The New Normal Worklife: Lessons from the Pandemic

Hanne Haave, Ole Jørgen Ranglund and Tone Vold
The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Inland School of Business and Social Sciences, Norway
Hanne.haave@inn.no
Ole.ranglund@inn.no
tone.vold@inn.no

Abstract: COVID-19 has contributed to a digitalization of communication, and in many cases to a distribution of an organization's workforce. Several organizations in Norway claim that they will adapt to a more flexible approach regarding allowing work from home (WFH) in a post-COVID-19 worklife and allow a more "hybrid" way of working. This paper describes how the long-term crisis has unfolded in a large governmental organization. The focus for the investigations have been on how the employees have experienced working from home, and how this will impact their post-COVID-19 worklife, all with a Knowledge Management (KM) perspective. Through qualitative interviews with managers' and employees' issues, like a lack of possibilities regarding informal communication and sharing of knowledge, have arisen. This implies that there is a need for addressing KM practices that secure a flow of information, learning conditions and job satisfaction in the post-COVID-19 workday.

Keywords: "hybrid" worklife, effects of long-term crisis, digitalization, lack of KM practices

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused many organizations all over the world to send their staff to work from home (WFH). However, this is not the first time that WFH has been utilized. During the oil crisis in the 1970s, there was a shortage of gas, thus preventing staff from driving to work. There were quite a few advantages with WFH: less time in commuting, a stable production rate or increasing and less traffic and queues (Nilles, 1988).

The pandemic has had a few other perspectives, as it has not only been about being forced to stay at home due to a lack of gas. The virus sent shock waves describing much worse conditions like having to stay at home, not having contact with friends and family, death rates for the infected, quarantines and isolation. And what was predicted to last a few months turned out to last for nearly two years and can be categorized as a long-term crisis (Coombs, 2019).

This has represented challenges in several areas, such as remote leadership issues(Bergum, 2009; Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020), work-life balance (Kossek, Lautsch and Eaton, 2009; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Kelliher, Richardson and Boiarintseva, 2019), collaboration issues (Wang *et al.*, 2021), and security issues (Herath and Herath, 2020; Pranggono and Arabo, 2021).

This paper presents a case study from a large public organization in Norway. As with quite a few other organizations, the technology was at hand, and they were able to do the transfer from the office space to WFH.

This transfer has represented a change for the staff. Hence, we wanted to investigate whether this transfer had a "cost" for the organization and its members regarding Knowledge Management issues and practices. We thus focus on knowledge sharing and management and about work-life balance. How to facilitate for knowledge sharing in a distributed setting? How to manage knowledge – and lead remotely? And how would this affect family-life or life in general for the employees? And also; how would these issues impact on the life after COVID-19? In order to investigate this, we defined the following research questions:

How has the staff experienced the transfer from the office to WFH?

How will these experiences impact the post-COVID work-life?

In order to investigate this, we first present a theory to enlighten our research questions before we present our data collection method. We then discuss our results, conclude and point towards further research.

2. Theoretical foundation

Knowledge is claimed to have been centre stage for several decades; hence, strategies for managing knowledge have been developed to secure competitiveness in organizations (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Mårtensson, 2000). To organize, utilize, develop and retain the competencies of the employees may allow an organization to stay in the competition within a changing market, changing conditions, changing access to asset and changing laws and regulations (Grønhaug and Nordhaug, 1992). Nordhaug and Grønhaug (1994) claim that competence in organizations also has a social dimension. In companies where they have teamwork that is goal directed and effective, and where coordination of the resources is good, they offer a stronger competition. Nonaka (1994) suggested knowledge sharing and a focus on tacit knowledge in the organization becoming explicit and shared among the employees. Knowledge sharing was also Lave and Wenger's (1991) message when presenting the theory on Communities of Practice, in which one forms a community over a mutually interesting topic in order to share experiences and learn from each other.

According to Örtenblad (2015), the knowledge not only needs to be "managed", but turned into learning to comprise a unique learning organization; indeed, Marsick et al. (1996) have previously claimed that an organization needs to learn continuously and transform itself. This was further developed by Senge (2006), in which he describes the learning organization and the five disciplines: team learning, personal mastery, shared mental models, shared visons and systems thinking.

