

WORK FROM HOME IN THE AGE OF COVID -19: EMPLOYERS PERCEPTION AND EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge we have faced since World War Two. But the pandemic is not just a health crisis. It's also an unprecedented socio-economic crisis. Stressing every one of the countries it touches; it has the potential to create devastating social, economic and political effects that will leave deep and longstanding scars. Every day, people are losing jobs and income, with no way of knowing when normality will return. ⁽¹⁾

The COVID-19 pandemic has constrained organisation all over the world to move to remote working. This move is making extraordinary and unanticipated administrative challenges identified with employees prosperity, profitability and coordinated effort. How associations react to the test of acclimating to remote working will have huge effect for the time being – and an enduring effect on the future of work.

In the present study an attempt is made by researcher to investigate the perception and experiences of the employers during lockdowns because of shift to remote working that is work from home (WFH) due to Covid 19 pandemic and draw conclusions from it. For this purpose a survey has been conducted by designing and circulating an online questionnaire.

Keywords: work from home (WFH), Covid-19



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Introduction

Coronaviruses are a type of virus. A newly identified coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2), has caused a worldwide pandemic of respiratory illness, called COVID-19. The new coronavirus is spread through droplets released into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The droplets generally do not travel more than a few feet, and they fall to the ground (or onto surfaces) in a few seconds — this is why physical distancing is effective in preventing the spread.

COVID-19 appeared in Wuhan, a city in China, in December 2019. Although health officials are still tracing the exact source of this new coronavirus, early hypotheses thought it may be linked to a seafood market in Wuhan, China. Some people who visited the market developed viral pneumonia caused by the new coronavirus. ⁽²⁾ On January 9, 2020, the WHO issued a statement saying Chinese researchers have made —preliminary determination of the virus as a novel coronavirus. Cases have been reported from more than 80 countries, including India. The virus has acquired the ability to spread among humans, with cases of human to human transmission being reported first in Vietnam and Germany. COVID-19 symptoms can include fever, cough and shortness of breath. The illness also causes lung lesions and pneumonia. Milder cases may resemble the flu or a bad cold, making detection difficult. ⁽³⁾

More than 5.95 million cases have been reported as of 30 May 2020 across 188 countries and territories, causing more than 3,65,000 deaths and more than 2.51 million have been reported as recovered. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, as of 30 May 2020 have confirmed a total number of 1,73,763 cases, 82,370 recoveries and 4,971 deaths in India. . The highest number of cases came from these six cities in India – Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Chennai, Kolkata, and Pune.

The entire world is fighting with the COVID-19 pandemic which has interrupted the work culture and global dependencies of economies across the globe and brought it to a halt not leaving India too. With an increasing number of coronavirus cases, the government has locked down transport services, closed all public and private offices, factories and restricted mobilization.

The labour sector under the MGNREGA, 2005 are worst impacted as they are not provided jobs due to lockdown, most of the labour sectors are associated with the construction companies and daily wage earners. Travel restrictions and quarantines affecting hundreds of millions of people have left Indian factories short of labour and parts, just-in-time supply chains and triggering sales warnings across technology, automotive, consumer goods, pharmaceutical and other industries.

As we start getting ready to take advantage of the relief in lockdown to restart work, reinstitute our businesses, or revitalize our social lives, companies with their employees are making every possible effort to envision the future of the workplace. About two-thirds of the 4.3 million ITBPO workforces across the country have moved to a work-from-home model to keep services uninterrupted during the lockdown. ⁽⁴⁾ Some experts believe that companies can

shift to remote working permanently. These lockdowns due to COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people work most importantly those in the organised sector. It has been seen that a larger part of employees of organised sector resumed working through WFH during the lockdown. As we know the term WFH is quite familiar to IT sector , this is something new to the employees of other sectors. Working from home saves time and money on the daily travel to and from work, having healthy home-cooked meals and staying close to the family or loved ones therefore it is alluring to professionals but it has not worked in a big way in India. Normally, when IT employees work from home , at that point a substantial number of employees keep on operating from the office. Although employees of a few companies accomplished work completely from home, yet the number was not huge contrasted with the size of the organised sector. The lockdown due to covid 19 changed all of this. It has allowed organizations a chance to assess the upsides and downsides of this idea from a relatively long-term perspective and started off speculation that the workplace is probably going to change. Work from home (WFH) poses number of challenges to both employers and employees but the researcher made an attempt to understand the challenges from employers perspective.

