

An Exploratory Study of the Means to Implement for Talent Management in a Remote Work Environment for Now and Post Pandemic

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Introduction

Background and Context

Remote work has been a hot topic amongst Millennials and Gen-Z's for nearly two decades. (EY Global 2020). What started as a trickle towards remote work prior to the Covid-19 pandemic has manifested into a flood overnight.

Back in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and, in 2003, after the tsunami, and during the SARS pandemic, followed by the H1N1 pandemic in 2009, employers were seen using telework as part of an overall business continuity strategy but telework needs to be drastically upgraded and improved to conduct business today. The clearest development since the aforesaid pandemics that took place between 2003 and 2010, was the increase in remote working, driven by more flexible and decentralized management practice and more widely available and potent technology.

As assessed by observers, more and more work was being detached from places and that this was a 'win-win' situation for everyone in all levels within the organization (Felstead and Henseke 2017). Evidence, even personal experience, suggests that paid employment is no longer confined to designated hours nor narrowed down to be executed in a specific place. This applies to managers, telework leaders, their underlings, other professionals and white collars. Additionally, more advanced and potent technological connectivity fuelled this process by enabling work to be carried out wherever the worker happens to be and at a time most convenient to him/her (Messenger and Gschwind 2016). According to a poll conducted by Mercer Human Resource Consulting in 2003, majority of the respondents expressed that their companies lacked an HR policy or pandemic plan that addressed health-related emergencies (Kistner 2003) and their employers were seen to have less incentive to invest in distinct pandemic management capabilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic is the test for which employers have been planning for years since the last outbreak a decade ago. As the transmission rate of the Covid-19 virus has shown to be escalating, the situation may yet bring about lasting changes in how companies manage their workers, and how they work. Today, the Covid-19 pandemic is causing employers and management of organizations around the globe to confront the accelerating changes in terms of talent management and workplace design in response to the rapidly evolving landscape (Kerr and Ng 2020).

This Covid-19 pandemic is likely, and, about to bring forward a new economic system that emphasizes more on intangible economic assets such as software, apps, new ideas and services over those which take physical form. Within this 'knowledge economy' the spotlights shine on educated professionals who are tech savvy with access to bodies of theoretical, specialized and abstract knowledge and so they add value using their brains rather than their hands. Now that remote work is about to become the dominant form of conducting business around the world, it is crucial for the business community to adopt a remote work operating system that would nurture the younger talents with the aforesaid skills in ways that would ensure autonomy, privacy, safety, comfort and freedom for the employees while helping them to surpass the anticipated outcome expected of them under a flexible and decentralized management practice and organizational control with the use of advanced technology. Therefore, the global business community needs to come up with a standardized template for not just the short-term but long-term actions as well. The standardized remote work environment constitutes a major portion of the overall business continuity strategies, and management would have to ensure that it works just the same, or even better, than having the employees working in the office during the week from 9 to 5.

It may be too soon to say that remote workforces shall become the post-pandemic new normal as the legacy metrics used to assessing work-from-home performance are somehow misleading and unhelpful. The pre-Covid-19 workplace analytics are no longer fit for the purpose as they don't capture the incoherent realities of digital workflows. The future remote workforce shall experience a great deal of stress while being challenged to do better with less, and they need greater insight into how they are performing. Productivity will eventually demand more aggressive and actionable measures such as digital accountability.

Meanwhile, the recalibration of key performance indicators (KPIs) is essential to ensuring that remote work actually works. Enterprises aiming at operating under best practices for their workers, and clients alike, should invest in digital accountability, but these efforts must acknowledge and respect newly blurred distinctions between work and home life (Schrage 2020) as digitally colonizing people's homes will never be an option as that would seriously undermine the organization's fine culture. Sympathetic leaders would grasp the need for a healthy coexistence.

Also, "less visible" workers that are also engaged in homebased production need to be recognized just as much as the "visible" ones. In order for talents' performance to be fairly managed or appraised across the board, a more functional communication system about

delegation and progress report needs to be put in place so there won't be any recurrent trust issues affecting the functionality of the remote-working setup.

What is already known about the above problem is that Millennials and Gen-Z's welcome the alternative work idea. However, can these younger employees make the best out of the digital remote work setup and thrive as they wish by making themselves available to perform critical functions as expected of them? What means are to be put in place to ensure that the line is drawn allowing a healthy coexistence of both work and family life. This, obviously, needs to be addressed and strategically tackled soon.

Problem Statement

What means are to be implemented for talent management in a remote-work environment now and post-pandemic?

