

COVID-19 Pandemic and Workplace Adjustments/ Decentralization: A Focus on Teleworking in the New Normal

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Abstract: *Purpose: the paper is an attempt to examine the effect of COVID-19 on workplace adjustments/decentralization. In doing this, teleworking in the new normal was taken as a major focus. Our interest is to find out the nature of workplace adjustments/decentralization that the COVID-19 has brought in the workplace by focusing on teleworking/telecommuting in the new normal. Design/ methodology/ approach: the paper adopts a descriptive research design and content analysis. The data of the paper are in qualitative and quantitative form and were sourced from secondary sources like textbooks, journals articles, and government reports and online published materials. In gathering the data used in articulating the ideas of the paper, their reliability and validity were enhanced by ensuring that the sources were reputable outlets and the data gathered reflect the variables of interest as contained in the topic of the paper. Findings: Findings of the study revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about compelling adjustments in the workplace. Work processes and practices are increasingly decentralised and adjusted with greater number of workers working from home (WFH). The global workplace is also witnessing a decongesting trend with a few staff in most organizations directed to work from office while others are to work from home. Hours put in by employees of financial institutions have been reduced to 6 hours as against 9-10 hours per day. Furthermore, sectors like the health and caregiving are under pressure for greater recruitment of hands to meet up with the pressure on the sector. Originality/ contributions: the study is original by the emphasis on workplace adjustments occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of such specific workplace adjustments is the emerging attention that teleworking and telecommuting has attracted in the public and private sector in the emerging new normal. The argument of the paper is that the COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis that has impacted negatively on organizational life and functions necessitating adjustments in the workplace for organisational, workers and societal benefits. As a way of managing the workplace crisis generated by the COVID-19, technological advancement by way of teleworking/ telecommuting offers the window for escape. The study has both theoretical and policy relevance in the new normal.*

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; workplace adjustments; workplace; teleworking; new normal.

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Introduction

The theme, content and argument of this paper occupy important components of genomic studies, decision theory and information society. COVID-19 is an international concern/infectious diseases that affects the biological organs of man and animals, mental health and psychological ability. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the society and the workplace in general has necessitated the application of decision theory to migrate the workplace to teleworking environment and information driven society where working tools are essentially computer and technological based. Governments and managers across the world are now compelled to seek the employment of more medical personnel and to fund medical researches as part of the means of handling the COVID-19 pandemic. The new normal is the emergence of a stronger information society that affects medical institutional workplace, and other workplaces in the public and private sector. The paper is therefore of importance to researches in neuroscience, artificial intelligence, and medical profession.

The COVID-19 pandemic that was first detected in Wuhan, China has spread to more than 190 countries of the world, and was officially declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a global public health emergency crisis on the 30th January, 2020 (Guo, et al, 2020; WHO, 2020a, BBC, 2020). Since this official declaration, many public and private organizations including their workers and countries across the world have been counting their losses and in some cases their gains (Agba, Ocheni & Chukwurah, 2020). The workplace has not been spared of the calamitous effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Hamouche (2020), reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the workplace, mental health and in some cases resulting to psychological distress, job insecurity, quarantine and confinement, financial loss, stigma and social exclusion.

As a way of securing workers, their families, the society, the economies of countries and ensuring the continuous functioning of the operations of public and private organizations, far reaching workplace adjustments/ decentralisations are taking place. This study progresses from this background and addresses itself to the following principal research questions: what nature of impact has the COVID-19 pandemic brought upon the workplace? In what ways has the management of organizations responded to the effect of COVID-19 pandemic in the workplace? Put differently, what are the workplace adjustments/decentralization that have taken place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? How does teleworking

and telecommuting fit into the new normal and what challenges does it present? In other words, does teleworking/telecommuting offer solution to the effect of COVID-19 pandemic in the workplace? And if not, what must organizations, staff and government do?

Brief Overview on the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is described as a public global emergency health crisis currently ravaging the world. Decomposing the acronym COVID-19 depicts that the letters “CO” represents Corona while the “bi-letters” “VI” stand for Virus and “D” represents Disease. The use of the year 2019 in association with the disease reflects the year the disease broke out or was detected by medical experts. It is pertinent to note that the name COVID-19 was adopted/settled for to avoid the stigmatization of the virus’ origins in terms of geography, population or animal association (Cennimo, 2020; The New York Times, 2020; WHO, 2020b). COVID-19 is an illness and medical health challenge caused by a novel Coronavirus and usually affecting the respiratory organs of the victim who may demonstrate clinical symptoms like pneumonia, fever, dyspnea, chest pain, cough, nausea, diarrhea, headache, sore throat, rhinorrhea, loss of taste or smell, muscle pain, etc. (Gennaro, et al, 2020; Cennimo, 2020).

