Remote working in India during the COVID-19 crisis

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Abstract
India has been reeling from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and has enforced a nationwide lockdown to ensure the spread is contained, and the situation is under control. This has paved the way for corporate across the length and breadth of the country to embrace remote working as the only feasible option to continue their business. Earlier, it used to be the IT sector employees and a handful of employees from other industries who had the privilege of working remotely. Now, with remote working becoming the norm, we aim to capture how it has affected people's working style and if interactions with family at home during work hours affect their work. We also aim to find out whether performance takes a hit due to the absence of co-workers. A questionnaire was filled up by employees working from home that sought out details about their working style, daily routine, interactions with other people (family member or colleague), and their thoughts on the remote working lifestyle. The major factors were measured on a five-point Likert scale. People work for a longer time when working from home, due to distractions caused by interactions with family members or other people and also the absence of colleagues causes problems to be solved at a slower pace. Women work longer hours when compared to men, additionally due to household chores. The absence of colleagues coupled with distractions at home cause people to prefer working from the office rather than from home. This study would help identify what sort of impact remote working has on an employee's performance and how it can affect the working style. The paper analyses the effect of remote working and the presence of family at home on an employee's performance.

Keywords

1 Introduction

The situation worldwide has not been very conducive to business or, for that matter, normal lives these past few months. With the outbreak of the Coronavirus, the lives of billions of people all over the world have come to a grinding halt. But amidst all the adversity, we see that corporate entities have decided that their businesses must continue and that they should continue to serve their clients and consumers to the best of their abilities. With social distancing being mandated by governments worldwide, people have turned to remote working or working from home to ensure that the world does not come crashing down.

This is not a new trend – it has been around for quite a few years now. Employers have already started saving costs by going the online way for quite some time now in a few countries [1].

“According to data collected by Euro found in 2010, around a fifth of workers across Europe said that they mainly worked at home, on clients’ premises, on sites outside the factory or office, and/or in cars or other vehicles. In 2015 around three out of ten said they worked in such places daily [2].

Although the Indian IT industry has had remote-working as the norm for many employees, other industries in India were still far behind in implementing this measure. But in the current scenario, almost every organization across all industries and sectors has shifted to this mode of work for business continuity.

“From the perspective of line and HR managers or clients seeking to manage remote workers, there may be a desire to monitor the activity of remote workers depending on the standpoint of these individual parties on the extraction of value. The degree of such monitoring is likely to be influenced by the balance between organizational and personal engagement with hard (where human resources are typically treated as disposable commodities) and soft (where they are primarily treated as assets) approaches to HRM [3], and the extent to which remote working is undertaken [4].
In some cases, distrust and a desire to exert control over work practices can stimulate the extensive digital tracking of remote work as part of a growing focus on performance metrics and HR analytics [5].

Such has been the impact that industries that had earlier deemed it impossible to accommodate the thought of working from home are now advocating it. During the summer, organizations have ensured that their employees can continue work from their homes' comfort. While some organizations have even gone as far as to send the employee's workstation to their home (Infosys being one example), others have taken a softer approach by focusing on those aspects of their operations that can be conducted through the online medium (product development, online marketing, etc.).

Going by the government's current regulations, offices have remained closed for an extended period of time, and to overcome this roadblock, there has been a conscious and clear push for digitization across industries [6]. The corporate world has decided that manual intervention in the day-to-day work has to be minimized to reduce human contact to a bare minimum and save cost. Digitization and automation serve as great tools to cut costs, which is one of the major areas of concern for almost all organizations. With the economy in a precarious position and livelihoods being threatened across the country [7], the onset of this pandemic has paralyzed commerce across the country's length and breadth. With revenues drying up and costs not coming down in any way, organizations are looking to reduce the human effort to save costs [8]. By opting for teleworking, companies are cutting down on operational costs (office maintenance, electricity charges, etc.), and digitization helps redirect employee focus on areas that need it. The scope of jobs is also changing (Job expansion) in this context and could lead to a revisualization of what the various job roles stand for.

