

ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECT OF POST-COVID OFFICE HYBRID WORK ARRANGEMENT ON EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND SAFETY: A CASE STUDY OF UNI4 ONLINE WESTVILLE DURBAN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic economy, health, and care systems were disrupted and this affected and shaped the future of work. The pandemic augmented many trends in employee work arrangement that had a major impact on businesses and employee health and safety and one of these trends is hybrid work arrangement. Globally, employers, government officials, health organisations, unions, and professional associations struggled to stay compliant. Occupational exposure and working conditions can have an undesirable or positive effect on the safety, health, and well-being of workers. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the effect of post-COVID office hybrid work arrangement on employee health and safety: a case study of Uni4 Online Westville Durban South Africa. Taking into consideration the aim of the study the following objectives guide the study i) to understand what hybrid work arrangement is. ii) to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected employee work arrangement, iii) determine the perceived challenges and opportunities in the application of hybrid work arrangement iv) make recommendations on the effective application of hybrid work arrangement at Uni4 Online Westville Durban South Africa. For this study, a secondary approach to data collection was undertaken. In this regard a total of 15 relevant articles were searched from different databases and search engines, The keywords were explored in three databases namely, Google Scholar, Ebsco-host, and Emerald. The findings from the literature showed that post-COVID hybrid work arrangements can affect workers psychologically because physical distancing through staying at home contributes to isolation and a lack of distinction between work life and home life. Furthermore, it was deduced that hybrid work arrangement creates challenges for workers because it creates fewer opportunities for career development and promotions because of weakened ties. In addition, workers in a hybrid work arrangement who were more dependent on others and generally received more feedback had fewer positive appraisals than those with more independent roles. The study recommends that both employees and managers need to develop new skills and capabilities to adjust to the new ways of working and utilising the prospects of Post COVID hybrid work. Also, firms should be concerned about sustainability implications when developing guidelines for Post COVID hybrid work, both in terms of social and ecological aspects.

Keywords: Post COVID 19 Office Hybrid Work Arrangement, and Employee Health, and Safety.

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Introduction

The new world of work that has developed primarily due to globalisation, the Internet, and the development of 4IR technologies has brought about changing realities for organisations and employees. Major trends emerging in the new world of work include increased virtualisation and digitalisation, more part-time jobs, people working from home or elsewhere, and employees more connected to work than ever before of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic collapse have led to an increase in remote and hybrid working. With the advent of COVID-19 global remote working became the new universal 'norm'. Before Covid-19 remote working was not a common practice, especially in the African context. Reports on South Africa indicate that 21% of professionals worked from home before the pandemic. The number increased to 79% during the pandemic (McCarthy, O'Connor, Síochain, and Frost, 2021). Therefore, this study analyses the effect of post-COVID office hybrid work arrangement on employee health and safety: a case study of Uni4 Online Westville Durban South Africa.

Hybrid Work Arrangement

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led governments around the world to strengthen hybrid work arrangements for workers (Birkett, Forbes, and Jackson, 2021). Furthermore, Tomeo, Mutale, Scarpino, and Chergarova (2022) posit that when the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) struck, everything changed. Companies frequently alter how they conduct business. Firms struggle to come up with fresh strategies for expansion and many workers now do their work from home. For most employees, working remotely was a novel idea. To define hybridity, especially in a workspace, the concept combines the physical work arrangement and hybrid work arrangement (Cook,2020). Thus, In essence, some employees work in person on the site of the business or organisation while some work by virtue of the internet. This arrangement could also involve the same party of people, where they get to show up physically on site of the company and take the rest of the week's days to work remotely. The hybrid working system ensures the organisation employing it enjoys the special advantages that come with the remote working system (Trede Markauskaite, McEwen, and Macfarlane, 2019). Premised on the ongoing assertion some companies believe their organisations will be at a disadvantage if their own employees continue to work remotely while competitors bring employees back to the workplace (Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy,2021). Another belief among companies is that they are concerned about the involvement and loyalty of remote workers. If these workers continue to work remotely, they will decline (Meister,2020). However, the main aim of this study is to analyse the effect of post-covid office hybrid work arrangements on employee health and safety.

Effect of Hybrid Work Arrangement on Employee Health and Safety

The hybrid work arrangement can increase employee flexibility, productivity, collaboration, business relationships, and performance (Choudhury, Foroughi, and Larson,2020). This model can help improve company culture by helping employees balance work and life (Meister,2020). In addition, hybrid working models allow employees to focus on their personal lives and family while still earning income. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Google was one of the first companies to announce in December 2020 that when employees return to work, they will use a hybrid work model where they work at least three days a week onsite and remotely. (Pataki-Bitto and Kapusy, 2021). In line with the

preceding assertion, some of the widely recognised effects of a hybrid work environment are but not limited to the following:

Communication

Founded on the ongoing deliberation on the effect of hybrid work arrangement it acknowledged that hybrid arrangement can influence communication. It enables the processing of information, meaning, and understanding between two parties. It also provides an important structure for people to work together, make decisions and interact to achieve the goals of the organisation (Berry,2011). Communication in mixed groups is generally based on real-time and ICT allowing asynchronous information and information sharing. Second, it encourages interaction without real-time communication, which facilitates synchronised transmission of multiple messages from multiple partners. This gives the receiver more flexibility in processing and responding to messages (Lilian, 2014).