COVID-19 has globally spread to more than 190 countries putting those working or living in the infected places at the risk of contracting the virus. According to CDC, those at the high risk of contracting the virus are people living and working around infected areas, COVID-19 health workers, close contacts with persons infected with the virus, and travelers returning from areas infected with the virus. Globally, COVID-19 has spread to 213 countries recording about 7,824,695 out of which 4,013,623 has recovered and 430,582 has died from the virus (Worldometer, 2020). As a way of handling the spread of the COVID-19 pandemics, countries and organizations have adopted measures like travel restrictions, social-distancing, shutting-down of operations, practice of washing of hands and use of alcohol based hand sanitizers, closure of schools at all levels. The catastrophic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on organisations, medical institutions, workplaces, society and countries has forced many changes and adjustments on the society and workplaces. Some of these adjustments are followed with the constitutional of committee to oversee compliance and implementations of policy decisions.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Workplace Adjustments/Decentralization

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a number of workplace adjustments/decentralization. Millions of workers across the globe are exposed to the danger of being infected with COVID-19 necessitating some adjustments in the workplace. Australian Public Service Commission (2018) defines workplace adjustments as changes introduced in the work environment to allow workers with disability to work productively and safely. This definition is within the context of workers that are physically challenged. We define in this paper, workplace adjustments as changes in work practices, processes and physical environment to enable workers to productively, timely and safely perform assigned tasks if possible from home.

Workplace adjustments are done for various reasons: to enhance work performance in the organization; increase the possibility of retaining productive and committed workers in the organization; improve staff competence and capabilities; enhance access to buildings by workers and customers (increase workers and customers' mobility) (Australian Public Service Commission, 2018).

Decentralization generally, connotes the transfer of authority and power from the central to lower level of authorities of government considered closer to the people and for the purpose of efficiency/effective service delivery (Ocheni & Agba, 2018). Bearing this in mind, we define operationally workplace decentralization, as the dismantling of work process/practices to enable workers to perform assigned tasks from home and report to the head office periodically or when the need arises. The term "workplace decentralization" (without being unmindful of the multi-versions of meaning associated with the term) is adopted in this paper in association with workplace adjustment to capture and explain the changes that has taken place in the workplace since the COVID-19 was declared as a public emergency health crisis of international concern by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The following are some of the important workplace adjustments and decentralization that has taken place since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in a global scale affecting more than 200 countries and their workplaces:

1. Work from Home (WFH) and Remote Working Policy and Programs: to ensure a safe-work environment and limit the spread of COVID-19 among workers, government and companies have directed their workers to work from home. High profile business organizations like JP

Morgan, Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Twitter, Square, Facebook, governments in developed and developing countries have directed their workers to work from home. Before now, work from home policy was more pronounced in the private sector driven economy than in the public sector establishments like local governments, municipal councils, and state and federal government agencies. Things have revolutionarily changed compelling even organisations without teleworking tools to ask their workers to work from home.

The National Compensation Survey of 2019 revealed that in the United States, an estimated number of 9.8 million of the country's total number of 140 million workforce in both public and private sectors have access to flexible workplace that permit work from home policy (World Economic Forum, 2020). For online universities and academic staff like exam officers who upload results online, work from home was already their norm and culture. It is important to acknowledge that not all organizations have adopted the work from home or remote working policy because of lack of readiness in terms of technological availability and requisite training for workers. As Brown (2020) aptly observe, remote work or work from home policy may not apply to every work or may simply not work for everyone (p.4). According to Anscombe (2020), modern technology driven companies are encouraging/mandating their workers to adopt a work from-home practice/policy since the right infrastructural-mix and policy that promote remote working are provided/available and the vast majority of their workforce are laptop users.

Bill Gate had projected years ago of the emergence of an information society by the year 2050 where about 50 percent of the global workforce will work from home-teleworking (Handy, 2001; Morgan, 2004). He also predicted that the competition to employ the best talent will increase in the coming years and organisations who offer extra work flexibility to their workers will have the edge (Schwaners, 2020).

