Challenges and Benefits of 'Work from Home' for Employees in the Kingdom of Bahrain

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 ushered in a range of strategic, structural, and operational changes in organisations. Significant among these changes being the work from home (WFH) arrangement. The main aim of this study was to identify the challenges and benefits that the WFH arrangement brought in its wake, for employees in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The similarities and differences in the challenges faced, and benefits reaped by different demographic segments of respondents, namely; male and female, managers and non-managers, and the four generations [Baby-boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z] were examined. The study revealed that the major challenges faced by respondents of these segments were receiving work requests from managers and colleagues after scheduled work hours and/or at their convenience, keeping a regular schedule, keeping family members away from workspace- especially during virtual meetings, not having access to the tools or information needed for the job, not having workspace/workstation at home, and communication with colleagues being hard. The major benefits listed were saving commute time, flexible working, work life balance, personal and family care, and more focus. The general preference of majority of the respondents was to continue with WFH arrangement - half the time in the future. The findings of this study threw light on the need for organisations to formulate policies for overcoming the challenges faced by respondents during WFH. This would result in better productivity and contribute to the employees' well-being.

Keywords: Work from home, challenges, benefits, gender, position, generation, correlation.

INTRODUCTION

COVOD-19 has propelled the world into a new arena, and the corporate world into a whole different place. The key factors impacted due to COVID-19, were not only the survival, sustainability, and profitability of businesses, but also the structure and systems in organisations. The major change that happened worldwide was the work from home (WFH) arrangement, which was a novel concept to many employees and most organisations. Organisations were in different stages of preparedness for WFH, and employees were in different frames of mind to WFH. The WFH concept is still evolving and has not reached its fruition even after 4-6 months of its wide implementation. As WFH

arrangements may continue in some form even after the COVID-19, it is imperative for organisations to overcome its disadvantages and leverage its advantages.

Aim and Scope of the Study

The main aim of this study was to examine the challenges and benefits of WFH, and the preference of employees for WFH in the future. The focus was to identify the differences and similarities in the challenges faced, benefits reaped, and future preferences; between male and female respondents, managers and non-managers, and among respondents belonging to the four generations currently working in organisations; namely, Baby-boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z [1]. The study was conducted during July/August 2020 in the Kingdom of Bahrain, and its scope did not include industry-wise and job/function/specialty-wise analyses.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included employees drawn from various organisations and sectors in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Published articles, journals, books, and websites on the topic were accessed as part of the secondary sources. A convenience sample of 250 employees was selected for the purpose of this study. 'Convenience sampling is as a method adopted by researchers where they collect market research data from a conveniently available pool of respondents. It is the most commonly used sampling technique as it is incredibly prompt, uncomplicated, and economical. In many cases, members are readily approachable to be a part of the sample' [2].

An online survey tool was used for primary data collection. A questionnaire consisting mainly of multiple choice questions, and statements with check boxes, pertaining to the challenges and benefits of WFH, was administered. Challenges faced during WFH, which covered fourteen areas of work and life, and prominent benefits of WFH were listed in the questionnaire. The online questionnaire link was emailed to the respondents. The response rate to the survey was 84%. All responses to the questionnaire were collated and analysed under three demographic segments, namely; gender, position and generation, which were represented in varying percentages in the distribution of responses. The data analyses was supported with info-graphs, percentages, and the findings were statistically analysed to obtain better interpretations of the input, and to draw meaningful conclusions.

WORK FROM HOME

"The economic and social shock presented by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to reshape perceptions of individuals and organizations about work and occupations and result in both micro and macro shifts in the world of work. The focus is on three occupationally-related domains that may be impacted by the pandemic. First, perceptions of the value and status of different occupations may change, resulting in both changes of occupational supply and demand (macro changes) and changes in the perceived calling and meaningfulness of different occupations (micro changes). Second, the great "work from home experiment" may change occupational perspectives on working from home. Organizations and researchers may be able to better understand which occupational and individual characteristics are associated with work-from-home effectiveness and better designate occupational groups and individuals to working (or not working) from home. Third, the increased segmentation of the labor market which allocate workers to "good jobs" and "bad jobs" and the contribution of occupational segmentation to inequality" [3].

