



Teleworking and Job Performance among Academic Staff of Universities: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

The nature of work, workforce and environment is continually evolving resulting in the quest for more improved, efficient and effective work arrangements in all spheres of the economy. The Covid-19 pandemic which disrupted normal work routines worldwide, caused an accelerated embracement of work trends such as flexible work arrangements which hitherto were not fully utilized in the work environment. Flexible work arrangements are basically options that allow an employee to choose when and where to work normally outside the traditional typical pattern of arriving at the workplace by 8am and leaving at 4pm daily. Teleworking is one of the flexible working arrangement patterns that provides employees with greater freedom to alternate between the ordinary workplace and outside locations, mostly via the use of information and communications technology (ICT). Considering the unique nature of the work environment in the universities, being a workforce streamed by the role to academic staff and the current increased digitalization of workforce globally, this work seeks to find out if and to what extent teleworking has been embraced by academic staff in universities. While highlighting the various forms and general principles of teleworking, this paper equally seeks to appraise the effects of teleworking on organizational performance and the challenges faced by them as a result of either imbibing or not imbibing teleworking. It is recommended that more in-depth empirical field research be conducted on the effects of teleworking on organizational performance in universities in order to substantiate the claim that teleworking impacts positively on organizational performance.

Keywords

Telework, Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs), Self Determination Theory (SDT), Performance, Universities

INTRODUCTION

The on-going digitization witnessed in the workplace, facilitated by technological advancements has not only initiated radical changes in the human experience of work, but has equally brought about diverse options to the how, when and

where employees' performance is obtained in the organization. This has resulted in a notably significant shift away from the normal or standard working week towards non-standard work schedules known as flexible work arrangements (FWAs). Alqasa and Noor (2022) define flexible work arrangements (FWAs) as policies and procedures that permit employees to vary their workplace, time, or effort, i.e., when, where, and for how long they accomplish their job responsibilities which significantly gives them the freedom and options to respond to changing circumstances. Flexible work arrangements include teleworking, flexible working hours, flexi-time, part-time work, overtime, job sharing, shift and weekend work etc. and are seen by Paull, Omari and Sharafizad, (2009) as fundamental workplace mechanisms for attracting, retaining and progressing the best and the brightest on one hand as well as tools for rationalizing the workforce and organizational costs while expanding client/customer service beyond traditional hours.

Teleworking is a form of flexible working arrangement where work is conducted remotely mostly with the aid of information and communications technology (ICT) thereby according employees the freedom to alternate work between the traditional workplace and outside locations (Mutiganda, Wiitavaara, Heiden, Svensson, Fagerström, Bergström & Aboagye, 2022). In the education sector, teleworking has been introduced in the form of electronic learning (e-learning, digital learning or virtual learning), open and distance learning, blended learning, (Commonwealth of Learning, 2013) and practiced using ICT online-tools such as Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, WhatsApp and other communication facilities including computer, teleconferencing, text messages, etc. to interact with students or colleagues at different places (Dawodu & Osondu, 2011).

Globally, numerous governments are steadily updating their educational sector to adapt to these changes precipitated by rapid technological advances. Catană, Toma, and Barbu (2021) aver that more than 40% of teachers from the European Union used telework in 2018. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, education is considered as the linchpin of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 plan (Alqasa & Noor, 2022), and so adequate measures are being put in place to ensure that the various levels of education are bolstered by the appropriate competence, and are supplied with training that is compatible with new knowledge and technologies (Al-Subaie, Al-Habeeb, & Altwaijri, 2020). In the same vein, the higher education sector in Australia is experiencing significant transformation of university operations which have impacted on the work environments of both academic and general staff (Paull, Omari & Sharafizad, 2009). In Nigeria, a philosophy of education meant to ensure that an individual, at any stage of the educational process after primary education has the flexibility of choice between continuing his full-time studies, combining work with study, or embarking on full-time employment without excluding the prospect of resuming studies later has since been adopted by the government (Ambe-Uva, 2007). This is evident by the establishment of the National Open University - which is arguably the largest open, distance, and eLearning university in Nigeria, in 1983. The National Open University which had its operations suspended on 25th April, 1984 but later resuscitated in 2002 is known for providing functional, flexible, accessible and cost-effective education for all who seek knowledge. Furthermore, the National Universities Commission NUC equally approved distance learning centers in eleven universities in Nigeria (EduCaleb, 2019). For the private universities in Nigeria, Nonyelum and Ikpe (2021) attest that during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown private institutions in Nigeria like Babcock University Ogun State and Afe Babalola University Ekiti State that were closed, just like their public counterparts commenced online lectures via several e-learning platforms. From above it is evident that teleworking in the forms of e-learning, open and distance is practiced in some universities in Nigeria.