However, most of the theory on learning organization and knowledge management is based on a "normal" worklife at work. How will working from home influence these theories?

Work from home (WFH) has been actualized several times during the course of history as several incidents, e.g., wars, environmental problems and traffic issues, have generated reasons for WFH. However, in those cases, WFH has mostly been agreed on, and in some cases been a convenient solution. WFH may also allow people from rural areas to work in city-based organizations, as it also embraces the opportunity of being flexible regarding family life and other private issues (Morgan, 2004). According to Morgan (2004), it also allow people with disabilities to be employed.

WFH requires a different approach to working in teams or Communities of Practices (CoPs). Cooper and Kurland (2002) even suggest that employees need to practice working effectively from home. Some employees experience a high job satisfaction when working from home (Kelliher, Richardson and Boiarintseva, 2019). Contreras et al. (2020) present studies showing that WFH is more effective and productive. They also claim that it leads to less stress and turnover. However, the downside is that social isolation may reduce production (Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020). The employees may also experience a possible loss of commitment, as they may work longer hours inducing stress and burnout, and feel permanently available; a work-home conflict may therefore arise (Cooper and Kurland, 2002; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010).

According to Peters et al. (2016, p. 2583), advantages regarding WFH are "enhanced job autonomy, time-spatial flexibility, work motivation, engagement, flow, and job satisfaction, and the reduction of commuting time and stress and work-life conflict".

Contreras et al. (2020) claim that leadership practices need to be changed and be more adapted to e-leadership utilizing ICT to maintain communication and execute interpersonal skills. They therefore need to be able to cope with complexity. Effective communication and trust building through an appropriate use of ICT are essential tasks for the e-leader.

Indeed, Flood (2019) claims that it is important for a leader to build a personal relationship with the employee at WFH, as this is the connection with the organization.

Remote work may also improve work satisfaction among employees (Kazekami, 2020). Bentley (2014) claims that this is also connected to support regarding management, technology and colleagues, as this will reduce social isolation, a work-family imbalance and stress. According to Klopotek (2017), remote work or WFH requires employees to be self-organized and master time allocation.

According to Spreitzer (1995), managers have five cognitive dimensions regarding empowering employees: a sense of competence, a sense of self-organization, a sense of being effective, a sense of being meaningful and a sense of trusting others. Amundsen and Martinsen (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2014, p. 489) presented the following definition: *"Empowering leadership is the process of influencing subordinates through power sharing, motivation support, and development support with the intent to promote their experience of self-reliance, motivation, and capability to work autonomously within the boundaries of overall organizational goals and strategies."* According to Seibert, Silver and Randolph (2004), empowerment contributes to positive outcomes for both organizations and individuals. Indeed, individuals who prefer the flexibility of WFH make a greater effort and perform more strongly, sometimes at a higher cost regarding spare time than working at the office.

However, for this particular situation of forced WFH, empowering leadership (EL) requires something more, as this involves what may be called e-leadership. According to Roman et al. (2019), this is about maintaining motivation in order for employees to achieve the agreed upon goals. Regarding e-leadership, the managers need to be democratic and allow access to information, and it is imperative to maintain an open communication (Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020).

A definition of e-leadership has been provided by Avolio et al. (2000 p. 617), "as a social influence process mediated by Advanced Information Technologies (AIT) to produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behaviour, and/or performance with individuals, groups, and/or organizations".

According to Van Wart et al. (2019), it is important that an e-leader has communication skills, social skills, teambuilding skills, change management skills, technological skills and show a sense of trust and consistency.

Technology development also contributed to the KM area, as one with systems were able to store data and retrieve it from databases (Heggernes, 2020). The technological development these last few years, in which data is no longer only what you register in your own organization, but is accessible from a multitude of sources, and is now also an analytical tool (Heggernes, 2020). Moreover, with the different solutions for storing and accessing data, the availability is enhanced to being accessible from almost everywhere. In the times of the COVID-19 pandemic, this has also been an enabler for work from home, as we have been able to access data/information needed from anywhere.

