Impact of Working from Home on Burnout and Stress in Indian Millennials after the COVID-19 Breakout

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Abstract

The onset of COVID-19 in 2019 brought with it a slew of issues at the personal, economic, social, and mental levels. COVID 19 has proven to result in increased stress, loneliness, anxiety, and depression particularly among people already dealing with health issues. While the impact of the virus has been studied extensively, the impact of the one variable of working from home especially in a country like India with a predominantly rigid culture has been missing. Hence, the research focused on understanding the relationship between working from home and stress as well as burnout among full-time employees, particularly in the millennial age band. The research found that there is a strong positive correlation between stress and burnout where an increase in one leads to an increase in the other as well. The research also found that gender differences exist, but this is particularly in stress levels with women reporting that they feel more stressed out than their male counterparts. The research also observed that the working from home experience has been a mixed bag of ups and downs for mist however, 80% of people are still keen on continuing to work from home for at least a part of the workweek even post coronavirus.

Keywords: Work from home • Employee burnout • Employee stress • Millennials • COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic context

The novel, COVID-19 virus was identified first in China's Wuhan province in December 2019. It is a respiratory tract infection causing symptoms, such as fever, chills, dry cough, fatigue, and shortness of breath [1]. The virus is similar to the SARS coronavirus and MERS coronavirus however the impact of COVID-19 is has proved to be more crippling as evidenced by the exponential increase in infectious cases [2]. The transmission of the virus is the most critical concern since asymptomatic carriers of the virus can transmit it to other people via air droplets or contact. Much like the rest of the world, India too has been heavily impacted by the pandemic. The first case of COVID-19 was identified in Kerala on 30th January 2020. In March the number of registered COVID-19 cases in India had increased substantially with greater community transmission being considered the cause as opposed to previous cases that were primarily of people who had traveled from abroad [1]. 50 days after the virus was first reported in India, on 22nd March, a 14-hour voluntary lockdown named 'Janata Curfew' was observed in India. India reported a total of 360 cases and tested a total of 16,021 individuals until the Janata Curfew. On 24th March 2020, the Government of India announced a nationwide lockdown to stop and contain the spread of COVID-19, closing schools and non-essential businesses, and suspending air and rail travel. As of early March, the total COVID cases globally have reached 114 million with India alone contributing a large figure of 11.1 million cases [3]. Given this new development, businesses and companies were forced to work online from their homes. For many, the work home experience is new and alien to them with no prior experience in working from home for most in the country. Only essential workers like healthcare workers, Police, Cleaners, etc. were permitted to come to the office to work. Zoom calls and Hangout calls have replaced in-person meetings, fixed office timings become a thing of the past, and WhatsApp office groups have become a constant source of disturbance during what used to be off-work hours. These variants are said to be super-spreaders of the disease. On the other hand, viruses to counter the virus have started being administered to people to build immunity and antibodies so they do not contract the disease.

The first unlock took place in June 2020 with an economic focus. As per the new guidelines of the GOI, small gatherings in religious places and shopping malls, hotels, and restaurants were reopened. Most people ended up working from home for at least 3-6 months in 2020 since offices were varied of the risk with infection rates increasing due to in-office work. Since then, there have been 6 phases of unlocking with greater flexibility. As of February 2021, most parts of the country have opened for office goers and tourists as well. The focus is on rebuilding lost businesses [4]. What has been termed as the 2nd wave of COVID-19 has now started globally and the threat of it taking place in India continues to linger as well with numbers increasing again after it dipped. The concern is that the 2nd wave is likely to be a lot worse than the first one. A lot of working professionals continue to work from home on account of safety and/convenience. It becomes crucial to understand how their work from home experience has been so far and whether it has a greater capacity to cause stress and burnout.

Work from home in India: According to Owl Labs, WFH means that "an employee is working from their house, apartment, or place of residence, rather than working from the office" [5]. According to Ionos, WFH "refers to an office at home". In most such cases, it is a reference to "the workplace of an employee who previously worked in a traditional office". The onset of the pandemic caused an upheaval at an emotional, economic, and social level. Social distancing and being cooped up in the house left people in want of socialization and company [6]. At a financial level, many had lost their jobs or else had received pay cuts. However, now, almost a year from the date of

the first lockdown, many companies are recovering losses and are getting revenues on track again [7]. It was only in the past 5 years that companies had started to incorporate facilities like working from home or flexible hours to boost employee productivity.