"Working from home (WFH) is a situation where employees perform work tasks remotely (from their home) instead of being physically present in a company office building. WFH is also called telecommuting or remote working. Employees that work from home are often referred to as a virtual workforce. These are actually specific types of WFH scenarios. In a WFH setup, the employee typically has a dedicated home office workspace equipped with a computer. There are many reasons why companies may be having their employees work from home, ranging from participating in after-hours meetings with global clients/team members to accessing a distributed workforce to supporting company operations during a crisis. Employees that work from home often report higher company loyalty, job satisfaction, and morale because they are better positioned to maintain a healthy work/life balance" [4].

"The work-from-home job force just got a big push from the current global coronavirus pandemic. But even before COVID-19 became a factor, increasing numbers of people have been saying goodbye to their onerous commute to work. Thanks to ever-evolving technologies, it's no longer necessary to be in an office full-time to be a productive member of the team. In fact, many kinds of work can be done just as effectively, if not more so, from a home office. As appealing as remote work is to employees, it wouldn't be such a strong trend if employers didn't also recognize benefits from their side of the desk. Also, in the event of a natural or manmade disaster, a distributed workforce is in a better position to keep operations running, even if some of the group goes offline. The key takeaways:

- For employers, working from home can boost productivity, reduce turnover, and lower organizational costs, while employees enjoy perks like flexibility and the lack of a commute.
- To work effectively from home, employees need to make sure they have the technology they require, a separate workspace, Internet service that meets their need, a workable schedule they can stick to, and ways to connect with others" [5].

"Since the majority of the global workforce is not used to working from home, this sudden change has led to many problems. They are adjusting their seats to meet their organisational needs amidst everything that is happening around the world. Until now, remote working was seen more as a perk or luxury that companies provided to meet the needs of the employees and vice versa. But now, it has taken centre stage in our work culture. Nothing much has changed in terms of work (for those whom work from home is feasible). Employees doing their jobs from their homes have accepted the realities. But this sudden shift in work culture has brought some new challenges with it like: 1. Flow of communication, 2. Distractions at work, 3. Lack of motivation, 4. Technology hiccups, 5. Work-life balance" [6].

"Whether you're an employer already familiar with managing a work-from-home workforce or your company is just diving into the waters of working remotely, the need to consider work from home best practices has never been more apparent. Especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic, employers should be doing everything they can to keep their employees working if there is enough work to do—and that means putting on "creative thinking caps" about appropriate work from home arrangements. Even if companies haven't previously considered this as an option for every role in the organization, they should be considering it across the board now" [7].

SURVEY FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The three main demographic segments: gender, position, and generation were sufficiently represented among the respondents, with a nearly equal representation of female (51%) and male (49%) respondents, managers (45%) and non-managers (55%). The four generations namely; Baby Boomers [19%], Gen X [32%], Millennials [33%] and Gen Z [16%] were also part of the respondents. To the question, whether WFH was part of HR policies in their organisations, majority of the respondents (54%) indicated that WFH policy started *only during COVID-19*, whereas 20% *didn't have a WFH policy*, and 26% *had WFH for some jobs only*.