The fusion of work and private life can be challenging for employees as well as leaders. Fast decision making and real-time information sharing may be difficult when working remotely. Balancing productivity and well-being can be challenging in turbulent times.

Literature Review

The spread of COVID-19 has led to unprecedented measures, first by governments and now businesses, as they try to limit the spread of the virus. In addition to restricting travel and cancelling large events, a growing number of companies are now rethinking their ways of working. While production workers as well as system-relevant workforce such as medical staff are still working on-site, a majority of the remaining workforce has been encouraged or even mandated to work remotely. Working remotely under these circumstances means adapting to a new environment, battling a new set of distractions as well as experiencing an unprecedented fusion of work and private life. In order to continue working efficiently and creating value under these new circumstances, organizations need to understand, accept and support their employees' specific situations and needs. Employers should understand their workforce and intend to visualize some of their specific situations and needs.

Amabile & Kramer, (2013) found that work from home is helping the employees to balance and differentiate their office work with their routine work. The study also added that work from home saves time, increases the productivity, finishes the targets on time and also helps the employees to give time for their personal life.

Go, (2016) stated the focus on major failures and dark side of work from home, the cultural differences faced during webinars by the employees. Work from home creates a big gap in communication between superior and the subordinates.

Richardson & Writer, (2017) opined that work from home is the result of modern technology, which resulted in the increased credibility i.e. increase usage of internet for web conferencing, voice mail, fax which makes work easier and simpler. The positive side of work from home is that the employees according to their convenience can start their work. Further they added that the negative impact such as delay in work and no submission of work on time will be there.

As per THE HINDU newspaper in an interview with Pratik Kumar, a veteran of the software sector, believes companies heavily leveraging the cost advantage will definitely look at the option of allowing more people to work from home to save on real estate expenses. However, he warns that while this concept sounds good in conversations, the reality is something else. For one, India lacks reliable power supply, which is not conducive for companies working on mission-critical projects. Second, data leaks are a distinct possibility, and hence, a deterrent to allowing employees to work from home. Data security and client privacy issues are deal-breakers for companies in the banking, financial services and insurance (BFSI) sector. The lockdown posed a huge challenge for companies operating in or catering to this sector.

Kaushik Dasgupta, from Accenture India, explains, —WFH has always been a taboo in India. It is believed that employees working from home are not as committed to the organisation as the ones who are working in an office. As a result, WFH policies in most companies are often rigid. Often, you are allowed to work from home only if you have an urgent need to be at home at that time.!

Singh of PolicyBazaar.com says, "WFH has worked brilliantly for our employees. We plan to make it functional for at least 20-30% of our staff once things normalise." The fully loaded cost for PolicyBazaar.com, which has 13,000 employees, tends to be around 1.25-1.5x of the employee's salary. This money can come down drastically if WFH is implemented.

Not all companies, however, are gungho about WFH. At least the heads of two of the largest technology services players in the country have flagged up an issue. The CEO and MD of Tata Consultancy Services, Rajesh Gopinathan, highlighted the need to restrict WFH for those who support critical and confidential functions of global clients. On a LinkedIn post, he said: "We power financial backbones of several countries, support some of the largest healthcare and pharmacy companies in the world, run technology for governments and public services organisations." Infosys' CEO Salil Parekh also shared a similar concern, adding that "we continue to be guided by advisories from local governments in the 46 countries we operate in." Apart from security and regulatory issues, WFH also has a human challenge. The absence of water cooler conversations, impromptu meetings and cafeteria discussions with colleagues could impact productivity. "We want to make sure we don't lose the human touch," says Manish Dalal, managing director, Asia Pacific, Endurance International Group, a web hosting company. "People need to meet to brainstorm. How do I create virtual mentoring sessions and imbibe company culture among people who are at home?" A way out is to have employees come to office a few times every, say, fortnight. At Endurance, 700 employees are working from home at present.

There could be challenges on the home front also. Many employees may not have a spare room at home for longterm WFH. Or, millennials living in paying guest-type accommodations may not have the space or freedom to install the required infrastructure, such as a broadband line or a power back-up system.