Cohesion Team

Rendering to Wang, (2018) a group is two or more people who interact, interact, and change for a common purpose. Therefore, team cohesion involves completing certain tasks that members must complete. Bhasin (2017) defines team cohesion as a set of behaviors that promote good relationships among team members. Premised on the ongoing assertion a cohesive team has a shared understanding of values and goals, and therefore a shared commitment to the organization's mission (Paul, Drake, & Liang, 2016). To achieve this goal, they must establish a good rapport and participate in regular discussions that are published to promote a sense of cooperation and therefore team cohesion (Powell, Piccoli, and Ives, 2004). Founded on the prior assertion hybrid work arrangement can affect team cohesion, conferring to Blackburn et al. (2003), it is challenging to promote group cohesion while members were working in a separate location because they frequently experienced communication and interaction issues. Employees' productivity, motivation, and job happiness may be adversely impacted by such a situation.

Mental Health

Notwithstanding the above mental health was discovered to be a major catalyst affecting workers, especially workers who work from home often prove to have negative emotions and resentments due to isolation, stress, inability to share concerns and problems, and to find solutions to problems with colleagues at work (Mann & Holdsworth 2003). This affects productivity, work-life balance, and health (Grant, Wallace, and Spurgeon,2013).

Physical Health

In line with the previous assertion, physical health was also revealed to be highly affected by hybrid work arrangements it was affirmed that because of the hybrid work model, there is a lack of ergonomic office furniture which may interfere with engaging in appropriate physical activity and may hasten the onset of musculoskeletal (MSC) discomfort (Pillastrini et al. 2010; Ren,2020).

Work-Life Balance

It is equally recognised that a well-planned and managed hybrid work arrangement allows for the maintenance of work-life balance, a process that is key to a successful workforce. Spending more time working remotely requires less time commuting to the office and allows more time to spend on personal life (Bailey & Kurland, 1999). Therefore, employees can devote time to things they value in their lives, such as sports or childcare (Rockmann & Pratt, 2015).

Employee Wellbeing

Corresponding to Parry, Young, Bevan, Veliziotis, Baruch, Beigi, Bajorek, Richards, and Tochia, (2022) hybrid work arrangements can also affect employee well-being. These include fatigue, less/more social interaction, longer working hours, and increased work effort, which contribute to health problems for some workers. Frequent screen uses and exposure to hybrid work arrangements are also associated with health outcomes such as eye pain, visual impairment, headaches, fatigue, musculoskeletal pain (such as pain and backache), and psychological effects (such as stress and conflict).

Materials and Methods

This study adopted an integrative review of the literature to evaluate, explore and identify literature on post covid hybrid work arrangement. Christmals and Gross (2017) state that integrative review assesses the quality of scientific research, identify gaps, identify general trends, identify key themes, and link areas of expertise. It helps to formulate research questions, define the theoretical and conceptual aspects of the study, develop needs for future research, and explore applied research. In addition, Lubbe, Ham-Baloyi, and Smit, (2020) assert that integrative review allows researchers to go beyond the analysis and synthesis of primary studies and provide new insights and information on the topic. Although the aims to follow a similar approach to review, it does allow the inclusion of primary research as well as other data not included in the qualitative analysis. Taking into consideration the preceding assertion a total of 15 relevant articles were searched from different databases and search engines, Google Scholar, Ebsco-host, and Emerald. The keywords were explored in various databases namely: post covid hybrid work arrangement, effects, and challenges of post covid hybrid work arrangement.

Results and Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in governments around the world declaring statutory regulations directing workers to “work from home” where and when possible. Thus, hybrid work arrangements heightened significantly when pandemic restrictions were in place. In the application of hybrid work arrangements, it was revealed from the literature that hybrid work arrangements are concerned with an approach to work wherein employees devote some of their workdays to the physical office and the rest of their workdays working remotely (Teevan,2021). The CIPD (2021) further affirmed that a hybrid work arrangement is a flexible type of work where employees spend some of their time working remotely (but not necessarily from home) and some of their time in the office. Further insight into hybrid work arrangement was suggested by Lenka (2021) suggesting that as a work arrangement, the concept is concerned with a means of combining remote work and physical presence in the office.

In line with the study, it has been deduced that hybrid work arrangements can have a negative and positive effect on employees' health and safety. These outcomes can be linked to research by the CIPD (2021) during the pandemic which found that 44% of employers experienced a decline in their mental and physical health, worsened by a lack of social health or family life during the pandemic. This is part of the isolation and less contact with co-workers. However, 39 percent of companies claim that greater flexibility in working hours improves employee health. Furthermore, findings on the negative impact of hybrid work arrangement can be viewed through some of the established assertions by academics on the subject of hybrid work arrangement stating that the concept can be linked to work-related factors which are concerned with difficulty with staff interaction and co-operation (26%); lack of staff engagement (19%); line manager capability to manage homeworkers (19%); and line manager capability to monitor staff performance (18%).

