Original Article

Loss of work-life balance, experience of stress and anxiety among professionals working from home - An exploratory study in a western Indian city

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Work from Home, (WFH) gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the emphasized positives of flexibility, productivity, efficiency, and saving on commute time. However, over a period of time, the experience of stress, anxiety, and depression started to daunt the WFH employees. This study was done to understand the impact of WFH on work performance, mental health (stress and anxiety), and lifestyle, among Indian employees. This study would help in building evidence that would direct industries/organizations to make WFH policies.

Methods: An online survey was done during the COVID-19 pandemic in the months of April-June 2021. The link of the questionnaire (Google form) was posted on social media platforms of Facebook and LinkedIn. A total of 322 professionals filled the link. The tool included scales Individual Work Performance, Perceive Stress and State Anxiety, and questions on lifestyle practices and experiences of WFH.

Results: Participants scored high on the dimensions of task performance and contextual performance. About two-third of the percentage (65.3%) were under moderate stress and (8.9%) were under high stress, and more than fifty percent (55.4%) were experiencing high-state anxiety. The effect of work distraction on perceived stress and state anxiety was found to be significant (p=0.000). Also, a significant association was observed between feelings of isolation and perceived stress and high-state anxiety (p=0.004) (p=0.005) respectively and between anxiety and stress (p=0.000).

Conclusion: The provision of mindfulness training to employees working from home (WFH) can assist them in managing the stress and anxiety associated with remote work. Industries have a unique chance to create inventive and personalized approaches to support WFH arrangements, prioritizing the well-being of their employees.

Keywords: Anxiety; Perceived Stress; Lifestyle; Work from Home; Work-Performance

Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to its knees with millions of infections and deaths.[1] Social isolation was the key to keeping away the infection and countries strived hard to strategize different policies to restrict the spread of the infection.[2] India was the second-worst-hit country in the world after the United States which experienced significant losses as well, and, was able to control the pandemic with periodic lock downs.[3,4] WFH emerged as a widely accepted

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approach, propagated and executed by most professional sectors to maintain social distance.[5] WFH-is an arrangement in which employees work in their own homes, rather than in an office.[6] Telecommuting, as it is referred to in the United States, teleworking, as it is referred to in Europe, home-working, working at a distance-site, or remote workers are popularized that implies that work is something you do, not someplace you go.[7] In India- Information Technology, Information Technology Enabled Services, Ecommerce, Banking Financial Services and Insurance, Recruitment, Consulting, Edtech sectors approved WFH with open arms.[8] According to the International Labour Organization, there were approximately 557 million individuals working from home (WFH) worldwide in the second quarter of 2020, accounting for nearly 18% of the global workforce. In India, 55% of people were engaged in full-time WFH, 20% were working from the office, and 25% were following a blended work arrangement.[9,10] Considering the significant numbers involved, conducting detailed research becomes imperative to understand the various aspects and domains of WFH.

WFH became the preferred choice among employees because of flexibility received, saving on commute time, improved productivity and work efficiency, opportunities to spend quality time with family members, aversion to workplace distractions, and toxic office environs.[11,12,13] The flip side comprised, blurring of work-life boundaries, long working hours, decreased social interactions, no/less support from the industries/ organizations, poor lifestyle habits, and lastly emergence of mental health issues due to the complexity of one or more reasons described above.[11,12,13]According to a United Nations report from 2017, it was found that 41% of remote workers experienced high levels of stress. In contrast, only 25% of office workers reported the same.[14] Furthermore, there is ample evidence indicating that working from home (WFH) can trigger feelings of anxiety.[15,16,17]

The effect on mental health could be because of feelings of isolation and burnout, continuous task-

oriented approach, adjustments with the WFH surroundings for efficient working, and continuous struggle to prove capabilities in the virtual competitive world. Apart from the psychological issues, there is an ongoing deliberations among employers permitting WFH and employees around productivity and efficiency that cannot be ignored.[18,19,20,21] At the background of India's IT sector growing leaps and bounds, and holding a huge prospect of becoming a world leader. It is essential to study the effect of WFH on the mental health and lifestyle of the employees in India. This would give insights to governments/organizations for developing strategies to reduce the negative impacts of WFH.[11] Hence the present article seeks to comprehend the WFH effect on work performance, stress, anxiety, and lifestyle of employees in India. The study could recommend the organizations on the appropriate steps to deal with the WFH's issues.