Work from home hasn't evolved much in India, says Neetish Sarma, founder of co-working company Smartworks. "There isn't a dedicated space at home where one can work, and internet or power glitches can lead to loss of productivity." For many companies, especially in the outsourcing segment, work often happens at odd hours. Making a suitable arrangement for this could also be a problem.

Atul Shinghal, founder and CEO of fintech startup Scripbox, says the Covid-19 situation has made companies more accustomed to remote working. "But it is early days. A complete evaluation of the pros and cons of remote working is needed." One key advantage Shinghal sees is "the learnings we, as an organisation, are getting of our resilience and capabilities to continue to deliver value while working remotely and keeping everyone safe." That will be another big driver to get people to work from the comfort of their homes.

Objectives of the study:

To study the perception and experience of employers towards work from home

Research Methodology

A survey was conducted by using a self-prepared semi structured online questionnaire for the purpose of collecting primary data. The study design of the research is exploratory in nature. For the study, 100 questionnaires were distributed to minimise the risk against likely no responses and declines and a sample size of 50 respondents was drawn. Data is collected from different sectors in the month of June 2020 during lockdown due to Covid 19. The study has been conducted in Delhi.

Secondary Data has been also collected from various journals, websites and newspaper reports.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Total of 50 responses received .The study includes 92 percent of males and 8 percent of females. 28 percent of the respondents are belonging to the age group of 25 to 30 years and 72 percent belongs to the age group of 30 to 64 years. All the respondents belong to different sectors such as manufacturing, banking, insurance, teaching and IT. 2 are from teaching sector, 12 belong to IT sector, 13 are from banking sector, 10 from insurance sector and 13 belong to manufacturing sector. The questionnaire consists of close ended questions.

Results:

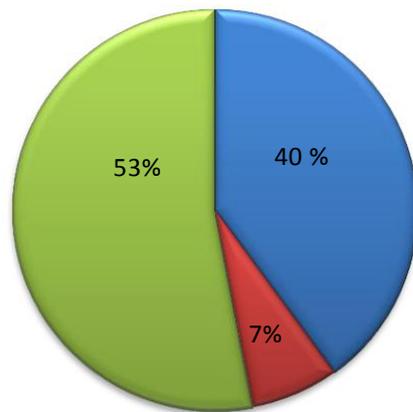
Respondent’s demographic profile

Characteristics	N=50	n(%)
Age (in years)		
25-30	14	28%
30-64	36	72%
64 and above	0	0%
Gender		
Male	46	92%
Female	4	8%
Sector		
Teaching	2	4%
IT	12	24%

Banking	13	26%
Insurance	10	20%
Manufacturing	13	26%

Question-1 Do you agree work from home has stopped the real time monitoring of the employees?

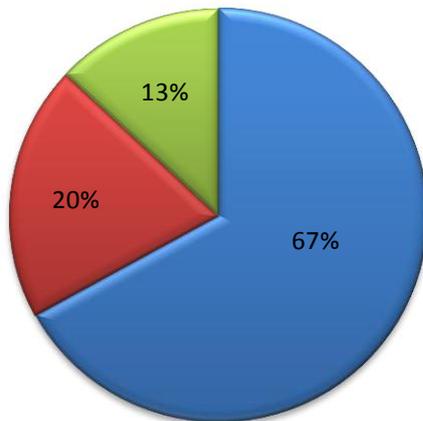
50 responses



- 40% agreed that WFH has stopped the real time monitoring of the employees
- While 7% did not agree
- 53% were partially agreed

Question-2 Is there a threat of confidentiality of work and information shared between you and your employees?

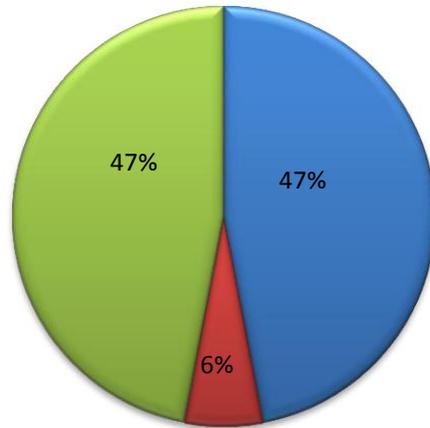
50 responses



- 67% reported that there is a threat of confidentiality of work and information shared between them and their employees
- 20% reported No
- 13% replied can't say as they were not sure

Question-3 Do you think work from home is not time effective as you have to conduct a lot of ad hoc meetings, frequent calls etc.?