In line with the preceding deliberation on the hybrid work arrangement it is important to note that hybrid arrangement includes both opportunities and challenges which founded on this study reinforces the positive and negative effects of hybrid work arrangements Therefore opportunities associated with the hybrid work arrangement can be viewed through the lens of cost saving hybrid work arrangement reduces cost for both the employer and employee (Beno,2021; Lenka,2021). Moreover, a hybrid work arrangement offers organisational management the opportunity to save expensive office upkeep costs. (Konovalova, Petrenko, and Aghgashyan,2022). Premised on the ongoing deliberation a positive endorsement of hybrid work arrangement has been suggested in a study by Fayzieva et al. (2020) asserting that remote working is positively associated with employee productivity and efficiency during the Covid-19 pandemic. Gajendran and Harrison (2007) also revealed that hybrid work arrangement is positively associated with supervisor ratings or performance evaluations. Further research by Golden, Veiga, and Dino (2008) showed that employees who work longer in remote locations report higher levels of communication skills with their supervisors. However, premised on opportunities offered by hybrid work arrangements it is important to note that the utilisation of hybrid work can be cumbersome because it requires an update of information and technology, and internet connectivity is sometimes an issue. (Beno,2021). Nie, Chen, and Yu, (2023) point out that the sudden change in the shift of employees from physically working in the office to a hybrid work arrangement reveals a negative reality that most companies do not fully meet their work trust. It is clear from many public discussions that there are trust issues with hybrid work arrangements there are many people who are good at management and leadership and are believed to be allowed to work where there is no direct contact. management and supervision, employees will not be able to complete their work, according to the required schedule or fulfill their responsibilities.

Conclusion Recommendations

The study provides insight into hybrid work arrangements, and their effect on the employee, findings revealed that hybrid work arrangements can have both positive and negative effects on employees' well-being and health. Therefore, notwithstanding the current reality that the concept of hybrid work arrangement is now widely used by organisations it is important to take into consideration the fact that there are benefits offered by the application of hybrid work arrangement balanced thus the need for academics, managers, and supervisors to plan and implement the concept effectively so that positive benefits will outweigh the negatives is now paramount. Therefore, it is recommended that in the application of hybrid work arrangements human resource management practitioners should take into consideration the business, communication, and technological effect of the concept.

Office Equipment (computers)

Upon request, the organisation's management should provide its employees with specialised work equipment approved by their leaders and equipment that will enable them to perform their current duties while working remotely. These requests may include computers, computer software, and other necessary equipment (such as office chairs). The use of tools, equipment, software, and/or equipment provided by the organisation should be limited to authorised personnel but for company business purposes. Furthermore, In the implementation and application of hybrid work arrangements, organisation managers and human resource managers should take into consideration applicable cell phones/smartphones/tablets depending on the business need and should provide support for mobile devices. Employees should discuss technology needs especially with updated with their managers before the application of hybrid work arrangements. When choosing a specific computer, it is important to keep in mind and ensured that all hardware purchased is compatible and can operate effectively in a firm's working environment. However, bestowing to Thorpe & Gordon, (2012) the world is constantly evolving, so existing features are updated while new features are constantly being introduced. It is important to follow the latest changes in the world of technology when creating or instituting hybrid work arrangements.

Communication

In the application of a hybrid work arrangement, it is recommended that when collaborating by phone, employees should be able to call and email during important business hours. In addition, employees should provide their supervisor with the required mobile phone number. Furthermore, it is advised that employees and their supervisors should be in contact regularly during normal business hours to ensure that all expectations are met. Taking into consideration the ongoing deliberation team cohesion is seen as one of the important approaches to a work arrangement that allows for communication and builds trust from stakeholders. In the case of a hybrid work arrangement. In June 2020, it became clear that trust is a major issue in the application of hybrid arrangements during the pandemic. So it is recommended that managers should initiate ways and means to interact with employers and employees that are possible through the application of technology is found to foster collaboration between team members and bring team spirit. (Arunprasad, Dey, Jebli, Manimuthu, and El Hathat,2022).

Performance Management

Managing performance management requires trust between employees and line managers. This can be achieved with open communication, focus on results, and respect for change. These principles should be incorporated into workforce management to ensure effective and productive working relationships. In addition, it is recommended that managers should reassure a culture of trust within the organisation and ensure that the productivity system of measurement is fair and reasonable. (LRA,20212).

Ergonomics (Health and Safety)

It is recommended that all employees, especially those involved in the hybrid work arrangement, should make use of the ergonomic information available on an organisation's environmental health and safety website when setting up and managing their workplaces. In addition, it is recommended

that human resource management managers should be trained on health and mental health, including how to spot signs of health or overwork and how to give a good speech. (CIPD,2021).

Line Manager Training and Development

Employers should provide training and development to line managers to ensure effective management. Hybrid work arrangements will bring new challenges to line managers, and they need to develop knowledge and skills to solve them. Training will include remote communication, project management, team and relationship management, and cross-functional team collaboration to ensure they are equipped to manage the remote worker. (LRA,2021).

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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