Unveiling Job Satisfaction Transformations: A Study on the Perspectives of Nepali IT Sector Employees Before and After Telecommuting during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: Focused on the IT sector in Nepal, this study investigates the impact of telecommuting on job satisfaction. The lack of specific telecommuting policies in Nepal, coupled with the sudden shift to virtual work during the pandemic, presents challenges that necessitate exploration. The primary objective is to assess and compare job satisfaction levels before and after telecommuting. The study holds significance as one of the earliest examinations of telecommuting in Nepal, aiming to guide future research and provide insights for academicians, practitioners, and corporate managers. Methodologically, a Pre-Post comparison approach is employed, utilizing a quantitative survey design. The results, analyzed using R software, reveal a significant decrease in job satisfaction after telecommuting, prompting a discussion on telecommuting capabilities, drawbacks, and the ongoing debate on its effectiveness. While the study acknowledges limitations in sample size and sector focus, it calls for future research encompassing diverse categories and larger samples to enhance generalizability.

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INTRODUCTION

The historical evolution of work structures underwent significant transformations, particularly with the transition from physical to mental tasks. Originally, prior to industrialization, work primarily occurred within the domestic realm and was labeled as cottage industries. As economic structures evolved, the nature of work shifted towards mental tasks, leading to the establishment of centralized organizational structures (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). Subsequently, with technological advancements, the concept of telecommuting emerged, denoting the ability to perform work remotely. Coined by Jack Nilles in 1972, the term gained prominence in subsequent years (Dailey-Hebert,

Mandemach, & Donnelli-Salle, 2020; ul Mustafa, & Nishat, 2017; Ameer, Ali, Farooq, Ayub, & Waqas, 2023).

The inception of telecommuting can be traced back to the 1970s, influenced by the oil shortage crisis (Huws, 1984). In response to economic and energy conservation imperatives, individuals began working from home, thereby initiating a revolutionary concept. Presently, telecommuting has become the predominant mode of operation for at least 50% of the U.S. population (Muhammed, 2018), extending its prevalence beyond developed nations to include developing countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand (ul Mustafa, Abro, & Awan, 2021; Ahmed, Mahboob, Hamid, Sheikh, Ali, Glabiszewski, & Cyfert, 2022; Teh, Hooi, Loh, Ong, & Hong, 2013).

Telecommuting, as a human resource management practice, offers benefits extending beyond work-life balance, attracting and retaining high-quality employees. Positive aspects, as highlighted by Raghuram (2014) and Roderick and Jelley (1991), include reduced traffic congestion, increased productivity, enhanced work-life balance, job satisfaction, flexible scheduling, decreased commuting costs and time, increased family time, reduced interruptions, and environmental sustainability.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted global responses, including policies to mitigate the adverse effects and prevent the virus's spread (Abulibdeh, 2020). Recognizing potential hotspots for transmission, countries, including Nepal, implemented lockdowns, compelling many to work from home (ILO, 2020). This measure, while curbing the virus, resulted in widespread economic and social impacts.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a paradigm shift in work arrangements, with numerous organizations, including IT companies, NGOs, and INGOs, adopting telecommuting to curb the virus's spread (Pant, 2020; ul Mustafa, & Nishat, 2019; Ma, Akhtar, Akhtar, Hashim, & e-Ali, 2022). Governments globally facilitated the transition to remote work. Telecommuting, defined as a work arrangement where employees perform their regular tasks at a location other than their usual workplace, supported by technological connections (Fitzer, 1997), emerged as a crucial practice for sustaining economic activities while safeguarding employee health (Abulibdeh, 2020).

The Government of Nepal implemented a total lockdown on March 24, 2020, restricting movement and business operations to mitigate the virus's spread ("Work From Home Culture in Nepal," 2020). Following a temporary easing of restrictions in July 2020, the government reinstated a second lockdown in April 2021 due to a resurgence of COVID-19 cases ("Nepal's lockdown 2.0, new Covid curbs on travel," 2020). Telecommuting became indispensable in sustaining economic activities during these periods, although its implementation faced challenges in developing countries like Nepal, where computer access is limited in more than half of households ("Teleworking is not working for the poor, the young, and the women," 2020).

In Nepal, lacking specific telecommuting policies, the sudden shift towards virtual work during the pandemic presented challenges for both employees and organizations. Despite its relative novelty in the country, the impact of this abrupt transition towards telecommuting on employees' job satisfaction remains unclear.