Support received from organisations during WFH

The findings related to the support that respondents received during WFH [see Figure 1] showed that for 80% respondents, the *IT department played a crucial role*. Less than 50% of the respondents indicated the support their *HR team and colleagues* gave them. HR teams, as perceived by the respondents played a minor or subordinate role during WFH as compared to the IT teams. As WFH involved technological support, IT teams led the WFH initiative, which was at the behest of the HR/senior management team. The *continuous communication and updating* that they received from their organisations, and the *support from their managers* was appreciated by 59% and 50% of the respondents, respectively. These two important areas of support were not as effective as they should have been. Whereas, only 20% of the respondents received *workstation/ equipment support,* and a negligible 2% received *financial support for WFH arrangements* from their organisations. The support related to workstation/equipment support/WFH arrangements is crucial and majority of the respondents didn't receive it from their organisations.
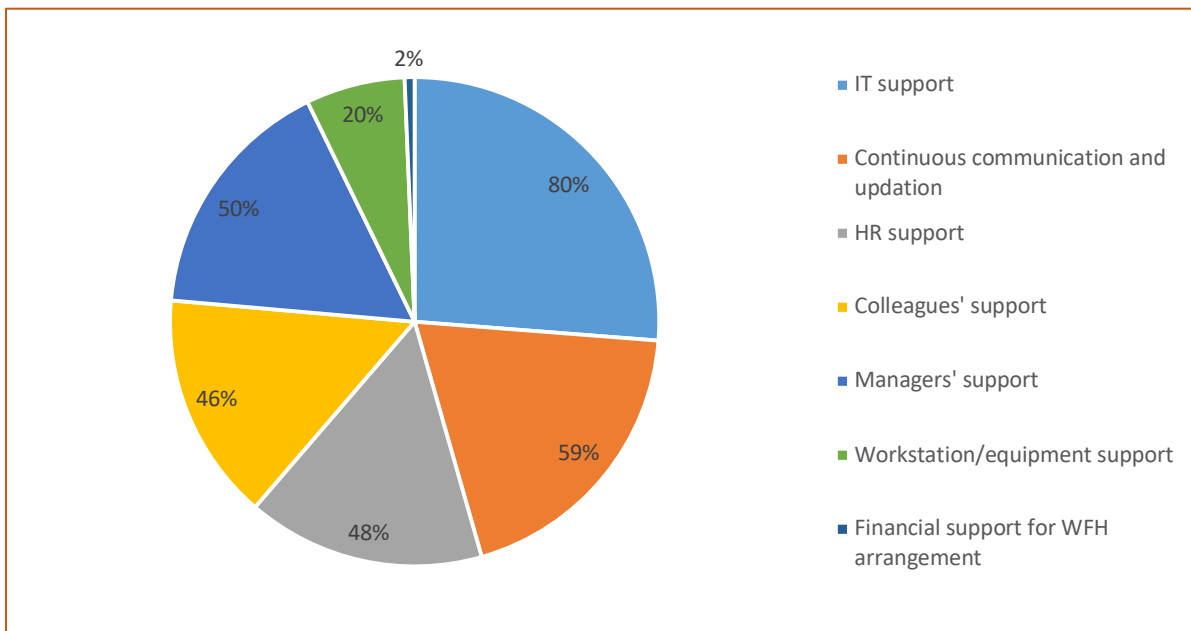

Figure 1: Support received from organisations during WFH

Challenges faced during WFH

The biggest challenge faced by both male (77%) and female (89%) respondents was *receiving work requests from managers and colleagues after scheduled work hours and/or at their convenience. Keeping a regular schedule* was also a challenge for 75% male and 68% female respondents. The other challenge listed by 52% male and 60% female respondents was *keeping family members away*