The new economy driven by remote work is emerging as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and management of organizations need to stay on top of this remote-working setup to ensure talents' performance stay ahead of expectations based on the combination of non-traditional work practices, settings, and locations, that is beginning to supplement traditional offices. Other than cost reduction, organizations also need to ensure that the time and freedom offered to the employees in alternative workplace would generate higher and more efficient productivity by guiding their employees to draw a firm line between their home and work lives and be confident that the line is in the right place.

A number of studies evidenced the above-noted benefits for both the employers and the employees (Apgar 1998) such as cost saving and heightened productivity. However, more in-depth research and investigations are required to bring forth the areas that are missing, such as adjustments to teleworking, the hardware and software involved, employees' adaptability including any compromises such as devoting extra-long hours to work while staying at home, or the lacking of their 'visibility' or 'presence'. These areas need to be studied for the two, management and remote workers, to seamlessly and digitally merged together for the better.

Research Questions

- How virtual organizations can manage remote employees effectively?
- How could talent management be done digitally? Would there be apps/digital platforms that could seamlessly produce the same result as if the talents were producing in the office?
- Would it be considered effective and efficient by facilitating multi-ways communication to foster better remote management if each member on the team is provided with a personal digital platform (either an external peripheral or an app installed on the laptop) that links and syncs with the rest of the team and management?
- How could one's KPI be monitored and assessed digitally? Would remote work leaders need to be trained for that?
- In some cases, one's lack of 'visibility' and 'presence' might trigger some sort of trust issues amongst one's team. What could be put in place to avoid recurrent situations like this and to ensure that trust would remain as the backbone of the remote working setup?
- What adjustments or improvements are to be made to standard remote-working setup in order to cater to the different generations of employees so their vision and mission would match that of the organization? How about digitalizing clear OKRs?
- How to mode the alternative workplace idea so they would assist in heightening the talents' performance in an inclusive culture?
- How do we go beyond to ensure that the business community and everyone in it would come out better, wiser, and stronger post-pandemic?

Relevance and Importance of the Research

The global business community has been thrust into this current remote work experiment without much preparation or warning and is being left in a survival mode (Distribute Consulting, Zoom 2020). A recent study by The National Research Group uncovers what different generations want from the new remote work reality, identifying white space for new solutions as we rethink everything from conferences to collaboration. (National Research Group 2020).

From the above study, it was discovered that about half of Gen Z-ers prefer not working from home. Most of them claimed that they get distracted easily thus not being productive. It seems like maybe the majority of the younger generation really needs the structure usually provided by their superiors or regular office protocols. To some, working from home is like having a little too much freedom. Also, those that were born with technology would think that using the technology remotely would be a no-brainer but some of them actually struggle with getting too distracted by the technology, social media included. (National Research Group 2020). The research is to uncover how organizational management could be done electronically while the workers are functioning at home.

While many organizations have some form of remote-working environment setup, most have never conducted a full-scale remote worker continuity test, much less developed the culture, technology, communication policies, organizational management (such as OKRs and KPIs) that will have to work together almost simultaneously in today's global context. It is, therefore, important to study how this remote-work setup would produce the expected results for both the employers and employees by identifying the divides in terms of what different demographics want from the remote work reality, and the gaps there are, and to come up with a number of resolutions currently not available to the global business community.

This research shall provide data to the business community so the researcher could participate in designing better experiences and solutions that bring the two, management and remote-workers, closer together as they are now farther apart. This research is relevant to the current situation in context as the findings would likely help organizations translate their unique culture to a virtual environment through meticulously building a universally accepted digital platform system through which talents' performance could be measured and appraised in ways that would be respectful towards the employees and their family.

Literature review

Key Concepts, Theories and Studies

Unprecedented challenges for leaders have been posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The global business community with everyone in it have been thrust into this remote-working experiment without previous experience and workers at all levels are only operating in a survival mode.

It is worth noting that the following, contrary to some would believe, was discovered in a recent survey:

- (1) *Productivity*: As opposed to most would believe, Gen Z-ers, who were born with technology would find it a no-brainer to work remotely; however, to the contrary, 50% of them expressed they are less productive and 51% say they are more distracted as they don't have the necessary equipment/resources at home to do the job remotely when they work from home compared to going into the office (National Research Group 2020).
- (2) *Social and Cultural Impact*: Interestingly, it appears that the younger generations (71% Gen Z and 67% Millennials) are more concerned about the cultural impact of the Covid-19 on how colleagues communicate with one another. In the same survey, 56% of Gen Z-ers are compelled to go into the office for they enjoy being social with their co-workers, with most finding it easier to communicate and share ideas in person than by telecommuting. (National Research Group 2020).
- (3) *Economic and Environmental Impact*: Generations (75% of both Gen X and Millennials) that lived through the previous recessions are most concerned about the financial impact of Covid-19. 52% of Millennials and 60% of Gen X-ers say they would save money if they worked from home because they wouldn't have to commute, while 52% of Gen X-ers say they would like the idea of working from home because it's better for the environment. (National Research Group 2020).