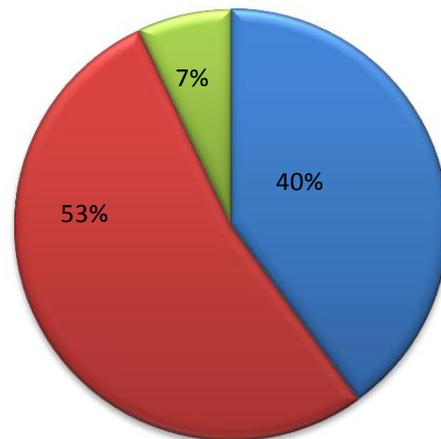
50 responses



- 47% replied Yes as they think WFH is not time effective
- 6% replied No
- 47% were partially agreed

Questions-4 Is your business revenue affected by less operational costs, in terms of facility management, electricity bills, etc.?

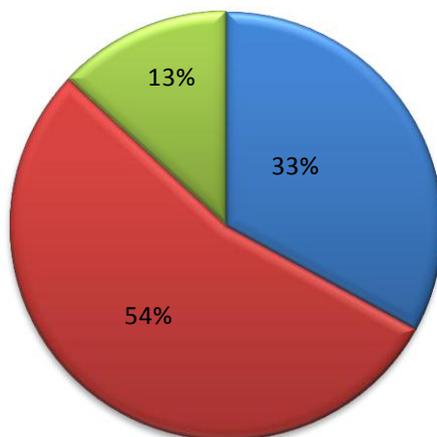
50 responses



- 40% reported their business revenue has highly affected by less operational costs
- While 53% reported no such major effects
- 7% replied can't say as they were not sure

Question-5 How challenging has it been for you to provide your employed personnel with the time to time trainings while work from home?

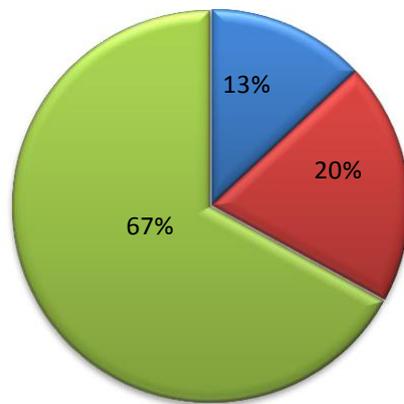
50 responses



- 33% reported it as highly challenging
- 54% reported no such challenges faced
- 13% reported that they deferred the trainings

Question-6 Have you been efficiently able to present the work tasks through video calls, voice calls or emails that needs to be done by your employees?

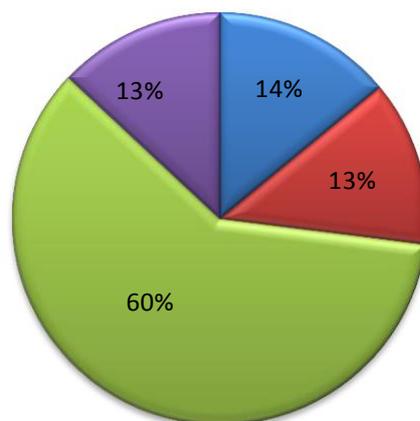
50 responses



- 13% replied Yes as they were efficiently able to present the work tasks
- 20% replied No
- 67% replied that they were partially able to present the work tasks efficiently

Question-7 Are you satisfied with your employees' performances while working remotely?

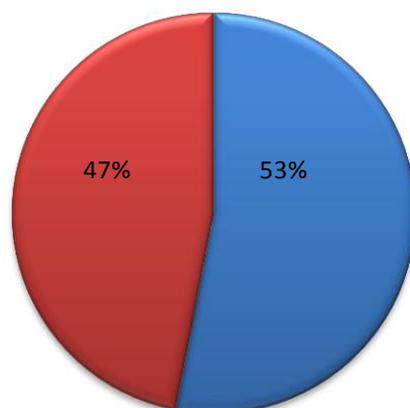
50 responses



- 14% reported as highly satisfied
- 13% reported as satisfied
- 60% reported as partially satisfied
- 13% reported as not satisfied

Question-8 Do you support less paper work and more of electronic sharing of files, as it has been happening in work from home since it is cost-effective and saves environment?