Methods

The study is an exploratory research that collected the data using an online Google form. An approval from the ethics committee was taken from Symbiosis International University's Independent Ethics Committee (IEC) vide letter (SIU/IEC/Admin/2 June 2020). Online informed consent was taken from all the participants. To protect confidentiality, individual identifiers from the data were removed post- data collection.

The semi-structured questionnaire included scales that measured work efficiency, stress and anxiety, beliefs about WFH, information about diet and physical activity and an open-ended question to report the challenges experienced while WFH in last three months. The inclusion criteria for participation was employees WFH since last year in India. The link to the form with the informed consent was posted on the social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) accounts of the researcher. And was also shared on what's app and emails of professionals in contact with the researcher. The period of data collection was between April-June 2021.A total of 322 professionals filled the Google form link.

The semi-structured questionnaire comprised scales and some close-ended and one open-ended questions.

A reliable and validated scale- the Individual Work Performance Scale (IWPS) measured the performance and the productivity of work.[22] Domains of task performance and contextual behaviour (12 from total 17 items) were selected only. Scoring was done on a five point scale, the mean score was calculated.

The perceived stress scale (PSS is the most widely used psychological instrument of 10 items for measuring the perception of stress. It is an assessment of individual situations that are appraised as stressful.[23] Scoring was done on a five-point scale, some items were reversed (items 4, 5, 7, & 8). Further, a summation of scores was done on all the scale items. Individual ratings on the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) have a potential range between 0 and 40, where elevated scores reflect increased perceived stress levels.

► Scoring ranging from 0-13 is considered a low stress.

► Scoring ranging from 14-26 is considered a moderate level of stress.

► Scoring ranging from 27-40 is considered a high level of perceived stress.

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory STAI (short version) is a psychologically validated scale that measures– state anxiety, or anxiety about an event, and trait anxiety, or anxiety level as a personal characteristic. A short version was used because of its high reliability and validity.[24] The responses were taken on four-point Likert scale, higher scores reflected a higher level of anxiety. In the STAI-6 tool, there are six questions with a Likert scale from 1 to 4. This gives a score range from 6 to 24. To create scores compatible with the original STAI-S scores, the STAI-6 scores will be divided by 6 and multiplied by 20 to give a range from 20 to 80. The following guidelines were used for the interpretation of scores: 0–9, normal or no anxiety; 10–18, mild to moderate anxiety; 19–29, moderate to severe anxiety; and 30–63, severe anxiety.

The questionnaire also asked about challenges in WFH, changes in dietary practices and physical activity, feelings of loneliness, ideas about flexibility, and the blurring of work-life boundaries.

SPSS software version 19 was used for the analysis of the responses. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied. The qualitative analysis of the subjective narrative data obtained through the open-ended question was conducted using the content analysis method.

Results

The sample reflected an almost equal proportion of gender i.e. females, (48.5%) and males (51.5%). Around half of the respondents (52.5%) were in the age group of 21-25 years. And, (13.9%) were>=40 years as the details shown in Table 1. A majority (44.6%) studied engineering and about one-fifth (20.7%) studied, Law, Biotechnology and Commerce. More than half (54.4%) were married and (93.9%) had one to five family members in their homes. A majority, (83.2%) lived in houses with two to four rooms (Table 1).

Table 1 reflects more than half of the respondents (64.4%) reported of working for more than 8 hours a day. A more than quarter (29.7%, 32.7%) reported that the quantity was acceptable and good respectively. Around (40.6%) reported that the quality was acceptable. The participants scored high, on both dimensions reflecting higher means (task performance Mean$_m$ =3.6 range 3.40-4.01, contextual performance Mean$_m$ = 3.7 range 3.47-4.15).

More than sixty percent (65.3%) were experiencing stress in the moderate category and (8.9%) were experiencing high stress, and more than fifty percent (55.4%) who had been WFH for last three months were experiencing high state anxiety. Additionally, (69.3%) and (78.2%) said that WFH provided flexibility and efficiency.

Table 1: Characteristics of the respondents and number of hours worked, quantity and quality of work output (n=322).