from workspace-especially during virtual meetings. The fourth challenge for 59% female respondents was *not having access to the tools or information needed for the job,* and for 47% male respondents it was *not having workspace/workstation at home,* whereas this posed the sixth challenge for 54% female respondents. For 43% male respondents *communication with colleagues being hard* was the fifth challenge, and for 56% female respondents it was *too many distractions at home* [see Figure 2]. Both female and male respondents experienced the same four major challenges, indicating that there was no gender difference when it came to the challenges faced during WFH.
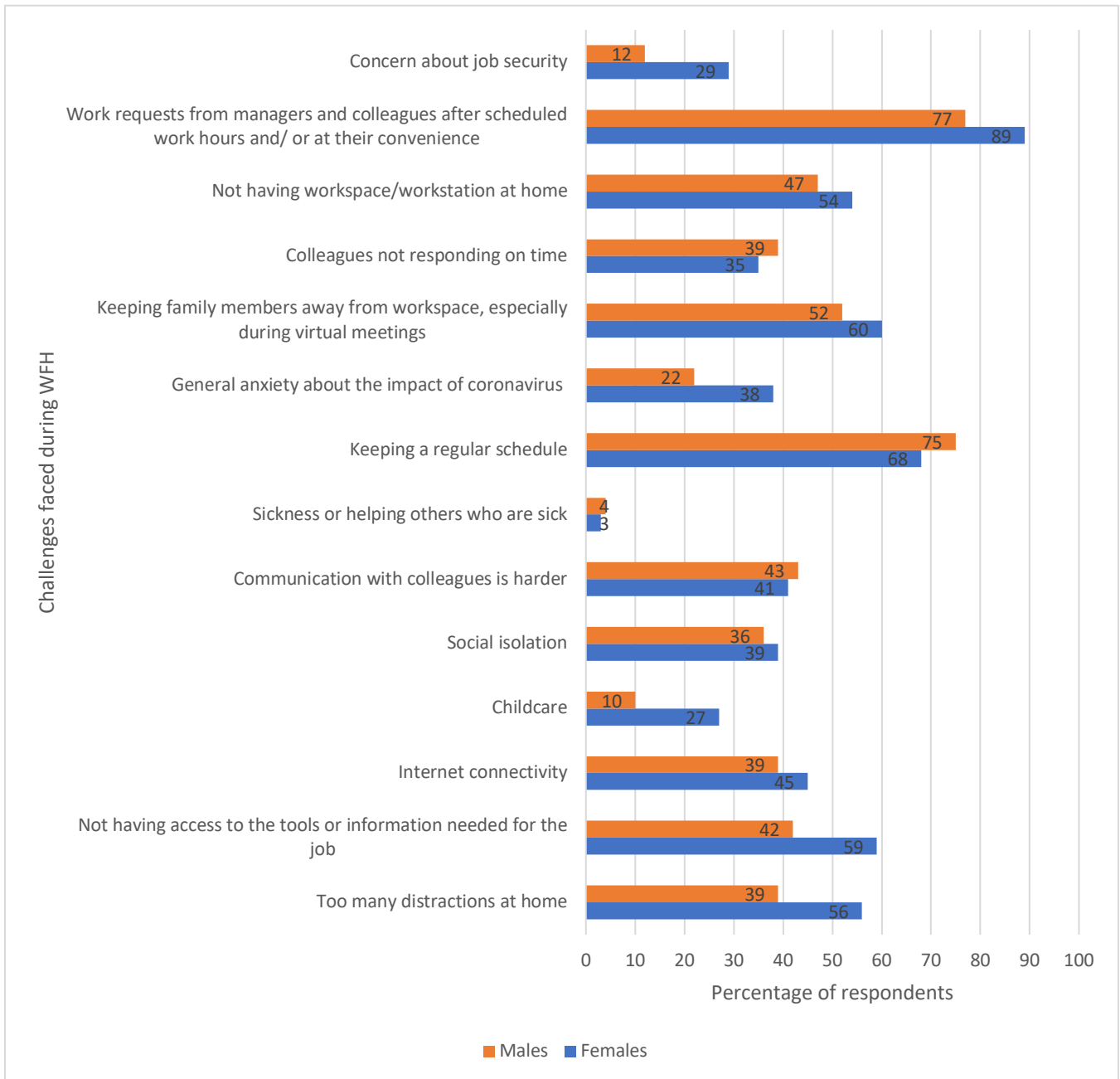