2. Social-distancing and work-shift strategic policy: as a control measure to reducing workplace risk of spreading COVID-19 among workers, organizations have adopted a social-distancing and work-shift strategic policy. Workers are encouraged to observe social-distancing when traveling to their workplace and while at work. Workers and customers are to keep up to 2 meters distance spacing in the workplace and while cueing to be attended to (Llywodraeth Cymru Welsh Government, 2020; Health and Safety Executives, 2020). Organizations offering essential service this period of the pandemic are staggering work-shift hours. In some financial institutions like banks, offices are opened to customers from 8am and closes

around 2pm. In some cases, only senior staff go to offices while the rest are directed to stay home. The editor's note to readers of *Human Capital Matters* 2013/7: flexible work, pictures this kind of workplace adjustments to include changing working hours (to working less hours or changing start or finish hours); changing work pattern (for example job-sharing or split shifts); changing the location of work (for instance, working from home, teleworking) (Australian Public Service Commission, 2020b). To increase the sensitization and research space, publishing outlets like Taylor Francis; Sage and others have initiated special issues on social distancing and COVID-19 in their journals.

3. Outright reduction in the workforce of organizations: Some organizations that are badly shaken economically by the COVID-19 pandemic, the trend of workplace adjustments has been in the direction of downsizing and reducing their workforce. Such steps have aggravated the unemployment rate in developed and developing countries. Some organizations who did not reduce their workplace have directed their workers to proceed on compulsory leave without pay and where salaries are paid by employers in the private sector, it is half salaries.

4. Closure of offices and operations: As an occupational safety measure necessary to control the spread of COVID-19 among workers and the public, offices and operations are temporarily shut-down. Committees set up by government to monitor and manage the COVID-19 pandemic are daily assessing the situation to determine when the ban and restrictions will be lifted.

COVID-19 and Teleworking: The New Normal

The number of workers teleworking or telecommuting has increased significantly since the outbreak of the COVID-19. Teleworking is an organizational innovation that has created a flexible work-life permitting workers through the aid of technological innovations to perform some or all of their official responsibilities from home or at a location alternatively provided for the purpose (de Vries, Tummers & Bekkers, 2019; Caillier, 2012). Before the outbreak of COVID-19 at least one study has demonstrated that 70 percent of the global workforce are permitted to perform their office tasks from home or remotely at least once a week (Browne, 2018). Similarly, a LinkedIn study of 2019 revealed that 82 percent of the workers surveyed want a flexible work environment and practice that allows them to work from home at least one day in a week. While 57 percent indicated work from home policy of at least three days a week (Gilbert,

2020). With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, workers are restricted through governmental and organizational decisions from going to work. A more flexible workplace policy that emphasis teleworking has become the New Normal in this period of global public health crisis. This point was made by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) when it observe that the COVID-19 pandemic implies that more workers than ever before are teleworking – utilizing information and communications technologies to work from home (ILO, 2020).

At this point, it is important to address ourselves to the associated benefits of teleworking or telecommuting. Debate on this differ and varies from scholars to scholars. According to de Vries, Tummers and Bekkers (2019), many public agencies adopting or implementing teleworking as an organizational innovation expects that the paradigm shift will improve the working conditions of civil/public servants. The empirical study these group of researchers conducted shows contrary results: public/civil servants experience negative effects from telecommuting, greater professional isolation and low organizational commitment and dedication on the days that they performed their official duties entirely from home (p. 570). Despite these contrary findings, many have continued to argue in favour of teleworking especially at this moment of the COVID-19 pandemic. The American government through the White House's Office of Management and Budget has urged agencies in Washington, D. C to maximize and optimize teleworking flexibilities for their workers (Loh & Fishbane, 2020).

The paradigm shift towards teleworking during this period of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that technology can assist managers and government to manage work associated risks. In this regards, Loh & Fishbane (2020) writes that

... telework can enable firms to reduce the risk of losing productivity to regular or catastrophic traffic disruption. Offering telework as a benefit can help employers afford the cost of hiring high-skill labor, and keep workers connected to the office and each other no matter where they're based. Teleworking's reach allows employers access to a larger group of potential workers and allows workers access to more job options (paragraph 7).

According to Loh and Fishbane (2020), the benefits of teleworking is not only to the employers and their employees. Teleworking as they argue can help solve multiple systemic problems like traffic congestion by actually reducing traffic since workers work from home. This point is important as a

2011 traffic report shows that commuters in Baltimore, USA, spend between 50 and 70 hours yearly stuck in rush hour traffic (Pyles, 2011). Despite the above benefits, Loh and Fishbane, (2020), observe that telework will not eliminate the potential of face-to-face work and social ties/interaction.

Teleworking is also associated with job satisfaction. Fonner and Roloff (2010), maintained in an empirical study that teleworking enhances job satisfaction by helping to reduce organisational politics, work-life conflict and work-related stress emanating from prolonged meetings, interruptions, and distractions in office-based work environment. They further argue that contrary to the view that teleworking leads to social isolation, it is advantageous because it accounts for greater information exchange between teleworkers and their colleagues through sustained connectivity.