- (4) *Self-Sufficiency*: According to what most would believe, 52% of G Z-ers say it's more convenient to work from home rather than work from an office. 55% of them would enjoy the freedom of being able to work anywhere while 49% say they don't mind staying inside their home for long periods of time. (National Research Group 2020).

The key concepts of this situation include:

1. Exponential growth in the coronavirus has led to exponential change across multiple dimensions of how the business community works. As a matter of fact, the term remote-work has evolved from social distancing for combating sickness from spreading in the workplace to the mode of work for today as office workers have become increasingly mobile for they are able to work from a greater variety of locations both in and out of their main place of work. A workforce might return to the office after the danger has passed, but the dynamics of their collaboration would forever be impacted. Organizations, therefore, need to prepare themselves for having a remote workforce guided by an operation system so as to ensure that the company's unified success won't be compromised when they are no longer unified in location (Distribute and Zoom 2020).
2. Technology advancement, demographic changes and global integration are changing the outlook of the economy, the makeup of the labour force, and, in turn, the agendas for management (Kerr and Ng 2020). Remote working is growing rapidly, and technology, demographic, and social trends point to its continuous growth as flexible schedules and remote working options are preferred options for many employees, and are linked to improved productivity, work engagement and job satisfaction (MacRae and Sawatzky 2020). However, a recent research reveals big divides in terms of what different demographics want from the remote work reality. The findings suggest that the differences amongst Gen Z, Millennials and earlier generations, in terms of workplace preference, have perhaps been exaggerated as both early- and later-career professionals mostly want the same workplace attributes and professional development opportunities (Zaharee et al. 2018) while 50% of Gen Z-ers prefer to work in the office (National Research Group 2020). The shifting of attitudes and expectation of Millennials and Gen Z toward work has raised the need to rethink the firm-worker relationship and one's value proposition as an employer (Kerr and Ng 2020). The researcher believes that organizations could build a digital system to work

with employees across the generations there are that would provide them with the social support while guiding them under the company's remote management system.

3. The global business community which has been thrust into this experiment is facing "the challenge of making significant changes in a matter of days on an extraordinary scale" (Li, et al. 2020). They are looking for ways to (a) solving security concerns around remote working; (b) working around trust issues; and (c) reducing collaboration fears (Atech Support 2020). Also, a recent survey conducted by Future Workplace, 350 HR leaders in the US explored the question of the impact of the Covid-19 on HR and the new normal of work. Amongst their responses, they see that (1) organizations need to ramp up training and investment in remote working; (2) the future of work is the future of worker wellbeing; and (3) the Covid-19 situation could well be turned into opportunity to redefining one's business. (Forbes 2020). The researcher believes that technologies are able to foster the improvements and redesigning to tackle all the social issues involved.
4. A conceptual framework is needed to understand the role of the organizational control in the context of remote work arrangements in order for the C-Suites executives to have complete control of the situation. Organizational control, in fact, should be treated as a Manager's resource as well as that of the employees. It appears that organizational control is initiated by the adoption of remote work arrangements with its antecedents and individual outcomes at individual, group and organizational levels. (Errichiello, Pianese 2016). The role of organizational control ought to be clarified when the organization decides to adopt remote working. Such clarification is best to be built in to an operation system which guides the remote workers in their daily work with preciseness.

There are a number of key areas where employers need to address when shaping the future workforce. This research shall focus on:

5. *Meticulous Planning*: A virtual office places distinctive burdens on management processes including communication and that must be rethought so as to allow the organization to maximize the benefits of the virtual office / remote-work setting (Staples et al. 1999).