Figure 2: Challenges faced during WFH: Gender-wise analysis

Major challenges faced by managers during WFH were *receiving work requests from managers and colleagues after scheduled work hours and/or at their convenience* (42%), *not having workspace/workstation at home* (40%), *communication with colleagues being hard* (39%), *colleagues not responding on time* (35%), and *too many distractions at home* (32%). For non-managers it was *not having workspace/workstation at home* (43%), receiving *work requests from managers and colleagues after scheduled work hours and/or at their convenience* (37%), *communication with colleagues being hard* (36%) and *internet connectivity* (36%), *colleagues not responding on time* (27%), and *not having access to the tools or information needed for the job* (27%) [See Figure 3]. There was no differentiation in the challenges faced by managers and non-managers during WFH, with both respondent groups highlighting the same four major challenges.
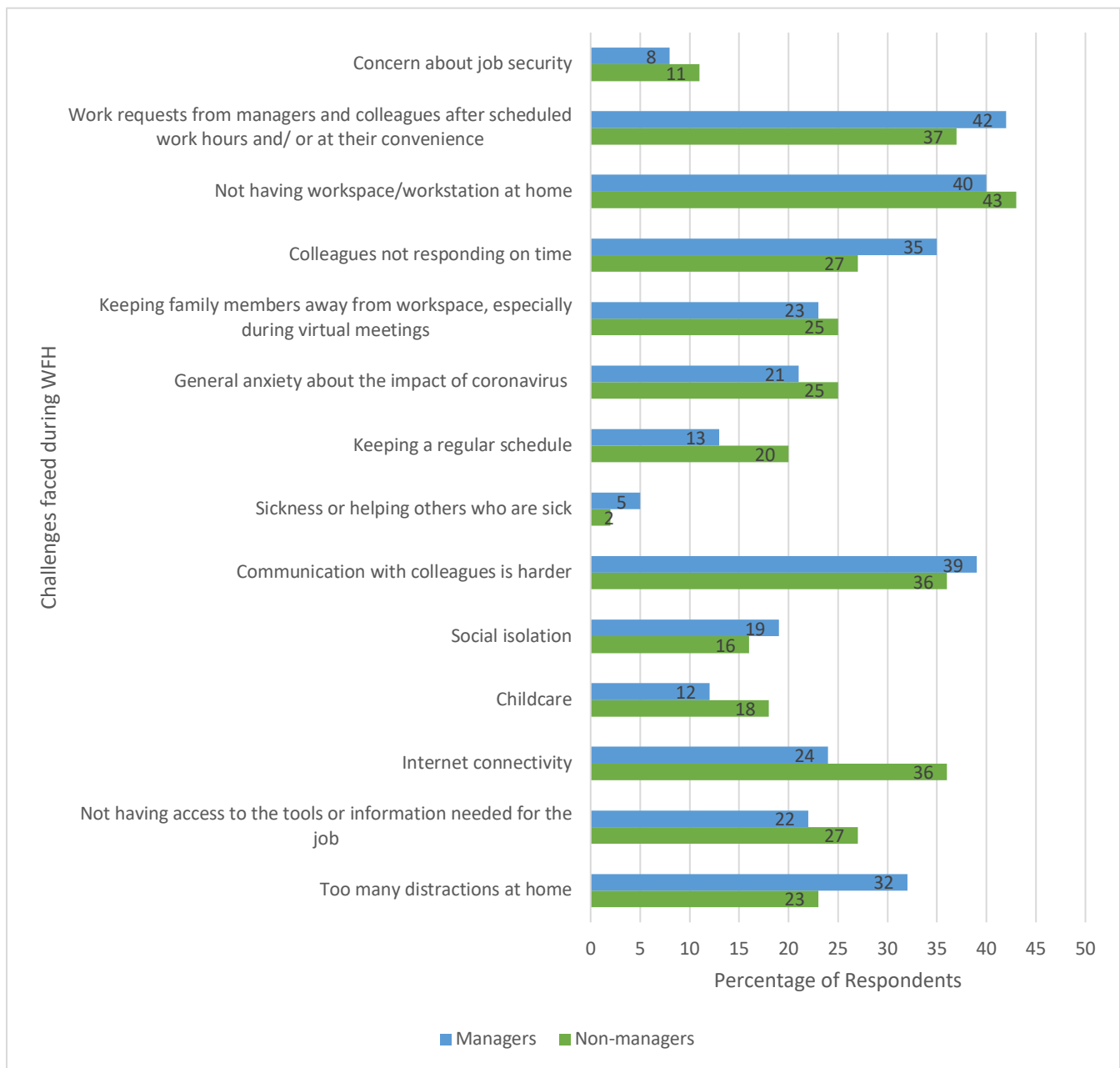

Figure 3: Challenges faced during WFH: Position-wise analysis

As displayed in Table 1, *work requests from managers and colleagues after scheduled work hours and/or at their convenience* stood out as a major challenge that all generational respondents faced, followed by *not having workspace/workstation at home,* which was not such a challenge to Gen Z respondents. Gen Z respondents, being digital natives, may already have their own workspace at home. *Too many distractions at home* did not bother the younger generations - Millennials and Gen Z respondents, as much as it did the older generations - Baby-boomers and Gen X respondents. This could be due to the level of family commitments and the extent to which these generational groups were able to separate family and work life. *Not having access to the tools or information needed for the job* was a major concern to Baby-boomers and Gen Z respondents, as opposed to Gen X respondents and Millennials, who were more concerned with *job security.*