3. Method of inquiry

Our aim of this study was to acquire the informants' experience of WFH, as well as the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on their worklife. We therefore chose to use a qualitative case-study design. We wanted to investigate how the situation of a long-term crisis was handled by both managers and staff in a governmental organization. We interviewed a total of four managers and three employees, with the informants selected by the top manager. We conducted in-depth semi-structured individual interviews that lasted up to one hour, using a digital programme (ZOOM). Because most people by now are used to communicating via digital means, we experienced that we had conversations with the informants being open and responsive to our questions. The interviews were recorded with the informants' written approval, and transcribed verbatim. The data analysis started by reading through all the data material and coding the interviews by highlighting sentences with relevance to our central issues and themes regarding our research questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, we have discussed the findings against the theoretical perspectives presented above.

Table 1: Overview of informants

Informant	Gender	Time of interview
1 - Top manager	F	November 2020
2 Department manager	M	March 2021
3 Department manager	F	March 2021
4 Department manager	M	March 2021
5 Employee	M	March 2021
6 Employee	F	March 2021
7 Employee	F	March 2021

4. Results and discussion

In this section we will present the results from our study, where informants' quotations representing central findings.

After the lockdown, the main challenges in the first initial period were to keep up production and take care of the employees. The top manager's first worry was to whether they were able to serve their customers or not. *"I was very worried about how we were able to deliver our services to the customers…That was my first reaction. And then I started to worry about the staff if they would be ill".* (Top manager 1) The organization seems to have handled the situation in a relatively good manner, both regarding delivering customers services and taking care of staff. Yet, the statement does show an acknowledgement towards leadership being under different constraints (Flood, 2019; Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020).

How did a long-term home office affect the worklife for both managers and employees?
The managers claim that productivity increased during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in line with the theory on telework, as job satisfaction may increase (Seibert, Silver and Randolph, 2004; Roman *et al.*, 2019; Kazekami, 2020).

Digitalization has been a prerequisite for daily management and maintaining the contact between employees when working remotely. Microsoft Teams was used for meetings, but also for both formal and informal chat. The employees experienced that it took some time to make clarifications, and get answers to questions they might have. Working remotely has hence had an impact on the possibilities of informal communication and learning:

> *Regarding getting an answer fast when you have questions and don't know what to do, they were no longer fast. One had to write to each other, had to write a mail, or set up a meeting. Before, you could just go to the desk of your colleague or have a chat at the coffee machine and have your answer right away (Employee 6).*

These experiences were shared by other employees:

> *My threshold was high when it came to call someone to ask for help. The Teams meetings were formal and did not open up to informal talk, only professional issues. (Employee 7)*

One of the challenges when working from home has been that the contact is digital and mostly formal; if you want to get things done, it is often necessary to set up a meeting with an agenda. This makes it harder to keep a good environment for cooperation and an exchange of experience and knowledge in projects (Employee 6). This refers to a possible lack of communication that Van Wart et al. (2019) refers to, which may be a lack in what can be characterized as e-leadership (Avolio, Kahai and Dodge, 2000) regarding maintaining/developing trust and communication utilizing adequate ICT tools.

4.1 Work-life balance

> *Working remotely also causes problems with isolation and uneasiness and a feeling of physical stress. "It was the situation working from home, I felt isolated, working long hours alone with no break during the day"* (Employee 7).

This may be an example of the risks of remote work (Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020), as well as an example of persons who are is not able to organize their time according to a remote work regime (Kłopotek, 2017). It also implies that there is a work-life imbalance that potentially could lead to ill health (Kossek, Lautsch and Eaton, 2009; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Kelliher, Richardson and Boiarintseva, 2019).

This notion is also shared by leaders within the organization. One of the leaders expresses a worry:

> *I am more concerned about the employees in my department who lack natural meeting places during the day, as they work more individually [not in projects] and don't get the feeling of belonging. (Manager 2)*

How does the management meet these concerns? Our informant discussed the issues in the group of leaders, and with his two middle leaders, to initiate a closer follow-up of the employees. The measures that have been

taken in his department were: 1) Weekly status meetings for all employees, the meetings being both formal and informal; 2) Informal lunch meetings, and 3) Friday coffee on Teams in smaller groups, where more people attended. In case any of the employees dropped out of these fora, they were contacted by their nearest leader (Manager 2). This shows that the leaders in the organization worked more consciously to follow-up with their employees to secure their connection to the workplace when they are working remotely. As Contreras et al. (2020) and Avolio et al. (2000) recommend, the leaders sought to maintain a close contact with the employees, to secure communication and to sustain trust, as well as seeking to establish the well-being of their employees (Kelliher, Richardson and Boiarintseva, 2019).