Although there has been news of layoffs during this period, it has not been a significant amount. This proves that organizations are willing to adapt to this sudden change in circumstances and look at ways to deal with an uncertain future. The most notable instance of organizations reacting positively to the current situation is the online internships offered across industries to MBA students during the summer. The summer internships were supposed to begin from early April, but the lockdown was imposed from end-March, throwing companies' internship plans into disarray. They reacted promptly by changing the internship mode to an online one – from onboarding interns digitally to ensuring that their internship experience is not marred in any way by conducting motivation sessions and mental health awareness initiatives online. Although most of the internships were delayed by a few weeks, only a handful of organizations cancelled their offers, further strengthening the perception that organizations are flexible and willing to adapt to change. Even the projects offered to interns were modified to ensure they were relevant to the current scenario. There have not been many policy changes for full-time employees, but the major change has been in the lifestyle associated with their work [9]. Work-life balance is now more in the employees' hands than their employers, more than ever before. Now, an employee has the agency to decide his working hours for himself, which was not the case even in the recent past. But the question that now arises is what impact does this have on the performance and the working style of the employee? How do they feel about this change, and is this beneficial for them?

With this research, we aim to find out how the employees across industries are dealing with this work from the home situation – whether they like it, how it has affected their lifestyle, has their work been affected [10], how employers are dealing with this situation, the infrastructural changes required, etc. We also wish to find out if the current HR policies in India are suitable for this mode of working and, if not, what changes can be made to make this experience beneficial for both employers and employees.

2 Literature review

The corporate scenario in India has traditionally involved people commuting to offices for work. Rarely have people worked from home – it was practiced in a select few industries and that too on a very small scale. But, the impact of COVID-19 has been such that everyone is now confined to their homes, and organizations are rushing into this world of teleworking to continue their business. To see how co-workers’ teleworking at the same time impact their work execution, we first need to comprehend the job of telecommuting itself. There are both positive and negative sides to working from home. Beginning with the positives, telecommuting ought to give representatives a greater chance to concentrate on their work. When working from home, the contact between co-workers can be
significantly reduced, to the point of only a handful of interactions every week. Undoubtedly, research has indicated that telecommuting is related to less interference [11]. Second, since no one is genuinely checking the teleworker, they have more discretion in how, under what conditions, and in some cases, when they can finish assignments [12]. It expands the workers’ adaptability to the demands of work [13]. More self-governance in the activities related to work will probably be related to greater efficiency [14]. Third, workers who work from home might be all the more ready to invest additional efforts to compensate their manager for the ‘favour’ of flexible work hours [15]. Notwithstanding the positive viewpoints, various negative perspectives have likewise been recognized [16]. A significant downside of telecommuting is the diminished control by associates or the administrator. This can be valid for both the association and the representative. At the point when somebody’s work is ineffectively checked, a more prominent chance of work evasion exists; however, there may likewise be less feedback on possible errors. Group working may turn into an issue [12]. Teamwork turns out to be increasingly dangerous when teleworking. It may create vulnerabilities, pressures and lead to miscommunication between employees. Secondly, there might arise cases of isolation, both social and sometimes professional [17], resulting in lower rates of networking amongst them, lower levels of peer learning, and mentoring from associates and bosses [18]. Being far from the workplace may likewise give rise to the notion that being out of sight limits career progression, rewards, and recognition [19].

Moving to co-workers, they are probably going to impact the performance of the representative in different manners [21]. The co-workers influence the attitudes of an individual and his/her behaviour in an office setting by what is known as ‘horizontal exchanges’, including exchanges of the informal or social kind [20]. Group cohesiveness is certainly related to the group’s performance as a whole, yet when no one is near, employees experience less cohesiveness [22]. Trust and shared encounters improve execution by requiring less exertion to keep up co-worker exchanges and acting as an asset for information and viable assistance. The trading of basic data about how things in the association work make undertakings simpler to execute by straightforwardly helping representatives advance towards their work objectives and encouraging smoothing exchanges with co-workers [23]. Be that as it may, if employees do not exchange such information between themselves, this may lead to their job becoming more demanding as they are not helped by others [21].

We know that working from home leads to labour being more and more intensified [22] and that an employee’s performance decreases when he works from home [23] XZ – so this means that there is more work but less output or less quality of output. One other factor that determines the impact of teleworking on performance is the nature of the work itself. Also, teleworking leads to less interaction with one’s co-workers, which, coupled with intensified labour and lower performance, gives rise to an interesting proposition.