Materials and Methods

The global context pre COVID-19

With the pandemic in full swing, offices globally saw a mass exodus of companies moving their staff to work from home arrangements. However, the figures, pre-pandemic were not substantially high yet. The concept of remote working or "Telecommuting" started to gain momentum in the 1970s and 1980s due to increased access to the internet and more affordable PCs [8]. Research conducted in the 1980s predicted that in the next 30 years most white-collar employees would be working remotely from homes/coffee shops, etc. But according to a 2015 report by the U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics, only 24% of employed people did some or all their work from home in the year 2015 [9]. Hoteling is a concept where no employee has a fixed work desk; instead, employees would take up an available work desk for a day in the week when they want to come into the office. Employers were thus able to cut back on office space [10].

The Indian context pre COVID-19

While the world was showing signs of embracing the work from home and flexi-hours culture, India was still lagging in incorporating these new facilities. The $200+ billion IT Sector in India is the perfect example of an industry highly equipped to have made working from home a reality much earlier than 2020. However, the sign-in, sign-out work culture where the number of hours one is at work is diligently reported and monitored had anchored the industry in the traditional style of working [11]. When the IT giant Yahoo retracted its work from home policy, it caused a big stir to understand why companies resist the work from home practice. Indian HR personnel often fear that the facility of working from home will be misused and often results in lower productivity [12]. The real reason why senior staff and managers have been resisting the remote working wave is that they are afraid of change. It requires people to learn new methods and systems of work which requires them to step out of their comfort zones. Leaders often revert to power and control mechanisms like supervision which keeps their fears of inefficiency at bay [10]. However, today, the pandemic has busted myths of the office being essential for many [13]. Therefore, while work from home comes with various benefits like flexibility, greater autonomy, reduced commute time and costs, greater cost efficiencies, etc. certain challenges exist difficulty in managing remote workers, strained team dynamics, negative impact on the long term relationship of the employee with the company which impacts retention [8].

Work-related stress

Lazarus and Folkman defined Stress as, "A particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" [14]. Any disrupted homeostasis elicits, what is termed as the "stress response", which means the activation of peripheral and central neuroendocrine mechanisms which are responsible for various adaptive behavior and responses [15]. The scientist has adopted 3 different approaches to assess levels of stress:

1. The environmental approach focuses on the assessment of various events and experiences that are objectively or normatively associated with adapted demands.

2. The psychological approach focuses on evaluating every individual's subjective ability to cope with demands and expectations that are posed by specific events and experiences.

3. The biological approach focuses on the activation of certain specific physiological systems that have been proven to get modulated or impacted in physically or psychologically demanding conditions [16].

Interviews and questionnaires tend to be the main measurement tools of the environmental and psychological approaches while biomarkers are the indicators of the biological approach [15]. There are 3 popular measurement tools for assessing the levels of perceived stress: the Impact of Event Scale (IES), the Stress Appraisal Measure (SAM), and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). Of these, the Perceived Stress Scale or PSS is the most universally accepted and used in studies assessing stressfulness of events as well as physical and psychiatric diseases and to formulate stress management programs [15]. Then there is "distress" which is when people are faced with constant challenges that result in stress-related tensions and the feeling of being over-worked [17]. When people refer to stress, they most often are referring to "distress" as is also the case in future mentions of the term "stress" in this paper. Stress is known to play a part in health problems such as diabetes, skin conditions, asthma, anxiety, headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, and depression. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has even declared stress a hazard of the workplace [18].

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Work-Related Stress as "Work-related stress is the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope. Stress occurs in a wide range of work circumstances but is often made worse when employees feel they have little support from supervisors and colleagues, as well as little control over work processes. As Indian professionals continue to work in a Work from home setup in social isolation, they are increasingly reporting anxiety, loneliness, social isolation due to lockdowns, fear-induced stress regarding contracting the coronavirus, work stress, and burnout in addition to fears of job loss and financial instability owing to the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. Indian professionals have also reported a significant work-life imbalance as a repercussion of all the above factors.

Work-related burnout

Etymology: The term "Burnout" has been inspired by Graham Greene's book, "A Burnt-Out Case 1961." It portrays an architect who is disillusioned and spiritually tormented and quits his job to retreat into an African jungle. A bright flame being reduced over time to ashes is significant of gradual psychological erosion [19]. Burnout has been defined as wearing out, exhaustion, or failure resulting from excessive demands made on energy, strength, and resources [20]. According to Christina Maslach, "Job Burnout is a psychological syndrome that involves a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job. The three dimensions of this response are an overwhelming exhaustion, feeling of cynicism and detachment from the job [19]. It is the outcome of the cumulative issues and stressors at the workplace in each of the below dimensions that lead to eventual burnout [19].

