity of the findings is limited to the present data and cannot be generalised. Margin of error in survey studies is selected between 1%–10% (Serdar et al., 2021), but the larger the sample size the greater the precision (Martínez-Mesa et al., 2014). In addition, omitting industry as an important variable in the questionnaire hindered the analysis and interpretation of the results. Another limitation is that employees' views may have been distorted, mainly due to the involuntary nature of the situation. Consequently, it is important to bear in mind the possible bias in these responses. Furthermore, the lack of previous studies on the experience of employees in Kuwait with remote working before the COVID-19 pandemic limited the comparison of findings and preparation of recommendations. Since the scope of this study is too broad, the focus of the future research should be narrowed down.

As 2/3 of Kuwait's population is made up of foreigners, it may be useful in the future to include a larger representative sample and analyse employees' remote work experience by nationality and industry. Moreover, various statistical methods could be applied to increase the validity of results.

## 6.2 Future research directions

The pandemic brought unique problems and challenges not only for employees, but also caused changes in the working lives of line managers. These changes require managerial skills and procedures that will not adversely affect employee well-being and productivity. It seems necessary to analyse the problems and challenges of managing employees working remotely from the perspective of line managers. In this way, organisations could ensure that their line managers are equipped with the skills to effectively manage remote workers.

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