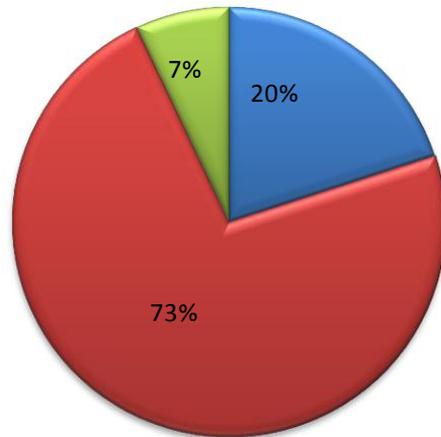
50 responses



- 53% replied Yes as they support less paper work and more of electronic sharing of files
- 47% replied yes, but only to some extent

Question-9 If there occurs any financial problem will you choose to fire the employees or cut in their salary slabs?

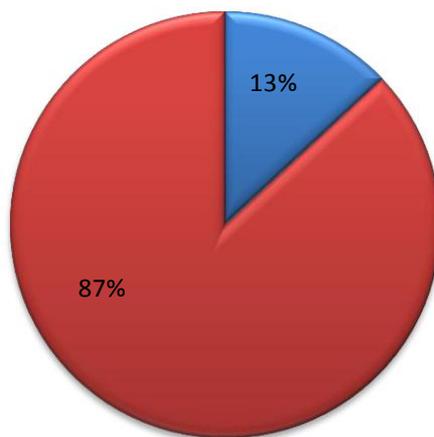
50 responses



- 20% replied they fired a few employees
- 73% replied with cut in salary slabs
- 7% replied to follow both the options

Question-10 As of today since this situation of lockdown has started have you fired any employee?

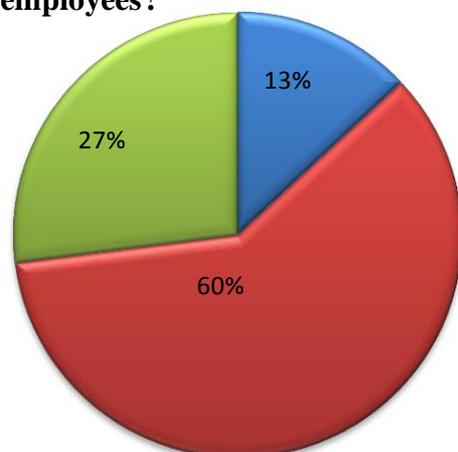
50 responses



- 13% reported that they have fired employees
- while 87% didn't

Question-11 As of today since this situation of lockdown has started have you cut the salaries of your employees?

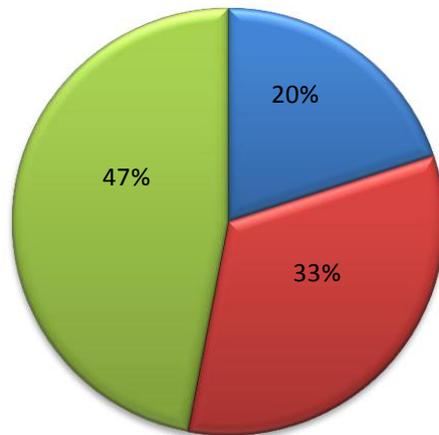
50 responses



- 13% reported to have completely cut the salaries
- 60% reported partial cut in the salaries
- 27% replied no cut in the salaries

Question-12 In this situation of pandemic will you continue with promotion of your employees?

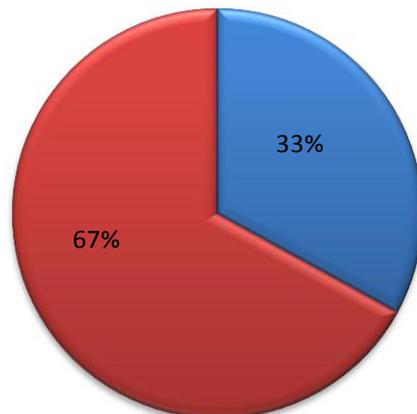
50 responses



- 20% replied to continue with the promotion of their employees
- 33% replied not to continue with promotion of their employees
- 47% replied with can't say as

Question-13 Can work from home be considered good in the long run?