6. *Talent Management*: Senior management must forgo industrial-age talent management practice to accommodate the different generations of the workforce today. Organizations with an engaged workforce and a clear culture in place are more likely to attract top talent and retain those in the remote workforce. Also, around the clock surveillance type of system would not be ideal as performance management over the remote workforce is all about trust. Experience and research demonstrate that anxiety and fear from underlings are no match for a leader who can inspire confidence in them.
7. *Recalibration of KPI's*: Digital accountability might well be one of the means to implement in the future remote-working setup but digitally colonizing one's home is out of the question (Schrage 2020). As opposed to placing the remote workforce under surveillance, it would be more ideal to using data to better performance.
8. *Digitalizing Company Culture*: A renewed and digitalized company culture that would bring the remote workforce closer to one another is ideal as most Gen Z-ers feel siloed from each other and isolated when working from home. A system that can implement new guardrails would be better off than rolling back the current policy just to deal with backlashes. Certain best practices for the remote-work setup need to be put in place to retain and enhance the organization's culture, even with limited face-to-face. Organizations need to define their culture clearly and watch the culture in action through observing the data generated by individual employees. Updating the leadership mindset while coupling that with setting clear expectations would definitely nurture an engaged workforce across the board.
9. *Cyber Security*: A huge rise in cyber-attacks, such as that on Twitter on 15 July 2020 and during the pandemic, it is understandable that organizations are fearful about adding a remote workforce into the mix. Organizations needs to realise that by modernizing their infrastructure and ensuring that their teams are fully trained on privacy and security, they can easily enable their remote workforce without compromising security. (Atech Support 2020).

Theories

Trust issues amongst teammates and leaders could significantly impact the effectiveness of a remote workforce as trust within the virtual working environment represents the key element to a successful work process. (Relja and Bandalović 2008).

Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) suggested that “trust can exist in teams built purely on electronic networks”.

Key Debates and Controversies

Managers are increasingly considering three key questions on (1) How do they gain access to the workers; (2) Whether they have the right competencies and skills; and (3) The talent's productivity. (Kerr and Ng 2020). This has led to the argument that trust may not be possible in global virtual teams. (Handy 1995).

Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés (2020) confirmed that most companies and organizations have never planned their response to an emergency resulting from a pandemic because of its rare probability of occurrence hence the observation that most organizations are on a survival mode today.

Felstead and Henseke (2017) illustrated that Yahoo and Hewlett-Packard's U-turn on the use of remote workforce back in 2013 appear to contradict fiercely the contributions and benefits seen to be derived from remote-working.

Gaps in Existing Knowledge

Managers should realize that managing a remote workforce is never the same as managing one in a traditional office environment. Performance management can be difficult when the worker is not physically present thus requiring very clear communication that is more intentional with clearly defined performance management criteria. Lacking effective communication and relevant performance management, it would be unfair to remote workers as they might be struggling to get the work done without the recognition they deserve causing them not to realize the benefits of the intended flexibility and autonomy. (MacRae and Sawatzky 2020).

According to a recent study conducted by academics from Northeastern University, MIT, MIT Sloan School of Management and the University of Massachusetts Boston, firms of high WFH index values, in fact, perform better compared to low-WFH firms during the Covid-19 crisis on a number of dimensions ranging from stock returns and return volatility to financial performance. As such, the researchers recommended (as at 2 June 2020) that:

- As a fruitful area for future research, further investigation into the exact mechanisms through which WFH are linked to performance could be conducted;
- The underlying issues, when deeply understood, is particularly valuable to ensure a more efficient and smooth adoption of and transition into WFH as employers and employees alike embrace the new reality in the aftermath of the crisis.

(Bai et al. 2020)

Research design and methods

Research design

This qualitative research shall take the descriptive approach. Primary and naturalistic data would be collected through personal interviews (and possibly through a survey of around 200 people). Secondary data would be gathered from research/surveys/studies conducted since 2015 as the current situation is unique and the technological advancement surpassed relevant knowledge before then. Data would be inductively explored to identify recurring themes, patterns, and concepts with each category thoroughly described and interpreted.

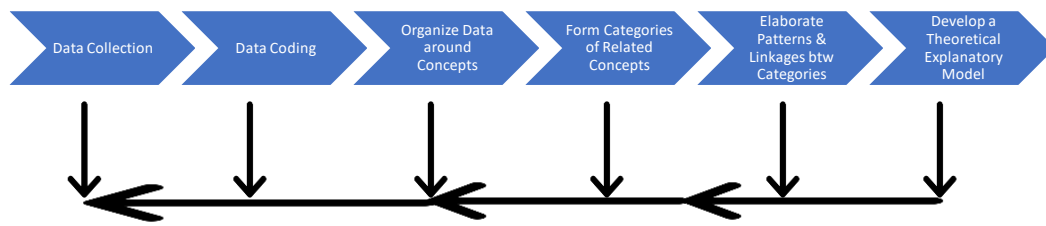
Methods and Sources

The tools to obtaining the data would include video recording, and voice recording during personal interviews. The participants (telework leaders), would be invited through close contacts and extended networks, should be at Senior Management levels working at companies with international exposures. Ideally, he/she is tertiary educated, tech savvy and with a minimum of 20 staff that work from home and report to him/her. Also, the participants would need to have personal experience with remote work.