Baby-boomers with only a few more years to retirement and Gen Z who just began their careers seem to have a similar mindset as regards *job security. Communication with colleagues being hard* was a challenge more for Millennials and Gen Z respondents than the older generation respondents, who most probably have more experience in dealing with these challenges. *Colleagues not responding on time* also proved a challenge to Gen Z respondents, maybe due to their inexperience, and *keeping a regular schedule* was a challenge for Gen X respondents, probably because of the work complexity, as this generation respondents would be in positions responsible for major projects and target achievements. The g*eneral anxiety about the impact of coronavirus* which was experienced more by Baby-boomers than by other generational respondents, could be attributed to the age factor of Baby-boomers. Being younger in age, Millennials and Gen Z respondents' listed *social isolation* among the five major challenges.

Table 1: Challenges faced during WFH: Generation-wise analysis

Challenges faced during WFH	Baby-boomers	Gen X	Millennials	Gen Z
Too many distractions at home	72	84	56	46
Not having access to the tools or information needed for the job	67	75	66	67
Internet connectivity	52	55	49	33
Childcare	12	23	47	9
Social isolation	35	68	72	65
Communication with colleagues is harder	61	53	69	78
Sickness or helping others who are sick	2	2	3	1
Keeping a regular schedule	23	81	49	38
General anxiety about the impact of coronavirus	71	58	39	37
Keeping family members away from workspace, especially during virtual meetings	32	72	32	28
Colleagues not responding on time	43	67	61	67
Not having workspace/workstation at home	78	88	85	54
Work requests from managers and colleagues after scheduled work hours and/ or at their convenience	89	92	86	97
Concern about job security	31	78	84	34

Benefits of WFH

Saving commute time was ranked the number one benefit by both female (92%) and male (87%) respondents, followed by *flexible working* which was indicated by 69% female and 71% male respondents, and *work life balance* by 53% female and 57% male respondents. *Personal and family care* was the fourth benefit for female respondents (41%) and the fifth for male respondents (31%), whereas *less stress* was the fourth benefit for male respondents (34%) and *more focus* was the fifth for female respondents (38%). There is no gender difference, as regards WFH benefits, with majority of both male and female respondents listing the same four main benefits of WFH.

Saving commute time was also listed as the number one benefit by managers (85%), followed by *flexible worki*ng (74%). For non-managers, it was the reverse, with *flexible working* (87%) being the number one benefit and *saving commute time* (80%) the second. The third benefit for both managers (60%) and non-managers (51%) was *work life balance*. *Personal and family care* and *more focus* by non-managers (47%) and *personal and family care* (39%) and *more focus* (23%) by managers, were listed as the fourth and fifth benefits. The benefits of WFH were similar, irrespective of the position occupied by the respondents, as both managers and non-managers reported similar benefits of WFH.

Saving commute time was a major benefit for all generation respondents, considering the extensive commute time experienced in the Kingdom of Bahrain. *Flexible working* and *work life balance* were perceived as benefits by a lesser percentage of Baby-boomers as compared to the other three generations. This could be attributed to the fact that Baby-boomers having more than three decades of experience in the corporate world were more used to the fixed corporate timings, and have those many decades of practice with balancing work and life patterns. Baby-boomers did not consider WFH as *less stressful* or having *more focus*, most probably, for the same reasons mentioned. For Gen Z respondents WFH was *less stressful*, as they may be more accustomed to working with technology, at their pace and space. Gen X respondents and Millennials appreciated the time for *personal and family care* during WFH. These two groups maybe having dependents at home who need their attention or time, which they could not give as much due to corporate work schedules [see Table 2].