Teleworking has great economic benefits. According to a 2011 Statistics by Telework Research Network, (TRN), teleworking has the potential of saving the United States about 750 million dollars daily. This research body maintained that if the 41 million Americans having telework compatible jobs work from home at least a day in a week, the United States financial savings would total 772 million USD including: 494 million USD in commuter costs; 93million USD from 775 fewer traffic related accidents. Furthermore, TRN observes that the environment will be made healthier by the 423, 000 tons of greenhouse gas spared amounting to an equivalent of taking 77, 000 vehicles off the road in a year (TRN, 2011).

Perceived Challenges in Teleworking

Despite the seemingly benefits associated with telework as a work and organisational innovation, it is not without challenges. This section of the paper highlights these challenges as articulated by authorities in reputable journals. Taskin and Bridoux (2010), conclude that teleworking though advantageous and widely used may adversely affect organisation's knowledge base by threatening and circumventing knowledge transfers between teleworkers and their colleagues who are non-teleworkers. The following are some of the perceived challenges that may circumvent the utilization of teleworking opportunities by employers and organisations: tendency towards accepting the status quo because there is no identified need for change (comfortability with the status-quo); the difficulties associated with coordinating teleworking arrangements; the frightening high costs of establishing, coordinating and managing the teleworking programs;

challenges in controlling and coordinating and monitoring working activities outside the base office (Huws, 1991).

Requirements for effective and productive teleworking during and post COVID-19 pandemic

For effective and productive teleworking during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the following are the basic requirements: a functional computer system (Laptop or desktop); good and reliable internet connection/connectivity; chat and conferencing applications and software; a dedicated workspace designed and devoted for the purpose; a phone or modern for easy internet access; self -motivation and discipline; strict work routine, protection of teleworking devices through full-disk encryption; log out when not working, strong password policy, etc. (Anscombe, 2020). In addition to the above, a reliable and regular supply of electricity is a basic requirement to power teleworking devices and gadgets.

According to Jon Messenger (ILO working time specialist), the following five are the most important factors to making teleworking work, effective and productive oriented during the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2020):

i. Vibrant managerial support that flows from top management to frontline supervisors: work related researches suggest that managerial resistance to telework innovation in the workplace is a major challenge to its effective practice. The effective and productive management of teleworkers demands a result-based management technique/ approach. This approach entails identifying objectives clearly, determining tasks to be performed, and milestones, and then monitoring, assessing and discussing progress without overly burdensome reporting requirements.

ii. Appropriate tools and training for managers and teleworkers. This includes possessing and having access to appropriate working equipment like computers, laptops and apps/software for teleworking, adequate and timely technical support, and capacity building in the area of training for both managers and teleworkers. Because of the possibility and risk of social isolation associated with full-time teleworking, it is imperative that effort be made to assist teleworkers to stay connected with colleagues, technical team, supervisors and the organization as a whole.

iii. Defining clear expectations and communicating same to parties involved: Defining clear expectations in the teleworking arrangements is imperative to monitor and assess actual performance from expectations. All parties involved need to be clear about expected results to

be accomplished by teleworkers, hours for contact and number of hours of engagement, conditions of employment, ways of monitoring progress and reporting results. There must be clear rules and regulations to guide managers and teleworkers.

iv. **Time sovereignty for teleworkers.** Telework offers workers flexible time usage. This flexibility is important if telework is to be made effective. Flexibility in time usage allows teleworkers to align their paid work with personal responsibilities, such as taking care of their children and other family commitments.

v. **A boundary management strategy.** It is pertinent for teleworkers to create their own personal strategies for balancing paid work with personal life. To achieve this, there is need to have a dedicated workspace free from distractions, and the ability and freedom to disconnect from work at specified times devoted for rest and personal life.

vi. **Trust** – Trust is often regarded as the “glue” that holds other factors together. Trust here emphasis a three-fold trust. Trust between managers, teleworkers, and their colleagues is fundamental. Without this, telework cannot be productive and effective.

In addition to the above requirements, it our considered opinion that **introducing and sustaining a good medical insurance scheme for teleworkers** is imperative if it must be effective and productive. Teleworkers need to be assured of health insurance scheme to take care of their health challenges when that occurs. Furthermore, teleworkers need to be motivated through **a well-designed reward system** that rewards and compensates their time and services they rendered to the organisation.

Telework Apps and Software

To ease the implementation of remote working especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, table 1 below captures selected twelve remote work software and apps compiled by Andre (2020). They can be subscribed for by employers for usage by the employees.