Hypothesis 1: Working from home leads to longer work hours compared to that at the office
Hypothesis 2: The number of hours worked from home is related to the gender of the employee
Hypothesis 3: The presence of family members affects the focus and performance of an Employee while working from home
Hypothesis 4: The presence of colleagues affects the choice of the workplace (home or office)

3 Research methodologies

Our research is based on a survey-based investigation of the corporate entities that have adopted work from home in India. A structured questionnaire was floated to employees across these organizations at an entry or mid-level role and working from home. When we decided to select the industries that we wanted to include in our sample, we decided to go for those industries that have adopted teleworking to the greatest degree, and we decided on eight such industries. They are Management Consulting, Fast Moving Consumer Goods, BFSI (Banking, Financial Service and Insurance), Information Technology, Manufacturing, Pharmaceuticals, Retail, and Telecom. These industries are very different from each other, their working styles are different, the percentage of women in each industry is different, and even the number of people working is different. Selecting these six industries will help us decide if teleworking’s impact during the pandemic has affected change irrespective of industries or if the change has been limited to a certain industry type. The respondents had to answer 35 questions pertaining to their industry, their previous experience with remote working, their work hours, work habits, interaction
with family members, need of colleagues, etc. While deciding on the factors to measure the impact against, we observed that we could divide the factors into four major areas:

a) Impact on working hours
b) The relation between gender and change in working hours
c) Impact of the presence of family members
d) Impact of the absence of colleagues

We had a total of 55 responses from these eight industries, out of which only two respondents had not worked from home in the pre-COVID era. So, while considering the impact on working hours, we decided to exclude these two observations from the sample. The respondents had earlier worked from the office and in a teleworking setup, so they understood what changes and shifts had taken place in recent times. For questions pertaining to their feelings and preferences, we used a Likert scale to effectively understand their perceptions’ depth. We then performed statistical analysis on the data obtained from these responses to understand if our hypotheses are indeed valid or not.

4 Results and discussion

Figure 1 shows the results obtained regarding the difference in work hours caused by working from home during the pandemic. While considering the responses we received, there were two respondents who were not working from home, so we discarded their responses from the analysis. The Figure 1 see that in the pre-COVID era, in an office setup, the respondents were working for an average of 7.3 hours per day (excluding lunch and other breaks), with the median being at 8 hours per day and the maximum recorded hours was 11 hours per day. This corresponds with the real scenario where office timings mandate working hours ranging from 8-10 hours (including lunch and other breaks). When we look at the respondents’ work hours while working from home (including breaks), we see that they are working for an average of 9.25 hours per day, with the median at 10 hours. The maximum working hours reported per day was 12 hours, and seven people reported it. This gives us the idea that there has been an increase in the work hour’s post-COVID while working from home. To test whether our hypothesis is correct, we decided to conduct a test based on the data and to understand which test to perform, we need to understand whether the data were normally distributed or not.

The Figure 2, we can see that both the tests point out that the data samples are not normally distributed. So, to test whether there is any significant difference in working hours caused by working from home during the COVID crisis, we would have to conduct non-parametric tests. We decided to use the Wilcoxon signed-rank test to determine if there was any significant difference in the mean ranks of the two populations, and it is represented in Figure 3.
The Null Hypothesis was that there was no significant difference between the work hours per day pre-COVID (working from the office) and the work hours per day post-COVID (while working from home). The test’s sig value came out to be 0.000, thus rejecting the null hypothesis and proving that there indeed has been an increase in work hours post-COVID while working from home. Figure 4 and Figure 5 shows the Graphs depicting the frequency distribution of the two samples.

On further looking into the data, we decided to understand if this impact has been similar across all industries or if the results will vary across industries. Figure 4 and 5: shows the graph depicting the frequency distribution of the two samples. We calculated the actual difference in work hours between the two scenarios reported by each respondent and created a new field called “Difference”. Figure 6 Based on this field, we decided to conduct the independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test to understand the variation of impact by industry, if there is any. The null hypothesis was that the distribution of the field “Difference” values would be the same irrespective of industry. Figure 6 shows the Independent-Sample Kruskal-Wallis test.