Statement of the Problem

Due to lockdown measures, employees found themselves compelled to work from home; however, there has been no comprehensive study assessing the satisfaction levels of individuals in this telecommuting scenario. A Survey Monkey report, based on a survey of 9,059 respondents, indicated that over 89% of employees were satisfied with their work-from-home (WFH) arrangements. In contrast, a 2020 Martec Group study with 1,214 participants reported a lower satisfaction rate of 32% during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, an Institute for Employment Studies poll, involving 500 respondents, revealed that 50% expressed dissatisfaction with their work-from-home setups (Yu & Wu, 2021). A recent survey at Kathmandu University showed that out of 1,347 students, 42.4%, or 571 students, were not satisfied with studying from home (Kathmandu University, 2021). A similar dissatisfaction scenario may emerge in other sectors as well, especially considering the potential impact on work-family balance (Karacsony, 2021).

Various studies, such as those by Duxbury, Higgins, & Mills (1992), Golden & Veiga (2005), Ruth (2011), ul Mustafa, Nishat, & Abro, (2022), and Winderger, Chudoba, & Sundrup (2017), suggest that telecommuting might lead to job dissatisfaction in employees. Assessing the satisfaction levels of employees after working from home is crucial, as it provides guiding knowledge for future unforeseen events when telecommuting may be necessary again.

In the midst of the crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, telecommuting emerged in Nepal as a viable measure to sustain economic activity while addressing the ongoing trauma. While this may be considered a positive development amid the challenges brought about by the pandemic, the lack of a comprehensive study, particularly concerning a significant determinant like job satisfaction (Fonner & Roloff, 2010), could impede Nepal's ability to extract valuable insights from this experience. Research indicates that countries without telecommuting knowledge face difficulties transitioning from traditional modes of operation to telecommuting (Abulibdeh, 2020).

Research Question: Is there a significant difference in the level of job satisfaction before and after the implementation of telecommuting practices?

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this research was to assess and compare the levels of job satisfaction among employees in the IT sector in Nepal before and after the implementation of telecommuting. The study aimed to offer initial insights into the telecommuting experiences of IT sector employees in Nepal, particularly by examining variations in job satisfaction levels.

This research exclusively focused on employees within the IT sector in Nepal, encompassing companies involved in managing IT infrastructures, software development, information handling, and networking. Building upon the recommendations of several researchers (Teo, Lim, & Wai, 1998; Tung & Turba, 1996), who suggested that IT-related organizations are ideal for studying telecommuting, this study capitalized on the inherent telecommuting awareness expected in IT professionals due to job characteristics and available infrastructure. The IT sector, being the primary user of the internet, is particularly conducive to the implementation of telecommuting practices.

In contrast to conventional job roles, tasks within the IT sector, such as software development, database management, and web page development, often require minimal communication and collaboration. The predominant focus of IT sector companies on task completion, regardless of the physical location, suggests that working away from the office could potentially enhance employee productivity, as noted by researchers like Brown (2010) and Raghuram (2014).

Additionally, the nature of work in the IT sector allows for remote monitoring of work progress. The absence of fixed working hours, with employees needing to respond to clients even during non-traditional hours or festivals, as highlighted by the "Work From Home Culture in Nepal" (2020), further supports the feasibility of telecommuting in this sector. While challenges may exist for other sectors in transitioning to telecommuting, the distinctive characteristics of IT work suggest that employees in the IT sector in Nepal may encounter fewer obstacles when shifting from working in the office to working from home.

Significance of the Study

Telecommuting has become a standard practice in IT companies in developed countries (Ansong & Boateng, 2018), with much of the relevant research focused on these developed nations. Chepken (2012) highlights the limited exploration of the concept of working from anywhere at any time in the context of developing nations. Despite a high propensity for telecommuting in Nepal, there is a notable absence of studies guiding its proper implementation. The determination of whether telecommuting positively impacts job satisfaction in the context of Nepal remains uncertain without dedicated research in this area. The telecommuting culture that originated in developed countries in the 1970s has yet to fully penetrate developing countries like Nepal, creating a research gap, with job satisfaction being one of the unexplored aspects (Ansong & Boateng, 2018).

This study aims to fill this gap, potentially being one of the earliest examinations of telecommuting in the context of Nepal. Given the novelty of this concept in Nepal, employees' perceptions of telecommuting are largely anecdotal, especially considering the forced transition to telecommuting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The existing body of knowledge on telecommuting and its impact on job satisfaction, as studied by researchers such as Duxbury et al. (1992), Golden & Veiga (2005), Miller (2016), Ruth (2011), and Winderger et al. (2017), was established under normal conditions. The current extraordinary situation of the pandemic challenges this existing knowledge, necessitating a reevaluation (Wang, Liu, Qian, & Parker, 2020).

While the current literature on telecommuting addresses demographic, geographical, technological, economic, and environmental aspects, the studies exploring its connection with job satisfaction tend to be absolute. Without comparative analyses of job satisfaction levels before and after telecommuting, it becomes challenging to conclusively attribute job satisfaction or dissatisfaction solely to telecommuting or other factors. Mueller and Kim (2008) emphasize the need for research comparing job satisfaction levels in employees before and after telecommuting.