A university represents both a higher education learning, teaching, and researching institution and a community of stakeholders including lecturers (also known as academic or teaching staff), researchers, students, auxiliary and non-teaching staff (Catană, Toma, & Barbu, 2021) and have been earmarked as requiring flexibility, independence, and originality in their goals and outputs. Lecturers in universities are knowledge workers with high levels of education and specialist skills combined with the ability to apply these skills to identify and solve problems and equally adapt to rapidly changing workplaces and environmental conditions in flexible ways (Austin-Egole, Wokoma & Iheriohanma, 2014). Considering the assertion above and the paucity of research on the effects of teleworking on job performance of academic staff in the tertiary education sector (Paull, Omari & Sharafizad, 2009; Alqasa & Noor, 2022; Mutiganda, et al, 2022), this study intends drawing from literature review of research in teleworking, to discuss the potential benefits and challenges of teleworking, faced by both the academics and their institution with regards to job performance. Thus, adding to the knowledge of researchers, the academics and policymakers on teleworking and how it enables employees to achieve the optimal required job performance in the tertiary educational sector.

The general question this paper seeks to answer is: what is the effect of teleworking on job performance of the academic staff? Other research questions are:

1. What are the benefits and challenges faced by academics who telework?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of telework to their institutions?

The general objective of the paper is to examine the effects of teleworking on performance in the tertiary education sectors. The specific objectives are to:

1. Investigate the benefits and challenges faced by academics who telework.
2. Investigate the benefits and challenges of telework to their institutions.

The methodology adopted in this discourse is library research involving analytical discussion of secondary data. This approach is adopted since the focus is on general principles relating to teleworking vis-a-viz employees and organizational performance as necessitated by world-wide introduction of digital technology and the attendant devices.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Teleworking

Austin-Egole, Iheriohanma and Iheanacho (2021) define the concept of telework as an organizational practice involving the performance of any form of work which could have been done by the employee within the employer's / organization's premises remotely outside these premises on a voluntary basis with the aid of information and communication technologies such as internet, e-mail and telephone or any workable electronic gadget. Green, Tappin and Bentley (2017) aver that mobile work, home working, distributed work arrangements, anywhere working, e-work, virtual work, telecommuting and other hybrid forms such as part-time in the office, part-time at home or some other locations are numerous terms that have been used to describe teleworking. The International Labour Organization ILO (2017) identified three (3) different modalities of teleworking in her bid to ensure that there is a systemic perspective of the teleworking situation. The modalities include: a). regular home-based telework (which refers to employees working from home regularly, using Information Communication Technology (ICT)); b). high mobile teleworks (involving employees working in different places regularly, leading to a high mobility and ICT usage rate); and, c). occasional telework (consisting of employees working occasionally in one or more places outside the employer's premises with a much-reduced degree of mobility than the high mobile group).

Teleworking has equally been classified according to location by Tustin (2013) and includes; a) Home based or the hybrid model (which requires employee telework for one to three days a week while spending the remaining days at the work center). b). Regional Centers (these are special purpose telecommuting centers that may serve as extension of the work center, either used as a satellite center, or neighborhood center or casual work centers). Another classification of teleworking is given by Hamilton (2003) who classified teleworking with regards to time and context and whether it is initiated by the employers or employees. This classification includes a) Full-time working (here all work is conducted away from the central-site with little or no physical interaction with managers and coworkers). b) Part-time teleworking: (This as the name implies, is done on scheduled basis). c) Formal/Employer initiated teleworking has contractual agreement between the employer and the employee specifying off-site days, completion of tasks, evaluation, etc. d) Information/Employee initiated teleworking: this has no contractual agreement. The employee teleworks as the need arises. Odotola (2020) avers that though teleworking is far from being the norm in Nigeria, universities, companies, firms and startups in the metropolis are beginning to embrace the remote work culture.