Table 2: Benefits of WFH: Generation-wise analysis

Benefits of WFH	Baby-boomers	Gen X	Millennials	Gen Z
Saving commute time	89	92	93	95
More focus	34	76	89	87
Flexible working	67	89	88	83
Work life balance	53	83	76	84
Personal and family care	65	81	87	79
Less stress	23	34	65	85

Future preference of WFH

About 35% of male respondents prefer to WFH -*half the time*, 23% - *sometimes*, and 21% - *most of the time*. The preference for WFH for 36% female respondents is also *half the time*, for 23% - *most of the time*, and for 22% - *sometimes*. Majority of the non-managers (50%) and managers (33%) prefer to WFH- *half the time*, whereas 28% of the non-managers prefer to WFH -*most of the time*. Only 22% of the managers opted for WFH *half the time*, and 24% of them and 15% non-managers

prefer to WFH *sometimes.* Figure 4 illustrates the generation wise preference for WFH. Respondents of Gen X (57%), Millennials (51%) and Gen Z (64%) also prefer to WFH - *half the time*, followed by Gen X (35%), Millennials (24%), and Gen Z (22%) who prefer to WFH - *most of time.* About 43% and 39% of Baby-boomers preferred to WFH- *sometimes,* and *half the time,* respectively. Majority of respondents belonging to different demographic segments, prefer to WFH-*half the time,* with the exception of Baby-boomers who prefer to WFH-*sometimes,* as they may be more attuned to going to work, and more comfortable with an office environment.
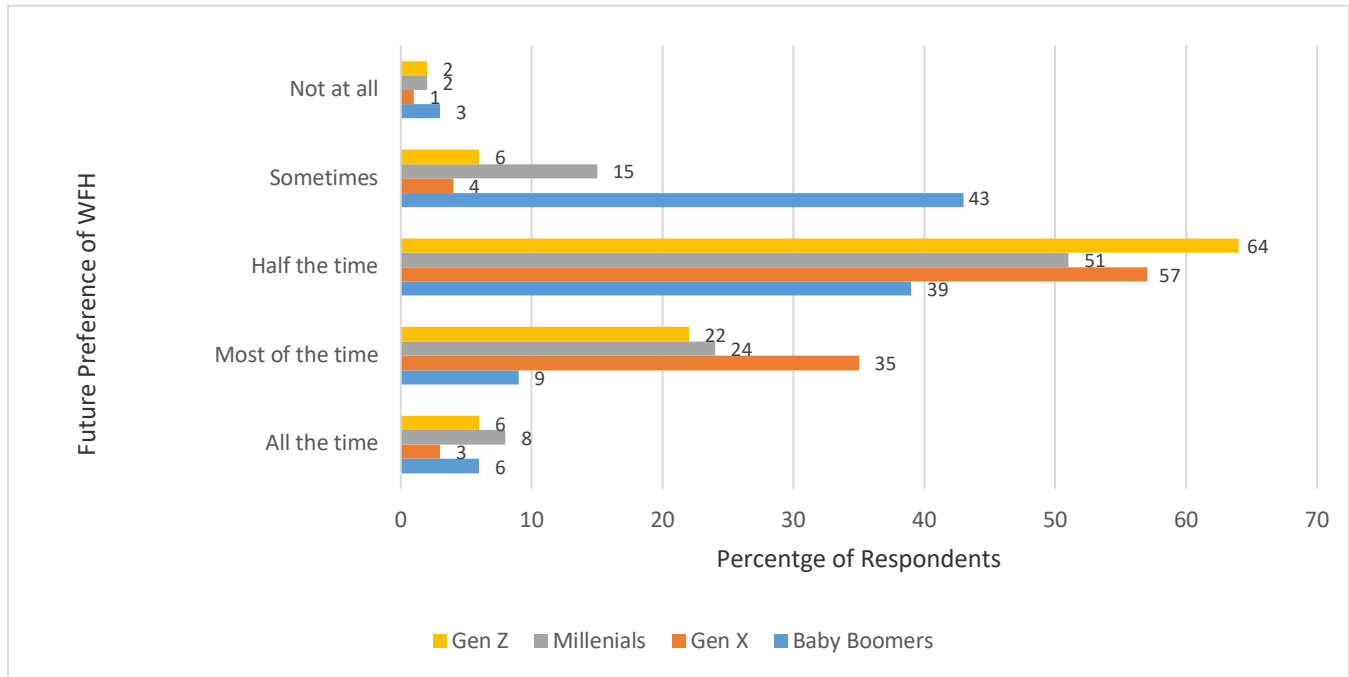