Figure 8 shows the Graph showing the number of responses received from each industry. In Figure 7, it can see that the test’s sig value came out to be 0.020, which is low enough for us to safely reject the null hypothesis. Thus, we can see a significant difference in the change in work hours based on which industry the respondent belongs to. This is further explained by Figure 8 which depicts the shift in work hours for each industry (negative value corresponds to more hours spent while working from home). As is evident from the plot, the biggest shift has occurred in BFSI while Telecom has actually reduced work hours. IT/ITeS had a mixed range, although the trend was clearly towards greater work hours during the pandemic. A similar case was noticed in the Manufacturing industry while the Management Consulting, FMCG, Pharmaceuticals, and Retail industries showed a definite increase in work hours post-COVID.
After looking at the impact of teleworking on industries, we decided to understand if there was any difference in the shift of work hours based on genders. As the data was not normally distributed, we decided to perform non-parametric tests to arrive at any conclusion. The Mann-Whitney U test result showing that the shift in work hours is different according to gender is represented in Figure 9. We conducted independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test with the Null Hypothesis that the column difference's value shows no change based on gender. Figure 9 shows the Mann-Whitney U test result showing that the shift in work hours is different according to gender.

The Figure 10, it can clearly see that the sig value obtained is less than 0.05; hence we can safely reject the null hypothesis. This means that for men and women, the change in work hours has not been the same. In fact, from Figure 10 which shows the distribution of the change in work hours for both genders, we can see that women are spending more time on work while working from home. This is an interesting finding since we had expected no significant change in work hours based on genders. To understand why this difference has presented itself, we decided to find which factor correlated to this difference.

The Figure 11 and Figure 12, the questionnaire, we identified that interruption in work due to household chores might be why women have to spend more time on work. To understand if there was any correlation, we used Pearson’s Chi-Squared test, and from the result, we came to see that the Chi-Square rating indicates that the rating on the impact of household chores depends on genders. Women who strongly felt that household chores were a burden while working from home also reported a larger shift in working

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**Hypothesis Test Summary**

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<thead>
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<th>Null Hypothesis</th>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Sig a,b</th>
<th>Decision</th>
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</thead>
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<td>The distribution of Difference is the same across categories of Gender</td>
<td>Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test</td>
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<td>Reject the null hypothesis</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

a. The significance level is 0.05.

b. Asymptotic significance is displayed.

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Fig. 9. The Mann-Whitney U test result showing that the shift in work hours is different according to gender.
hours during the pandemic. Of the 11 female respondents, all of them responded that they were finding chores as a problem while working from home, and eight respondents (73%) strongly agreed that household chores were a hindrance to focusing on work. From the 42 male respondents, we saw that 11 of them (22%) disagreed that chores were a problem, seven were not sure if it was a problem, and from the rest, only 18 strongly agreed that chores were a problem. Thus, it is clear that women are having a harder time managing work due to household responsibilities while men have it easier to some extent. Based on this insight, we decided to determine if there was any correlation between the factors that we measured against. So, we performed a Bayes Test for Pair wise Correlation and got the result as displayed in Figure 13.

We see a good degree of correlation between the factors themselves – like working in the office helps the respondents focus on work and that colleagues can help better when in the office are both related to the fact that working with colleagues helps to finish work faster. This goes to show that colleagues do have an impact on performance, and their presence is beneficial for more efficient work. As stated earlier, teleworking...
hinder interpersonal communication and social interactions between colleagues, resulting in less transfer of information and knowledge, which in turn affects the performance of the employee. It is easier for co-workers to exchange useful information or help each other out when they are stuck in an office setting. Teleworking brings in the added layer of communicating over the digital medium, which can lead to tension and misunderstanding in some cases, further hindering work progress and ultimately making it difficult to focus on work. On a similar note, there was also a significant correlation between the feeling that teleworking’s nature has certain disadvantages with both working in the office helps to focus on work and that the presence of colleagues helps to finish work faster. This further strengthens the argument that the nature of teleworking itself (in the sense that you are isolated from your co-workers and can only access them digitally) is responsible for the decrease in efficiency and, in turn, performance. There is another aspect that can shed more light on why people perceive that they can focus more on work while in the office – there is a significant correlation between household chores being a problem and interactions with family members or other people at home. While the employee is in the office, the focus is primarily on work, and interactions with other people are mostly work-related or for relaxation during breaks. But at home, there are several other responsibilities to be fulfilled, and the focus is diluted. Chores come in the way of work, and also, interactions with family members during work hours tend to hinder work progress.