We also found that there were signs of resilience in the organization when it came to the ability/willingness of the individuals to change:

> *The willingness to change, follow up on new things, as there are changes all the time. … It has been important to keep up motivation when unforeseen things happen. Then it is very important to be independent, because no one is following up or observing what's happening all the time. Being productive, even if no one is looking after you.* (Employee 6)

This may be a sign of employee empowerment. Here, the management should utilize the opportunity to share power, and motivate and support the subordinate's self-reliance and autonomy as suggested by Amundsen and Martinsen (2014). It also implies that the e-leadership could be stronger, and that the employees could be more closely followed up (Avolio, Kahai and Dodge, 2000; Cooper and Kurland, 2002; Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020).

4.2 New normal - back to the office?

Regarding what the employees find regarding the "new normal", the employees and managers have opinions about how this may be organized:

> *I believe that at my workplace it is possible to return to the office if you want to. If you prefer to work from home, you can also do that. I believe this is motivating – the flexibility of choose to work from the cottage on Friday – so there is a good thing about it.* (Employee 6)

> *The use of Teams has made us more productive even when working from home, and this means we will still also be productive after the pandemic. People find that the new normal [flexibility at work and use of digital communication] works well.* (Employee 6)

Our informant claims that to work physically at the office is necessary for maintaining a good work environment and keeping up production, which is in line with the flexibility and autonomy that working remotely provides (Spreitzer, 1995; Peters *et al.*, 2016).

Working at the office can also be viewed as an advantage when it comes to sharing information and taking part in learning processes:

> *It's been an advantage for me to be at the office, compared to those who have worked from home. Let's say four of us are at the office when eight work at home, and they don't have the same information as we do. I don't think they have learned as much as I did.* (Employee 5)

Lunch talk with colleagues can be a natural place for discussion and reflection*…"In a way, you learn something new all the time".* (Employee 5)

As described by Nonaka (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), knowledge sharing is thus preferred in a physical proximity of each other. Nonetheless, they do find the tool (Teams) important for cooperation, collaboration, knowledge sharing and communication. This implies that the tool has been adequate for keeping up the work and keeping contact, to communicate with and such share knowledge, and to cooperate and collaborate (Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020).

5. Conclusion

When the pandemic hit and sent almost everyone to home offices, the management in the organization in our case reorganized in order to meet the changed conditions. The leaders of the organization made alterations, not

only in the structure of leading, but also in their management practice, all in order to adapt to a closer follow up of the employees, much in line with the theory on e-leadership.

The staffs' report on an imbalance between worklife and private life is disturbing, as this may end in burnouts and sick leaves. In addition, the home environment may not be optimal for all workers.

It seems that the employees who are working in teams or other work groups have a stronger sense of belonging than the ones who are not a part of any team.

The organization was unprepared for the abrupt change. From having only a few who had contracts allowing WFH, all employees were sent to a home office and the managers were to assume an e-leadership attitude, as they sought to follow up all their employees, maintaining trust, communication and personal relations. However, there are some recommendations for the future of WFH. As some employees experienced being left on their own, there needs to be a better balance between close follow up and autonomy, in the sense that they should trust them to do what is expected of them. Hence, it is about creating proximity in digital and distributed setting.

Regarding the "new normal", the employees express an attitude of "having their cake and eating it too", as they both appreciate being at the office, but also see - and want - the flexibility offered by the opportunity of remote work/WFH.

5.1 Further research
We suggest a follow up after the pandemic to investigate whether the work satisfaction has changed in the various work groups. It will also be interesting to find out about how much flexibility the workplace offers in terms of opportunities for a home office. How they have organized for supporting and strengthening the job satisfaction and sense of belonging is also worth exploring

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