Characteristics		n (%)
Age	21-30	169 (52.5)
	31-40	108 (33.7)
	>=40	42 (13.9)
Gender	Females	156 (48.5)
	Males	166 (51.5)
Education	Engineering	143 (44.6)
	Life science	83 (25.7)
	Medical	29 (8.9)
	Others	67 (20.7)
Marital status	Married	175 (54.4)
	Single	146 (45.5)
Number of family members	1-5	296 (93.9)
	>5	26 (6.1)
Number of rooms in house	2-4	267 (83.2)
	5-7	51 (15.8)
	>7	3 (1)
Number of hours worked in a day	8	44 (13.9)
	<8	70 (21.8)
	>8	207 (64.4)
Perception about the quantity of work	Insufficient	16 (5)
	Sufficient	57 (17.8
	Acceptable	95 (29.7)
	Good	105 (32.7)
	Very Good	48 (14.9)
Perception about the quality of work	Very bad	6 (2)
	Bad	3 (1)
	Acceptable	131(40.6)
	Good	128(39.6)
	Very Good	54 (16.8)

A majority (76.2%) experienced blurring of work-life boundaries, (52.5%), (63.4%)reported feeling isolated and getting distracted while working and (60.8%)reported that the use of social media increased during that time. Changes in dietary and exercise habits during WFH were reported by 82.1% and 54.4% respectively (Table-2).

Table 2: Experience of stress and anxiety and other factors by the respondents

Level of perceived stress	n (%)
Low stress	83 (25.7)
Moderate stress	210 (65.3)
High stress	29 (8.9)
Level of state-trait anxiety	
No/low anxiety	92 (28.7)
Moderate anxiety	52 (15.8)
High anxiety	178 (55.4)
Did you receive flexibility while WFH?	
Yes	223 (69.3)
No	99 (30.7)
Did you feel that you were efficient in time management while WFH?	
Yes	252 (78.2)
No	70 (21.8)
Did you that there was blurring of work-life boundaries while WFH?	
Yes	245 (76.2)
No	77 (23.8)
Did you feel isloated while WFH?	
Yes	169 (52.5)
No	153 (47.5)
Were there distractions while WFH?	
Yes	204 (63.4)
No	117 (36.6)
Was there an increased use of social media while WFH?	
Yes	197 (60.8)
No	125 (38.2)
Was there a change in dietary practices while WFH?	
Yes	83 (82.1)
No	18 (17.9)
What was the pattern of exercise before the pandemic?	
Often	42 (41.5)
Sometimes	37 (36.7)
Never	22 (21.8)
Was there a change in pattern of exercise before the pandemic? Yes	55 (54.4)
No	24 (23.7)

The impact of work distraction on perceived stress and state anxiety was found to be significant. A notable percentage of participants (78%) who reported work distraction during remote work experienced moderate levels of stress, along with high state anxiety (70%) (p=0.000 and p=0.000). Moreover, concerning feelings of isolation, a significant proportion (71%) experienced isolation and fell into the category of moderate stress, while (68%) experienced isolation and reported high state anxiety (p=0.004 and p=0.005). The p values indicated a significant association. Furthermore, in terms of blurring work-life boundaries, approximately three-quarters (71.43%)

experienced this phenomenon and were categorized as having moderate stress, while (62.3%) reported high state anxiety (p=0.007 and 0.006), with a significant association as depicted in Table 3.

A significant correlation was found between anxiety and stress. Participants experiencing moderate anxiety (81.25%) also exhibited moderate levels of stress, while a significant proportion(80.36%) of those with high anxiety levels were categorized as having moderate stress (p=0.000) Table 4.

Table 3: Association of work distraction, feeling of isolation, and blurring of work-life boundaries with perceived stress and state of anxiety