Job Performance

Orishede and Ndudi (2020) post that the success and growth of organizations is largely dependent on the performance of their employees on their jobs hence organizations need highly performing individuals to be able to meet their goals, deliver the products and services they specialize in, and achieve competitive advantage. Job performance is a set of workers' behaviours that can be evaluated, monitored, measured and assessed in accordance with the laid down goals of the organization (Igbinovia & Popoola, 2016). Employee job performance relates to how well workers behave in the workplace and perform job duties obligated to and can be summarized as the record of outcomes achieved for each job function, during a specified period of time measured either monthly, quarterly, semi-annually or annually (Donohoe, 2019). The level of performance of employees in organizations is measured through the degree of productivity, customer satisfaction, job satisfaction, employee commitment and retention (Nwokocha & Iheriohanma, 2012). Onyeizugbe, Nduka and Enaihi, (2019) identify worker morale, level of satisfaction, turnover and absenteeism as other performance measuring variables.

Organizational performance summarily is the attained outcome of actions obtained with the skills of employees with the goal of achieving the organization's predetermined goals by increasing efficiency, quality, productivity, and profitability when measured from both the customer and the organizational perspective. This paper will look at how teleworking as a flexible work practice boosts innovativeness, and ultimately leads to increased/sustained optimal job performance.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Eurofund (2020), attest that the teleworking is quite common in Scandinavian countries in Europe with 38 and 33% respectively of the workforce in Denmark and Sweden, that telework. The Netherlands, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, France and Estonia are other EU countries with high levels of teleworkers at 31%, 29%, 27%, 26% and 25% respectively. Coincidentally, approximately 40 percent of the listed percentage of teleworkers in European Union countries belonged to the teaching and science professions (Widar, Heiden, Boman, & Wiitavaara, 2022). A telephone survey, ran on over 3,000 medium-sized (50–5,000 employees) manufacturing firms between 2012–2013 by Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying (2015) shows that in the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany, a sizeable number of managers, almost 50%, are allowed to telework during normal hours indicating that this is a conventional practice. For many developing countries like Nigeria, though, it is still relatively surprisingly high, at 10% or 20%. Respondents in Bloom et al. (2015) survey attribute the increasing adoption of teleworking in developing countries to the quest to avoid the rising traffic congestions as well as the spread in the usage of laptops and cell-phone connectivity.

Alqasa and Noor, (2022) examined the impact of part-time, flexible hours, and telework on employee performance in the Saudi education sector and concluded from their findings that though flextime positively influences employee performance neither part-time nor telework contributed to the employee's performance. Mungania and Mwit

(2022) conducted a survey to determine the influence of teleworking on employee performance in Public Universities in Mount Kenya region and concluded that there was a proven statistically remarkable relationship between, teleworking and employee performance of public universities in Mount Kenya region. Onyeukwu, Adeniyi, and Amin (2020) conducted a survey on how teleworking could serve as a catholicon to the spread of Covid-19 in Nigerian Universities and concluded that teleworking is an effectual strategy the Nigerian government should adopt in the educational sector to not only improve on performance but also to help in curtailing any future spread of diseases that might lead to the disruption of academic activities. These multiple studies have demonstrated that FWAs in general and teleworking in particular are associated with employee performance in universities though the nature and outcomes of these arrangements vary.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY (SDT)

Self Determination Theory (SDT) is a significant theory of motivation and personality propounded by Deci and Ryan (2002) that addresses three universal innate and psychological needs: Competence, Psychological Relatedness and Autonomy. The theory contends that meeting of these universal needs will assist people to function and grow optimally. While competence seeks to control the outcome and experience mastery, Psychological Relatedness is the universal want to interact, be connected to, and experience caring for others and Autonomy is the universal urge to be causal agent of one's integrated self (such as part time working and freelancing). Furthermore, the theory proposes that people appreciate the feeling of control they have over their actions, to the extent that anything that makes a previously enjoyed task appear more like an obligation than a freely chosen activity will undermine motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The choice of self-determination theory as the theoretical framework of this study is anchored on the knowledge that it is one of the contemporary theories of motivation and it is in tune with the current state of reasoning— which is that the feeling of fulfillment employees get as a result of engaging in the work they love doing, makes them satisfied with their jobs, give them a feeling of better 'fit' in their organization and makes them to perform better (Bono & Judge 2003; Austin-Egole, Iheriohanma and Iheanacho, 2021). Meyer, Becker and Vandenberghe (2004) attest that employees who feel what they do is within their control due to their freedom of choice are likely to be more committed to both their work and their employers. Bearing in mind that human control affects performance, and the mechanisms must be designed to accommodate variables or even errors which is in tandem with the basic postulation of the self-determination theory, this research will seek to find out the effect of teleworking (which gives employees freedom of choice of when, how and where to work) on the performance of academic staff of the tertiary education sector.