In order to find out how interactions with family members are hindering our work progress, we decided to conduct some tests and find out if the number of interactions has an effect or if it is agnostic of the number of interactions. We had asked people about the number of interactions with family members they have in a week which create some disturbance while working from home, and based on that data; we got the result as displayed in Figure 14.

The Figure 15 the table, we see that out of the 22 people who were distracted by others only 2-5 times in a week, 16 of them (73%) strongly felt that interactions create a distraction and prevent them from focusing on work. For 5-10 interactions in a week, 12 out of 13 agreed that it was a distraction, and for people who interacted more than ten times a week, all strongly agreed that it was distracting to them. Conversely, out of the 17 people who had less than two such interactions in a week, 14 of them (82%) did not see them as distractions.

Thus, we can say that more than two such interactions will tend to make individuals feel that interactions with family members or other people while working from home are distracting. The higher the number of interactions, the more strongly they will feel about this. We also tried to determine if people who felt that interaction with family while working from home distracted them from work would prefer to work from the office. Based on this, we conducted some tests and arrived at an interesting outcome.

Figure 16 shown that people who felt that interactions with family members were distracting them...
while working from home preferred working in an office. Out of 34 such people, 31 of them (more than 90%) preferred not to work from home, and out of the 55 total respondents, 45 (82%) of them responded saying that they preferred the office for work. Thus, we can see that people still prefer working from the office and that the higher the number of distracting interactions with family at home while working, the likelier it is that they will prefer not to work at home in Figure 17.

That person still preferred to work from the office gave rise to a few more questions. We found that distractions were one of the reasons, and we wanted to find out if there were any other such reasons or factors that affected the workplace choice. We found that two other factors were related to people choosing their workplace. They were the presence of colleagues, and the nature of work from home itself, and its values are tabulated in Figure 18.

Figure 19 is fairly evident that colleagues’ presence is a major factor in preferring to work in the office. The fact that colleagues can help better in the office as opposed to over the digital medium during teleworking has a large bearing on the result. Only 7 of the 52 people (13%) who felt colleagues could help better in the office still preferred to work from home, and only 3 out of 55 people (5.5%) did not find colleagues’ presence to be important. Coupled with the results from the Chi-Square test, we can ascertain that the presence of colleagues will drive people to choose office over working from home.

**Chi-Square Tests**

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<th>Value</th>
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<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>16 474</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Valid Cases</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* a. 7 cells (70.9%) have expected counts less than 5. The minimum expected count is .55.

**Fig. 17. Chi-Square test result showing that number of interactions and choice of the workplace are related**

**Fig. 18. Table showing that absence of colleagues goes against choosing the home as the workplace**

**Chi-Square Tests**

<table>
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* a. 7 cells (70.9%) have expected counts less than 5. The minimum expected count is .55.

**Fig. 19. Chi-Square test result showing that absence of colleagues is related to the choice of workplace**

Figure 20 shows the nature of teleworking and its effect on workplace preference. Diving deeper, we asked if people found the nature of teleworking itself to be a disadvantage to working from home. 38 out of 55 people (69%) responded saying that they agreed to this, and out of those 38 people, 34 (90%) preferred to work from the office. Thus, we can conclude that the absence of colleagues coupled with the disadvantageous nature of teleworking (communicating over a digital medium, technical issues, etc.) makes up for a compelling reason for people to choose working in an office over working from home. Figure 21 shows the Chi-Square test result showing the nature of teleworking is related to workplace preference.