Table 1: Selected Telework Apps and their Ratings

Remote software/tools	Description of tools	Rating score of software	User Satisfaction
Monday.com	A leading collaborative and communication app that allows on-site and remote work teams to interface and build Boards	9.8	99 percent

Wrike	A collaborative app used for the management of project by analytically generating accurate reports and actionable insights on project.	9.7	99 percent
Jira Software	A very common project management software that offers flexibility and sets clear workflows to enhance productivity and performance during project execution	9.3	97 percent
Oracle Netsuite OpenAir	Netsuite OpenAir software allows for service automation and facilitates access to company data, necessary tools and information, thus, promoting performance	9.7	97 percent
Smartsheet	Designed to facilitate use of spreadsheets, discussion threads, file sharing and automated workflows	9.4	99 percent
Project Manager	An online app for project management. The software eases the comparison of progress made during project execution	9.2	100 percent
Clarizen	A software designed for project management and social collaboration. It is used to improve team productivity and performance.	9.1	100 percent
Mavenlink	This is a multiple project management app with features for resource management, project management, collaboration, project accounting	9.1	99 percent
Kanbanize	An agile project management app with robust automation options and devices permitting effective workflow analysis	8.8	100 percent
Atlassian Confluence	The software allows employers and employees to build workspace through customized pages which enhances sharing of knowledge, collaboration and engagement	9.1	98 percent
Airtable	Airtable is a database software that offers management solution and collaboration platforms allowing business of all size to link records	8.9	100 percent

GoTo Meeting	Designed for online business meetings and can accommodate as much as 3,000 participants	9.0	96 percent
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Source: Andre, L. (2020). List of Top 12 Remote Work Software for Online Collaboration. Retrieved from <https://financesonline.com/remote-work/>

The software/applications presented on table 1 above when appropriately deployed in a workplace has the potentials of empowering workers to use technology to perform assigned tasks from their employers at home (Surman, 2014). Put differently, with proper training and capacity building, these teleworking applications enable workers as Bertin and Denbigh (2000) put it, to work at a distance from their employers or those who pay them. Public and private sector managers have over the years been encouraged by scholars and performance driven professionals to deploy the deliverables of new technology to workplace for the purpose of enhancing performance of workers and organisations, boosting customer satisfaction, and increasing organizational profitability (Surman, 2014).

It is imperative to note that not all jobs (before the COVID-19 outbreak, during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the pandemic) can be performed from home. In this regards, the Human Resource Management Department of the University of Kansas (2020), observe that, it is easy to implement teleworking policy and initiative for tasks/jobs that require writing, reading, research, processing and handling of data, talking with phone and making use of computer. It further states that at discretion, a job may be considered suitable for teleworking if the job or part of its component can be carried out off-site without adversely affecting the regular flow of work and communication. To drive further the discussion on telework associated jobs, Morgan (2004, p. 346) identified five possible types of telework from the write-up of European telework online:

1. **Mobile telework:** Which involves workers travelling from one location to the other for the purpose of maximizing the rendition of services or capabilities.

2. **Home-based telework:** This entails a worker performing official responsibilities and tasks from home rather than in central office location, customer site or similar work location.

3. **Telecentres:** Telecentres picture local facilities where teleworkers resort to work for the purpose of reducing the burden, time, cost and inconvenience of commuting to a central work location.

4. **Functional relocation:** This type of telework is very common in e-commerce where business activities, processes and functions are

concentrated and delivered by teleworkers from a distance. Examples are sales activities conducted by means of telephone or computer network or customer service that can be performed from anywhere using remote access to well programmed computer system.

5. **Tele-cottages:** Tele-cottages are composed of ICT facilities that are locally-based and offer the teleworking community the appreciable opportunity for personal interaction, skills acquisition and development and high performance ICTs (Morgan, 2004, p. 346).

Tying the Bolts and Nuts Together: Concluding Remarks

From the disquisition presented in this paper, we conclude as Agba, Ocheni & Agba (2020:119) aptly observe that, the “COVID-19 is a global health and economic crisis that has significantly altered the world of work”. The work environment of public and private organisations is witnessing radical changes fast driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and technological innovations. The world more than ever before is witnessing a strong emphasis on information society and a strong public health sector that calls for funded researches and collaborations. This leaves workers globally with the option of becoming an “information-man” and be ready to adjust to changes. Teleworking has come to stay and capacity building in the area of telematics offers greater opportunities in the world of work. Because of the obvious benefits of teleworking in the emerging new normal driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, the government, employers, organisations, medical professionals and their organisations must be ready to invest on teleworking apps and tools and they are to ensure that this is sustained through appropriate policies and programs. Information sharing, collaborations, a sense of commitment and motivated tele-workforce are central in the new normal.

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