Work Distraction	Perceived Stress					State Anxiety				
	Low	Moderate	High	Total	p-value	Low/No	Moderate	High	Total	p-value
Yes	22	160	22	204		25	36	143	204	
	10.94%	78.13%	10.94%	100.00%		12.50%	17.19%	70.31%	100.00%	
No	60	49	9	118	0.000	67	16	35	118	0.000
	51.35%	40.54%	8.11%	100.00%		56.76%	13.51%	29.73%	100.00%	
TOTAL	88	206	31	322		92	52	178	322	
	25.74%	64.36%	9.90%	100.00%		28.71%	15.84%	55.45%	100.00%	
Isolation										
Yes	22	121	26	169		26	29	114	169	
	13.21%	71.70%	15.09%	100.00%		15.09%	16.98%	67.92%	100.00%	
No	61	86	6	153	0.004	67	22	64	153	0.005
	39.58%	56.25%	4.17%	100.00%		43.75%	14.58%	41.67%	100.00%	
TOTAL	83	207	32	322		93	51	178	322	
	25.74%	64.36%	9.90%	100.00%		28.71%	15.84%	55.45%	100.00%	
Blurring of work boundaries										
Yes	45	175	25	245		51	41	153	245	
	18.18%	71.43%	10.39%	100.00%		20.78%	16.88%	62.34%	100.00%	
No	38	32	7	77	0.007	42	10	25	77	0.006
	50.00%	41.67%	8.33%	100.00%		54.17%	12.50%	33.33%	100.00%	
TOTAL	83	207	32	322		93	51	178	322	
	25.74%	64.36%	9.90%	100.00%		28.71%	15.84%	55.45%	100.00%	

Table 4: Association between state-trait anxiety and stress

Level of State Trait Anxiety	Level of perceived stress				p-value
	Low	Moderate	High	Total	
No/Low	70	22	0	92	
	75.86%	24.14%	0.00%	100%	
Moderate	9	42	0	51	0.00
	18.75%	81.25%	0.00%	100%	
High	3	142	34	178	
	1.79%	80.36%	17.86%	100%	
Total	82	206	34	322	
	25.74%	64.36%	9.90%	100%	

The content analysis of the narrative revealed that because of supervisors' unreasonable demands to be accessible, around the clock their disrespect for the employees' time, and a lack of teamwork, the respondents were working long hours. Unfortunately, these factors were having an impact on their work-life balance. Apart from the above challenge, they reported initiation of experiences of acute mental health issues such as anxiety brought on by continual burnout, stress, and a feeling of isolation. They were concerned that these symptoms would worsen and would lead to depression. They were experiencing physical distress including back pain, and strain in the eyes and ears. The probable causes could be the erratic lifestyle, lack of physical activity, and constant use of headphones with a mic. They further shared that constant availability at home raised expectations among family members, with the elderly particularly requesting assistance with everyday domestic tasks and to be their car driver in need-driving them to different places. A few people voiced concern over the rising costs of paying electricity and internet bills. The recruits complained that their onboarding process was difficult and they had little to no engagement with the team. Predominantly, all of them believed that the greater reliance on technology, more use of social media, and work distractions were the predictors of lower motivation and productivity in WFH arrangements. However, a few people also mentioned the benefits of WFH, including flexibility, increased productivity, reduced commute time, lack of stress from a toxic work environment, enjoyment of breaks for hobbies like cooking, and spending quality time with family.

Discussion

According to the study, WFH professionals perceive stress and anxiety as well as how these things affect their lifestyle, work-life balance, and the varied challenges encountered by them. Unlike the extensive survey conducted on IT remote workers in an Asian IT service industry, which exposed a productivity decline of 8–19%, this particular study received high ratings on two dimensions of task performance and contextual performance based on the IWPS scale, with 25% expressing satisfaction with the quality and quantity of work. Comparatively longitudinal research in the UK proved that employees were equally productive during WFH as in the offices.[25] Coincidentally, another survey in the US demonstrated increased productivity in the WFH setup; however, it also highlighted the possibility of bias among WFH-interested employees who might conflate production with productivity, potentially leading to skewed results.[26] Although this particular study focused on task performance, it did not thoroughly explore the impact of WFH on productivity. The present study's findings align with the same survey, indicating prolonged working hours. One contributing factor to this similarity is the increased time dedicated to team coordination and communication in contrast to the time typically spent in traditional office settings.[26] This aspect of working hours and productivity certainly needs to be studied further. Findings about the experience of stress and anxiety while WFH in the last three months are confirmed through other studies as well. In Hong Kong, a survey by the Mental Health Association revealed 87% of WFH employees experiencing stress, they reported job insecurity, anxiety, loneliness, and burnout as reasons for stress, and in Singapore, WFH increased the employees' stress more than COVID-19 front-line workers' stress did.[27]