50 responses



- 33% replied Yes
- 67% replied No

Discussion

The work culture in offices have gone through a massive change in India due to COVID-19 as employees and employers have shifted to Work from Home during lockdown. Earlier work from home was quite a familiar term in Information Technology (IT) sector but during this lockdown period it has been witnessed by almost all the sectors. 40% respondents agree that WFH has stopped the real time monitoring of the employees while 53% partially agree and 7% don't agree with this. When respondents were asked regarding threat of confidentiality of work and information shared between you and your employees, 67% replied positively while 20% negatively. 47% respondents say WFH is not time effective as they have to conduct a lot of ad hoc meetings, frequent calls etc. while 6% believe it is not so and remaining 47% is partially agreed with this. 40% respondents replied that WFH has

helped their business revenue affected by less operational costs, in terms of facility management, electricity bills, etc. That is WFH helps in saving on overheads like transport, food courts, gyms, etc and also companies don't have to spend on expensive real estate leases but 53% replied that they didn't experience major effects while 7% can't say anything about this. When respondents were asked that has it been challenging for them to provide their employed personnel with the time to time trainings while work from home, 54% said they didn't face such challenge, 33% replied that it was highly challenging and 13% said they deferred the trainings. 13% respondents say they have been efficiently able to present the work tasks through the video calls, voice calls or emails that needs to be done by the employees while 67% partially agree with this and rest 20% said they couldn't. when respondents were asked about satisfaction level with their employees performances while working remotely, 14% say highly satisfied, 13% satisfied, 60% partially satisfied and 13% not satisfied. 53% respondents support less paper work and more of electronic sharing of files, as it has been happening in work from home since it is cost-effective and saves environment but 47% respondents do so only to some extent. 73% respondents say If there occurs any financial problem they will choose to cut in employee's salary slabs while 20% say they will fire a few employees and 7% will choose to do both that is fire as well as cut in employees salary. When respondents were enquired regarding firing of their employees since this lockdown started, 87% replied no and 13% with yes. Similarly when they were asked about cutting of their employees salary since this lockdown started, 13% say yes completely, 60% yes partially and 27% say No. 33% respondents say, in this situation of pandemic they will not continue with promotion of their employees while 47% not sure and just 20% will continue with the promotion of employees. Our study shows that when respondents were asked that can WFH be considered good in the long run, 67% say a big No while 33% say yes.

Limitation of the study

The sample size of 50 respondents which was considered on the basis of accessibility could be relatively small compared to the total population. This calls for careful consideration and due diligence when extrapolating data.

Conclusion

Work from home has its own advantages and disadvantages. If we talk about its advantages it involves cost savings, convenience and productivity gains, if implemented correctly. Companies don't have to spend on expensive real estate leases, flexible timings for employees, convenient for working mothers, compensation based on transactions and companies save on overheads like transport, food courts, gyms, etc. On the other hand its disadvantages include data security and client privacy issues for companies in the banking, financial services and insurance (BFSI) sector, Internet or power glitches can lead to loss of productivity, Electricity companies might charge commercial rates for residences where office work is going on, Telecom permissions will be needed for better connectivity, night shifts at home might inconvenience family members, challenges in mentoring, aligning employees to company culture, etc.

A company thrives on a shared goal, ideals and work culture. These are highly motivating factors for an employee. Large companies invest a lot of time and effort in creating a work culture that brings out the best in employees. This cannot be created, or sustained, when employees work from home.

There is a feeling of isolation in teams where close collaboration is required. Office culture, the energy and the vibe when coming together in the office space, is missing. Plus, there is a possibility of meeting fatigue over video calls when compared to meeting in person, especially with larger teams.

It can be concluded that though this pandemic caused companies from all the sectors to shift to WFH during lockdowns but going through pros and cons and replies from the respondents of WFH we found not all the sectors will shift to remote working in the long run given their worries related to privacy issues & data security especially in finance, insurance and companies that have proprietary application. Apart from engineers, information technology employees, some HR roles, consultants, knowledge workers can work from home in long run.

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