**Fig. 20. The nature of teleworking and its effect on workplace preference**

**Chi-Square Tests**

<table>
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**Fig. 21. Chi-Square test result showing the nature of teleworking is related to workplace preference**
5 Discussions

The current pandemic scenario has indeed thrown us quite a few surprises, and while initially there was quite a bit of uncertainty, the corporate entities across India have adapted quite well to this new normal. Many people are working from home for the first time, and this also gave rise to some interesting situations and feelings. With the boundaries between work and home blurring, people have been confronted with a new situation to tackle – keeping work out of personal life and keeping personal life out of work. But although this might seem easy at first, we examined and found that it is not the case. The fact that people are working longer hours now than before is a testament to the fact that personal and professional lives are getting mixed. On average, people are working 2 hours more per day than they did before. This shift is not uniform across industries – BFSI has seen the largest shift in work hours, with work hours increasing significantly post lockdown, and in the Telecommunication sector, the case has been the opposite. The reason for this shift could be tied to the nature of work – case in point being the work hours for IT and Management Consulting has increased only slightly. In these two industries working online was already a reality for many people and these two sectors had accepted teleworking as a mode of work long before the pandemic happened. So, their work nature was already normalized for the situation, and now, with everyone working remotely, there has been relatively little change. The other industries are new to this and are still adapting.

Another interesting point is that gender plays a part in the increase in work hours – female employees are working longer hours compared to their male counterparts. Our findings also suggest that women have been impacted largely by household chores, which has kept them from finishing their work early. All the women who responded felt that chores were getting in the way of their work and keeping them from continuously focusing on their work. This could also be attributed to the traditional gender roles in our society where women have to do the lion’s share of housework and men comparatively do much less. From our findings, we see that family members also play a vital role in lengthening our work hours from home. People who have more family members will likely have a larger number of interactions with them over the course of a week, and more interactions can hamper the focus a person has while working. Our findings indicate that people who have more than two distracting experiences in a week tend to believe that family members are a distraction while working from home. They also feel that due to family distractions, they would rather work from the office than at home. In a similar vein of thought, we found out that colleagues also play a large part in work performance. Colleagues help out in times of need and help to finish work faster, increasing efficiency. With colleagues not being present physically, it makes it a bit difficult to get the same level of help over the digital medium and thus brings down the employee’s efficiency. Other than professional help, colleagues also interact informally and socially in an office setting, creating a sort of break from the monotony of work and retaining focus. That is absent at home, and so, work hours tend to extend. Interestingly, people who felt that having their colleagues with them in the office helps them finish work faster also chose to work from the office rather than at home, and it is shown in Figures 20 and Figure 21.

The Figure 22: we can see that some of the major factors that people keep in mind while choosing their place of work are the environment, time, efficiency, people, colleagues, focus, culture, etc. The words environment, efficiency, focus, and culture indicate that people would prefer to work in a place where they have the space to focus on work without being disturbed and can efficiently finish their work in time. The presence of colleagues and the absence of family members to distract them does justify their choice to work from the office rather than from home. Our research also shows that people who feel that their colleagues help them finish work faster overwhelmingly chose to work from the office, and the popular feeling that teleworking is disadvantageous in nature also led to people choosing office as their preferred workplace. Based on these findings, we can safely say that working from home is still far from the ideal solution, although it is the reality now. To work from home, we need to prepare the right environment at home so that our work does not make us suffer.

6 Conclusions

There are still ways to go before we can safely say that working from home is convenient. Currently, we are trying to push as much work as possible to the online mode, which is not the ideal way forward. We need to identify what sort of work can be done online and which responsibilities need to modify to make it suitable to be done online. The nature of work itself determines how well it can be performed in an online
setup, and we should carefully consider our decisions. Organizations need to analyse the current job positions they have and understand whether their responsibilities need to be changed to suit this scenario. If the plan is to shift to an online culture of working, then the jobs themselves need to change to gather maximum output. We are not yet prepared to work from home as it requires a certain environment. There need to be boundaries so that we are not distracted while working – a separate room or area where we can work long hours at a stretch without being disturbed.

Regarding chores, we need to plan out our daily activities and household work beforehand or have a routine so that we know what to expect and can accordingly schedule our work hours to gain maximum efficiency. If there are multiple people in the same household with more than one person working from home, the activities need to be divided accordingly to not bear the maximum brunt of chores. Also, having a designated working space helps us focus better, and the right environment will help us be more efficient.

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