TELEWORKING AND JOB PERFORMANCE AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF OF UNIVERSITIES

The work environment in the tertiary education sector is seen as unique as the workforce is streamed by role of academic and general staff with a clear traditional separation of the work (Paull, Omari & Sharafizad, 2009). The academic staff are knowledge workers engaged in undertaking traditional academic roles of teaching and research and have been known to enjoy some degree of freedoms associated with flexible work arrangement involving where, when and how they undertake their work except in the requirements of face-to-face teaching. Jensen, Bjorklund, Hagberg, Aboagye, and Bodin (2020) posit that the work situation in academic institutions presently can best be described as stressful as a result of numerous factors including but not limited to competition for research grants, time pressure, heavy workload, temporary positions, and lack of sufficient job resources (such as financing,) and this makes it difficult for academics to cope. Studies on academic institutions show that this strenuous work situation causes extended worktime and sickness-presenteeism, which may affect academics' work performance and well-being negatively (Lohela-Karlsson, Nybergh, & Jensen, 2018). Success in universities therefore involves to some extent the degree of work flexibility they are allowed to be able to be in tune with these changes and the resultant changeable demands.

Advancements in technology have heightened the expectations of students and administrators by providing increased possibilities for communication with academics across wider spread of hours, while at the same time giving academics freedom of choice to work away from campus with the learning and communication technologies readily available at their fingertips (Paull, Omari & Sharafizad, 2009). Mungania and Mwiti (2022) aver that universities are embracing flexible working arrangements for the workers, and also encouraging a blended method of learning to ensure students complete their studies as scheduled. Telework being an atypical employment type known for providing job opportunities beyond traditional barriers with the aid of digitalization and technological innovation is perceived by Widar, et al (2022) as a natural part of academic work and a necessary resource for coping with, and recovering from, high work demands.

Teleworking is prone to affect academics privately and professionally in different ways considering the divergent human nature. It has been reported to increase, as well as decrease, academics' job satisfaction, work performance, recovery, work-life balance, well-being, and stress. Therefore, to maintain a sustainable work environment in academic institutions it is important to clarify the opportunities and challenges telework options imply for academics' work performance and health.

Some of the benefits enjoyed by academics who telework include;

1. Employees who have greater autonomy, flexibility as well as control over work schedules are more likely to exhibit increased commitment, engagement, job satisfaction and retention (Muchiti and Gachunga, 2015)

2. There is reported evidence of an increase in overall job satisfaction among teleworkers owing to greater control over their work environment, less interruption in work, and less stress. Compared with employees working in a traditional office, those working in a home office felt that telework had enhanced their job performance, job motivation, and job retention.
3. Achievement of work - life balance can be challenging for academic staff. Thus, providing a flexible work environment in the form of teleworking for academics empowers them with the opportunity with which to manage both their lives and their jobs which leads to higher performance (Austin-Egole, Iheriohanma and Iheanacho, 2021).
4. Teleworking allows employees to balance family and work commitments, work uninterrupted for longer periods and spend less time commuting to and from work. The fact that employees perceive themselves as having greater control over work and family matters which is in line with the Self Determination Theory (SDT) indirectly improves their attitude, mental and physical health.
5. Teleworking grants attractive option to those academics in traditional institutions interested in online teaching but are not receiving enough recognition within their institutions and who prefer not to relocate.
6. Teleworking helps to reduce absenteeism, improve employee's morale, increase productivity and quality of work; traffic congestion is eased resulting in better work life for the employees.

