

Coronavirus Disease-19 Pandemic and Telework: Banking Upon the Collaboration Between Workers and Employers

Saurabh RamBihariLal Shrivastava, Prateek Saurabh Shrivastava¹

Medical Education Unit Coordinator and Member of the Institute Research Council, Department of Community Medicine, Shri Sathya Sai Medical College and Research Institute, ¹Department of Community Medicine, Shri Sathya Sai Medical College and Research Institute, Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth – Deemed to be University, Ammapettai, Nellikuppam, Chengalpet District, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

The emergence of coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has brought about a significant change in the dynamics of health and the work profile. Telework refers to the practice of working remotely with the help of different information and communication technology applications and thereby continuing the work. Although telework definitely minimized the probability to acquire the COVID-19 infection, gradually evidence emerged suggesting problems resulting because of defective design of the workplace and long duration of working hours. It is an undeniable fact that the ongoing pandemic frankly resulted in an overnight change in the work pattern of all employees. To conclude, considering the trends of the COVID-19 pandemic, telework is expected to be there, even in the postpandemic period. This calls for the need to enhance collaboration between workers and employees to enable a reduction in the incidence of physical and mental illnesses and promotion of safe and healthy behavior.

Keywords: Coronavirus disease-2019 pandemic, telework, world health organization

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has brought about a significant change in the dynamics of health and the work profile. The available global estimates revealed that as of February 13, 2022, a cumulative total of 408 million cases and more than 5.8 million deaths have been associated with disease-related complications.^[1] Upon identification of the fact that the disease transmits due to close contacts and via respiratory droplets, the lockdown was imposed in different parts of the world of varied duration.^[2] The basic purpose of such a step was to ensure social distancing which can therefore interrupt the chain of transmission.^[2] At the outset, it was difficult, but then soon, the majority of the sectors (such as health, medical education, school, information technology, etc.) shifted to the online mode as their work medium. The idea was to not allow COVID-19 pandemic causes immense economic disruption or interruption of routine services. In other words, the novel virus pandemic resulted in a significant rise in the incidence of telework across the globe.^[2,3]

TELEWORK AND ITS RISING TRENDS

In general, telework refers to the practice of working remotely with the help of different information and communication technology applications and thereby continuing the work, which eventually results in a remarkable impact on the health, safety, and quality of life of the employees.^[3,4] The findings of a published report indicated a net rise of 37% in the proportion of workers engaged in some kind of telework during the ongoing pandemic in the European region alone.^[4] On a similar note, a considerable rise in telework has also been reported in the American region. It is indeed true that we have adopted telework to continue working and minimize loss of productivity, but the need of the hour is that the

Address for correspondence: Dr. Saurabh RamBihariLal Shrivastava, MD, FAIMER, PGDHHM, DHRM, FCS, ACME. Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Shri Sathya Sai Medical College and Research Institute, Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth (SBV) – Deemed to be University, Thirupurur - Guduvancherry Main Road, Ammapettai, Nellikuppam, Chengalpet District - 603108, Tamil Nadu, India.
E-mail: drshrishri2008@gmail.com

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employers and policymakers should understand the impact of these practices and take appropriate measures to maintain an equilibrium between the needs of the employees and the organization.^[2-4]

TELEWORK AND ITS IMPACT ON HEALTH

Even before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, definite evidence is available suggesting the impact of prolonged computer work in the form of musculoskeletal, visual, and mental ailments.^[5,6] Although telework definitely minimized the probability to acquire the COVID-19 infection, gradually evidence emerged suggesting problems resulting because of defective design of the workplace and long duration of working hours.^[5] It is important to understand that prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, telework was adopted just with an intention to maintain a balance between personal and professional life, but that changed significantly after the pandemic.^[6-8] More often than not, employees are coerced to do the work, and it accounted for a potential mismatch with the inclination of employees. However, due to the extra time spent at home, people can definitely adopt healthy behaviors, including regular involvement in physical activity.^[5-7]

The longer duration of work and the absence of an ergonomically-designed workplace has resulted in a rise in the incidence of musculoskeletal complaints involving different parts of the body (like neck, wrist, back, etc.), visual discomfort, impairment, and headache.^[6,7] In addition, despite being at home, people have fallen sick and thus have been unable to work (sickness absenteeism loss in productivity as employees are unable to work in an optimal manner in their workplace).^[5,6] On the mental health front, people involved in telework are subjected to excessive amounts of work-related stress, feeling of loneliness, irritability, worry, guilt, burnout, and increase in smoking or alcohol intake.^[7-9] However, as an employee gets to spend more time with family members, the good thing is that it resulted in a reduction in the incidence of family conflicts, more opportunity for being flexible in their work timings, and reduced exposure to traffic or air pollution.^[3,7]

PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF HEALTH AND SAFETY

It is an undeniable fact that the ongoing pandemic frankly resulted in an overnight change in the work pattern of all employees. All of them started teleworking, but whether they were ready for this? The need of the hour is that all stakeholders (such as the government, employers, workers, and health-care services) should take appropriate steps to promote and safeguard the health and well-being of people while teleworking.^[2,3] It is also very much essential that employers and employees should work in collaboration with each other and ensure safe teleworking. This has to begin with bringing out modifications in the physical environment and ergonomics, as domiciliary settings lack most of the provisions.^[3,4]

The modifications can be in terms of ensuring adequate heating and cooling system, lighting, ventilation, electrical safety, and arrangement for an optimal telework station (such as an ergonomic chair, location, and position of the screen of the laptop/tablet, keyboard-mouse, and their placement, free from noise, etc.).^[3-5] It is a good practice to include breaks within the work timings to promote physical activity and to train workers about maintaining a balance. Moreover, while organizing telework, both employee and employer should formulate a plan for work, set priorities, specify work timings, and state the expected outcomes. It is very much necessary that workers should be encouraged to express freely that they are overstressed so that specific measures can be taken to prevent burnout.^[3-6]

Further, there is enough scope that the delivery of timely and constructive feedback significantly motivates people to work better. The planning and implementation of telework in a systematic manner are expected to be extremely useful in sustaining the physical, mental, and social aspects of health and well-being.^[5,6,8] As already stated, the success of the entire process will be determined by teamwork; there is a definite need for the employees to collaborate with their administrators and not let telework become a reason for added stress, as the basic purpose is to enable the worker to be at home and enjoy the work.^[3-6]

CONCLUSION

Considering the trends of the COVID-19 pandemic, telework is expected to be there, even in the postpandemic period. This calls for the need to enhance collaboration between workers and employees to enable a reduction in the incidence of physical and mental illnesses and promotion of safe and healthy behavior.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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