Due to workload, disturbed work-life boundaries, IT complexity, fast-paced work culture, and constant electronic interaction, a survey of IT employees involved in high- and low-intensity WFH revealed that they were experiencing technostress, but the review was done before the pandemic.[20] In addition, a survey conducted in the UK indicated that lower leadership quality, depressive symptoms, females, age > 45, the atmosphere at home, work arrangements, and having an infant or toddler at home were predictors of stress and burnout during WFH.[28] The same study found a link between poor organizational management, working overtime,

and work-related stress, anxiety, and melancholy. The weak organizational support element was corroborated in the Indian study as well.[11] Females experiencing high stress in the WFH arrangement are proven in various research studies including an observational study in Indonesia and Australia.[29] In this study, the gender-based experience of stress and anxiety was not arched. A study in India showed a positive correlation between perceived stress and depressive tendencies among WFH employees.[30]

The other predictors affecting mental health was home-workspace and different distractions documented in a review article, but study did not explore workspace as a concern for distraction.[31]Although the relationship between work distraction and stress and anxiety has not been directly investigated, but there is a research showing how work distraction affects productivity and stress.[31] In India a study documented 30-40% of WFH employees feeling lonely , lost, and disconnected from the real world, indicating the mental health impact of WFH.[11] This study revealed a significant association between feelings of isolation with the stress; it is a fact that isolation is a significant aspect of WFH during the pandemic and is viewed as one of the primary drawbacks of the work culture, which may affect job satisfaction and stress.[32] The findings about the blurring of work-life boundaries were supported by findings from other studies, such as a study from the Netherlands that found that professionals' happiness and well-being were negatively impacted by emotional exhaustion and stress brought on by the blurring of work-life boundaries.[33]

Although the links between job distraction, loneliness, blurred work-life boundaries, and stress is well recognized and extensively explored there are a few studies on the relationships between these characteristics and anxiety. And also the relationship between anxiety and stress in the context of WFH, therefore this dimension needs further research for confirmation.

Changes in the lifestyle in WFH arrangement are

obvious and studied before. Studies in Poland, Qatar reflected significant dietary changes, increased consumption of snacks, sweets and reduction in the physical activity leading to weight gain among the WFH employees.[1,34]Similarly, around, 75% IT WFH professionals in India also reported decreased physical activity.[11] In Japan, during WFH, the quality of diet was found to be improved, however excessive snacking was seen.[35] However,research in the Netherlands found healthy lifestyle to be protective against the negative effects of blurred work-life boundaries resulting in burnout and emotional exhaustion.[33]

Limitations
Due to the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by Indian IT companies on employee participation in online surveys, the study was limited to a small sample size. Secondly, many WFH employees were not keen to participate in the survey as they were discontent with the length of the questionnaire and expressed the same to the researcher. This pilot effort comes with its limitations, thereby offering ample scope for further research.

Conclusions
During COVID-19 pandemic, companies adopted WFH extensively as a public health measure which increased its prominence. Therefore, it has been researched extensively, globally and some studies have also been attempted in India. In such a case, a longitudinal design study in particular would be able to provide long-term outcomes or evidence. Also the cultural context of Indian WFH professionals and its impact need to be studied in detail. The findings draw attention toward development of policies for the benefit of the WFH employees in India. It is essential to introduce and teach techniques of using mindfulness approach to WFH employees. It would benefit to improve focus, concentration performance, to put work aside after work hours, and to cope with electronic fatigue. Companies need to make an effort to invest in, develop, and carry out initiatives for the employees' overall well-being. It is advised for supervisors to set up regular meetings to go over

challenges, performance, and progress, and to build organizational resources for professional help (counseling). Additionally, to strictly enforce work schedules to prevent overworking and thinning work-life boundaries. It is advised to periodically check on and screen for employees' physical and mental health in order to spot those who require medical attention. Selecting a hybrid model (inviting the team members to the office for 1-2 days) would assist in reducing feelings of isolation by emphasizing the value of colleagues' support systems. To address gender inequalities in the WFH scenario, flexible policies addressing gender equity must be in place. Organizations ought to strive on creating flexible, inventive workplace policies that will guarantee that WFH employees embrace healthy lifestyles and are in good health.

Acknowledgments

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