The research aims at using phenomenological inquiry to describe the essences of the phenomenon and the researcher intends to uncover and interpret the inner essences of participants' cognitive processing pertaining to talent management in times when remote working/WFH becomes necessary. This research shall make use of naturally occurring empirical material that constitute specimen of the topic of the research hence allowing the researcher to have a more direct touch with the very object under investigation. It is a conductive method the researcher may use in developing the theory through close-up contact with the empirical world.

The research shall consist of six phases:

1. Data Collection
2. Data Coding
3. Organize Data Around Concepts
4. Form Categories of Related Concepts
5. Elaborate Patterns and Linkages Between Categories
6. Develop a Theoretical Explanatory Model



(Figure 1)

At the very outset, certain codes would be created for the purpose of obtaining high priority subjects and key questions. A formulated questionnaire would then be drawn up. Following that, data would be collected during phase 1 of the workflow in which eight participants (telework leaders) would be invited to join the interviews individually in private meeting rooms in a virtual office over a period of six months. According to the flowchart in Fig. 1, exploratory data coding shall follow in phase 2 of the research in which data would be coded and defined. Amongst the data, similarities, relationships and patterns would be illustrated through phase 3, 4, 5 and at phase 6, a grounded theory would emerge from the data collected and used.

Practical Considerations

Certain potential obstacles would include the failure to obtaining eight willing participants. Limitations would be derived from whether the participants would be honest enough to offer their management weaknesses if such exist on top of their strengths. Certain practical issues would include being asked to keep the data secret for the protection of the company. The researcher plans to use a minimum of six participants. The mood of the room would be set to provide extreme comfort to the participants in hope that they would be relaxed enough to put off any guards they might have and open up to telling the truths and facts of their observations and planning. All company names would remain anonymous in order to protect the companies' and the participants' interests.

Remote work is currently a popular subject amongst sociologists, psychologists and other academic fields. The researcher estimates that the research would complete by the end of 2022 and the researcher would have to meet the deadline as planned in order to curtail the possibility of losing its exclusivity.

Implications and contributions to knowledge

Practical Implications

The research aims at collecting the data as denoted and provide clear suggestions on ways to encase them in a single digital platform so as to maximize talent productivity and, most importantly, the trust needed to support the remote-working environment. The findings would help to create a brand-new digital platform for the betterment of the remote work setup. They may also serve as informing policy to the global business community in formulating and improving their remote-working setup including organizational control, HR policies, computer hardware, and software, and most importantly, company culture and the trust needed to support the remote work environment.

Theoretical Implications

Regardless of how advanced the technologies are, nothing would work if trust is lacking between telework leaders and their employees. Therefore, it is important to have a system meticulously built with various installed parameters through which trust would be digitally developed and built between management and employees even in the case of the individual's lack of 'visibility' and 'presence' (Felstead et al., 2003). However, in some cases, an individual's lack of 'visibility' and 'presence' might trigger some sort of trust issues then how could that distrust be justified or revoked? It is obvious that digital accountability would drastically reduce the recurrent trust issues between leaders and their team members.

In theory, talent management could well be executed in a remote work environment through a meticulously built digital platform that is an all-in-one system aimed at providing any workers (leader and employees) all that are required for business to be effectively conducted and monitored in all ways, i.e. between leaders and their employees, amongst the leaders and amongst the employees, and between their employees and outside parties such as clients, service providers, etc. Such a digital platform would consist of all interfaces from conference to collaboration needs and allow all users to remain operating through it for business to be accurately conducted without the need to using any 3rd party apps or programs (such as teleconferencing, intranet communications, etc.) for cyber security. In short, the digital platform would not only allow talents' performance to be tracked and traced but to respect the employees' privacy and autonomous in a private network so as to minimize cyber-attacks.

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Research schedule

Research phase	Objectives	Deadline
Create Codes and Formulate Questionnaire	In preparation for Phase 1	September 30, 2020
Interviews (Phase 1)	Data Collection	April 30, 2021
Data Coding (Phase 2)	Identifying Themes / Concepts	June 30, 2021
Organize Data Around Concepts (Phase 3)		August 31, 2021
Form Categories of Related Concepts (Phase 4)		October 31, 2021
Elaborate Patterns & Linkages Between Categories (Phase 5)		December 31, 2021
Develop a Theoretical Explanatory Model (Phase 6)		June 30, 2022