Figure 4: Future Preference for WFH: Generation-wise analysis

Statistical interpretation

Correlation coefficient given in Table 3 shows a very strong positive correlation in the challenges faced during WFH between male and female respondents; and a strong positive correlation between managers and non-managers, indicating the very strong and strong similarities in the challenges faced by these segments, respectively. The strong positive correlation between Gen Z respondents and Millennials, also identifies the strong similarities in the challenges faced by these two younger generations. The moderate positive correlation denotes a moderate level of similarities in the challenges faced between Baby-boomers and Gen X respondents, Baby-boomers and Gen Z respondents, Gen X and Gen Z respondents, Gen X respondents and Millennials. This moderate trend could be due to each generation experiencing some challenges similar to, and some challenges different from, the next older or younger generation. The weak positive correlation between Baby-boomers and Millennials, indicates that there is not much similarity in the challenges faced by them. This, most probably, could be due to the generation gap between these two groups.

The very strong positive correlation between male and female respondents as well as managers and non-managers, and the strong positive correlation between Baby-boomers and Gen X respondents, and Gen X respondents and Millennials, evidences the similarities in the benefits as perceived by these segment respondents. This certain level of similarity among these groups could be because of

their experiences being closer to the next older and younger generation in the workplace. The **moderate positive** correlation between Baby-boomers and Millennials, is indicative of only a moderate level of similarity as regards the benefits perceived by them. The **negligible positive** correlation between Gen X and Gen Z respondents, and Millennials and Gen Z respondents, establishes minor similarities in the benefits as perceived by these segments. The **negligible negative** correlation between Baby-boomers and Gen Z highlights the differences in the benefits as perceived by these generations [see Table 3].

Table 3: Correlation coefficient

Respondents	Challenges faced during WFH	Benefits of WFH
Male/Female	0.92	0.93
Managers/Non-managers	0.87	0.95
Baby-boomers/Gen X	0.57	0.82
Baby-boomers/Millennials	0.45	0.63
Baby-boomers/Gen Z	0.64	-0.076
Gen X/Millennials	0.72	0.84
Gen X/Gen Z	0.69	0.11
Millennials/Gen Z	0.82	0.30

CONCLUSIONS

The survey findings and analyses indicate that the challenges faced and benefits reaped during WFH are nearly similar among different categories of respondents. Major challenges being receiving work requests from managers and colleagues after scheduled work hours and/or at their convenience, keeping a regular schedule, keeping family members away from workspace- especially during virtual meetings, not having access to the tools or information needed for the job, not having workspace/workstation at home, and communication with colleagues being hard. The noticeable shift was in the younger generation (Gen Z and Millennials) for whom communication with colleagues and social isolation posed a challenge. For the older generations (Gen X and Baby-boomers) it was having too many distractions at home.

Baby-boomers and Gen Z respondents were not as much concerned about job security as were the other generational respondents. Gen Z respondents faced the challenge of colleagues not responding on time, Gen X respondents- keeping a regular schedule, and Baby boomers - general anxiety about the impact of coronavirus. Major benefits listed by majority of all categories of respondents were saving commute time, flexible working, work life balance, personal and family care, and more focus. Having less stress figured among the top five benefits of only male, and Gen Z respondents.

Organisations should strive to support employees in overcoming the major challenges faced during WFH as identified by the respondents. This should be given top priority by reinforcing work ethics, establishing communication patterns/communication access points, building virtual teams, fixing regular virtual work timings, facilitating work life balance, providing guidance in setting up a 'work from home office', giving financial or equipment support for the home-work station, and most importantly, discussing expectations on both sides, and managing them.   Based on the specific challenges faced by the older and younger generations, differentiated orientation programmes

should be conducted, and initiatives should be targeted at specific demographic segments. Analysing the differences in challenges faced, however minor, would give a better insight into the successful implementation of WFH by organisations. As majority of the respondents were inclined towards continuing WFH in the future for half the time, organisations should review and revamp jobs to differentiate the tasks that can be done from home, and those that require office interaction. The balance between 'work from office' and 'work from home office' should be clearly demarcated. This would be the cornerstone for business continuity, and pave the way for the smooth functioning of organisations in face of future crises. It can be concluded, that the need of the day is to have a focused approach to virtual working and its related dimensions. The analysis of the findings clearly emphasises the need for further modifications in HR policies, an integrated goal approach, a positive work culture, and the necessity for organisations to consider WFH as an integral part of future HR planning.

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