Academics who telework are saddled with the following challenges

1. Ramarajan and Reid (2013) posit that employees often find it challenging to maintain boundaries between work and non-work issues and the forced confinement of workers during the Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated the issue. While teleworking might seem very appealing as it offers an enticing alternative, the absence of a clear separation between one's work and home domains in addition to the lack of commutes which provide a form of transition between both domains creates a work-life imbalance with its accompanying challenges (Austin-Egole, Iheriohanma & Iheanacho, 2021).
2. Considering that there must be a fit between the level of information system technology and the level of communication technology, academics in online and distance education institutions are constantly saddled with the quest of exploring how to balance the information and communication technologies to enhance students' learning effectiveness. They equally need to consider expanding the use of the same technologies (e.g., Web conferencing tools) to communicate and collaborate with colleagues and staff who are dispersed geographically.
3. Professional and social isolation for some which results in the loss of the valuable, prompt communication that is readily obtainable only through face-to-face interactions with their colleagues and mentors resulting in health side effects that might harm individuals' mental and physical health to a certain degree (Brooks, Webster, Smith, Woodland, Wessely, Greenberg, & Rubin, 2020).
4. Poor power supply and unreliable internet access is a regular occurrence while working remotely. Most employees who telework are burdened with sourcing their own electricity to power their work devices (which is expensive) (Odotola, 2020).
5. Techno stress is a significant negative consequence of teleworking on workers' well-being (Molino, Ingusci, Signore, Manuti, Giancaspro, Russo, Zito, & Cortese, 2020) and leads to the likelihood of those employees experiencing mental and physical hazards and constraints.
6. Teleworking affects career advancements as employees may not reach the depth or breadth of experience with the reduced opportunities they have for networking, mentoring and development of professional relationships, which are all key factors required for career advancement.

Benefits of telework for the organization

1. Telework has the potential to help open and distance education institutions attract academics from a wider geographic area (e.g., outside major urban centres) and from qualified applicants with certain constraints (e.g., disabilities, family responsibilities, lifestyle choices, spousal employment).
2. Telework helps in the retention of competent staff by making it possible for academics who might otherwise have left a position to remain in their jobs. For example, in incidences where their spouse's job requires relocation.
3. Telework reduces both the rates of actual employee turnover and employees' intentions to leave. (Mutiganda, et al 2022).
4. Telework grants institutions the capability to recruit staff from across a wider geographic spread by reducing such limiting such constraints as disabilities, family responsibilities, spousal employment.

Challenges faced by the organization

1. Organization's ability to telework depends on ICT infrastructure, organizational features, business environment and personnel proficiency, lack of which make teleworking a major challenge.

In contemporary times now, employees are continually seeking out organizations that are flexible and thus enable them choose the arrangement that suits their situation. Any organization that accomplishes this appears to have met the needs of the employees which will in turn raise the morale of the employees and improve motivation. The bottom line is

performance will be increased and sustained. Teleworking is in tune with the proposition of the original authors of the self-determination theory which is that people prefer to feel they have control over their actions, to the extent that anything that makes a previously enjoyed task appear more like an obligation than a freely chosen activity will undermine motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Individual choice of work time and benefits reflects control over actions. Employees calling in sick even when they are actually not or reducing the amount of work, they do in their bid to improve their work-life balance can be reduced with teleworking as a workplace flexibility option. Berkery, Morley, Tiernan, Purtill, and Parry (2017) aver that employees perceive employers who offer telework as attentive to their needs and this inspires them to be more committed to their work, and eventually results in reduced levels of turnover, absenteeism, improved retention thus invariably decreasing employee turnover. Similarly, when employees have control over their time, they are more motivated to contribute for high performance. Thus, teleworking can be said to be of immense importance in improving job performance.

CONCLUSION

Rapid advancements in information and telecommunication technologies have aided the added popularity of teleworking in recent years. Drawing on a literature review of research and practices of teleworking as an alternative work arrangement, this paper discussed, how teleworking impacts job performance and some of the major potential benefits and challenges of teleworking for academics and their institutions. Though critically important, a detailed examination of the technologies and the role that information and communication technologies play in enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of a dispersed faculty work environment is beyond the scope of this paper. The paper concludes that telework should be embraced to help to reduce absenteeism, lower office overhead costs, increase employee commitment and retention, increase worker morale and level of satisfaction, reduce turnover thereby ultimately increasing and sustaining optimal job performance.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that an in-depth empirical field research be conducted on the effects of teleworking on job performance in selected universities in Nigeria in order to substantiate the claim that teleworking impacts positively on job performance.

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