This research aims to lay the foundation for exploring various aspects of telecommuting in the future. The findings are expected to assist academicians and practitioners in gaining a deeper understanding of the telecommuting phenomenon. Additionally, it will provide corporate managers with insights into the perceptions of Nepali employees towards telecommuting, aiding in the formulation of effective strategies to enhance employee

productivity. The study's outcomes will inform employers whether telecommuting is a viable option for work modes and, if found to increase job satisfaction, may be offered as an alternative for long-term employee retention strategies.

METHODOLOGY

The primary aim of this study was to compare the levels of job satisfaction among IT sector employees in Nepal using a Pre-Post comparison method as part of an exploratory investigation. Formulating hypotheses derived from existing theories, the study adopted a deductive approach, opting for a quantitative design method.

The survey research method was employed, conducted in the natural environment to capture employees' expectations of telecommuting against their actual experiences. The study utilized a pre-post design within a single survey by prompting respondents to report their pre and post levels of the variable under consideration (Davies, 2020). Participants were asked to reflect on their expectations and actual telecommuting experiences.

Primary data for analysis were collected through an online questionnaire survey, given the IT-related focus of the research audience, making an online survey both practical and cost-effective. A sample of 40 employees from an IT-related company was randomly selected, with 34 volunteering for participation. As the sample is random, dependent, and sufficiently large (>=30), statistical tests could be conducted.

Job satisfaction, a widely researched topic, lacks a unanimous definition in the literature, with varying interpretations depending on the context (Zijlstra, 2018). This study focused on facet job satisfaction, examining job satisfaction solely from the perspective of telecommuting. Job satisfaction was conceptualized through Locke's Value Theory (Locke, 1976) and operationalized according to (Earl et al., 2011; Ziegler et al., 2012), considering job satisfaction as a function of employees' attitudes. Attitude, reflecting satisfaction with the job, was measured using a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), as utilized by Roderick and Jelley (1991). Positive and negative aspects of telecommuting were presented in a mixed format without separation.

To ensure content validity, the researcher conducted interviews with two professors, one specializing in Human Resources and the other in Information Technology, to assess the construct of the research. This method aims to evaluate the reasonableness, clarity, and relevance of items (Cooper & Schinder, 2003). Reliability analysis, specifically Cronbach's alpha, will be employed to assess internal consistency (Taherdoost, 2016).

RESULT, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

After receiving the data, it was processed using the statistical software R, chosen for its availability and cost-effectiveness. Each response was entered into the software and thoroughly analyzed for mistakes and missing data. Respondents who answered negatively to the question "Have you telecommuted during COVID-19 lockdown?" were excluded from the study, focusing exclusively on individuals who telecommuted during the lockdown period. As the positive and negative aspects of telecommuting were presented randomly without clear separation, their responses were separated before analysis.

For hypothesis testing, a paired t-test was conducted to compare the level of job satisfaction before and after telecommuting. The results indicated a significant decrease in job satisfaction after telecommuting (M_before = 64.1, SD = 9.2; M_after = 58.7, SD = 11.9), t (33) = 3.6, p = .000.

One potential reason for this decline in job satisfaction could be disparities in telecommuting capabilities among countries. Studies reveal varying percentages of work that can be done from home in different countries, influenced by factors such as the digital divide and economic characteristics. Developing countries may face challenges in adopting telecommuting due to lower technology adoption and digital infrastructure development (Abulibdeh, 2020; ILO, 2020).

Additionally, the drawbacks of telecommuting have been highlighted in the literature. Some organizations, like Yahoo and Bank of America, oppose telecommuting, emphasizing the limitations of virtual collaboration. Studies indicate that telecommuting employees experience higher stress levels, potential distractions leading to reduced productivity, and challenges related to infrastructure, societal resistance, and organizational culture (Srivastava et al., 2015; Olen, 2020; Khanal, 2020; Raghuram, 2014).

The ongoing debate over conventional office-based work versus telecommuting has persisted since the introduction of telecommuting. While some argue that telecommuting reduces job satisfaction in employees due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and potential isolation, there is no conclusive evidence supporting or refuting the overall effectiveness of telecommuting. The consensus is the need for systematic research to understand when telecommuting is effective and when it is not.

LIMITATIONS

The limited sample size raises concern about the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the study exclusively targeted IT employees in Kathmandu, potentially restricting the applicability of the results to a broader range of firms across Nepal. Given the widespread adoption of remote work in various sectors, including education and finance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to note that this study concentrated solely on the IT sector. The researcher recommends future studies of a similar nature that encompass diverse categories and employ a larger sample size to improve the generalizability of the results.

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