• The first dimension of exhaustion represents the individual stress component of burnout. It is characterized by a feeling of depletion or overextension of emotional and physical resources without any source of replenishment. There's a sense of fatigue and lack of energy to begin another day or face another problem. A recurring complaint is, "I am overwhelmed, overloaded, and overworked it is just too much." This exhaustion tends to be caused by work overload or even personal conflicts at work [19].

• The cynicism dimension represents the interpersonal context of burnout. This refers to detached, negative, or indifferent responses or attitudes to work various aspects of the job. It tends to be a self-protective mechanism or an emotional buffer of what one terms as "detached concern." These people cut down or reduce their performance at work with the outlook of, 'How do I get through, still get my paycheck and leave work?' Detachment can result in the loss of efficiency and over time it will result in a negative relationship not just with the job but also with co-workers. People tend to move from- struggling to do what they are very best to do the bare minimum. It tends to be caused by having to overwork for extended periods [19].

• The final dimension of inefficiency represents the self-evaluation component of burnout. This refers to a decreased sense of self-esteem and lack of achievement at the workplace. There is a sense of having made a mistake in choosing this career path and often they tend to dislike the kind of person they have become due to their job roles. It eventually leads to discontentment and a lack of appreciation for themselves and others [19].

Burnout due to work has always been a concern especially in India, where the phrase 'Work is Worship' is taken quite seriously. The 'Always on' Indian work culture has been costing employees their mental well-being [21]. According to a 2018 report by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Indians on average have the longest work hours compared to their global peers [22]. People working in the cities worked an average of 53-54 hours a week while those in villages worked around 46-47 hours a week. Most employees in India working for more than 48 hours a week which is much higher than the time limit prescribed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). As wages are lower in the unorganized unskilled sector people must work for more hours [22]. Job loss and pressure to perform in a highly competitive work environment are some of the key factors that contribute to burnout. A survey conducted by the National Mental Health Survey of India in 2015-2016 found that approximately 15% of Indians need aid and support for a mental illness. Working women were found to be more stressed than men [21].

Therefore, the rationale for this research

In today's COVID-19 context, with most of the employees still working from home full-time or for a large part of the week, it becomes, key to evaluate the impact of this new system on burnout and stress levels of individuals. Any change tends to come at a cost and forced change in the face of a crisis may have a different set of challenges altogether which makes it important to understand the same in detail. Even economic struggles are tangible and well documented by people as an outcome of the virus for most Indian households. However, the impact of one of the most pervasive changes caused by the pandemic, the introduction of WFH has not been researched enough in India. The impact of WFH on mental health is still ambiguous and is yet to be studied at length. Studies have shown that a large portion of our days is spent at work; On average person will spend approximately 90,000 hours in professional work-related activities over a lifetime. A burnt-out workforce can have negative impacts on personal happiness, self-esteem, and life satisfaction and can put pressure on the economic and healthcare systems. While the initial euphoria around work from home existed, it waned and gave way to several global articles citing stress and burnout due to working from home in the months following the shift [23]. Conversely, despite the issues concerning mental health and work-life balance, some businesses have reported an increase in employee output during this time, and many have decided to make 'work from home' a long-term setup. In such a scenario, a year since the 1st lockdown, it becomes critical to understand the impact of work from home on stress and burnout today when the inertia and adjustment struggles of the change will have limited influence on people's experience with this work system/ format. Moreover, some employers like TCS, Infosys, and Wipro are also transitioning/planning to transition into working from home as part of the long-term strategy to save on rent and other overhead costs making the research findings even more relevant.

Literature review

The literature review has been divided into five sections to introduce the reader to various facets of this research paper. We will begin by analyzing the importance of studying the topics of work-life balance today. We will then understand whom the work setting and culture have evolved globally to understand the shifts from working from office to telecommuting even before the onset of COVID; this will be contrasted with the work setting in India. Post this, we will deep dive into the research conducted so far around the pros and cons of working from home before COVID and with the lens of COVID as well. We conclude the literature review by making the case for the relevance and importance of this research in the context of the other pieces of work in the literature review

The importance of studying work life

Work has been a critical facet of human life for centuries and some even believe that humans are intrinsically wired and built to engage in some of the other forms of work [24]. Work-life is a big component of overall life and as such the quality of work-life becomes a key influencer of the overall life quality of any individual. It was suggested that the various factors that impact the quality of work-life of individuals also affect work performance. This in turn impacts the quality of non-work life [25]. Abraham Maslow's need and satisfaction theory of motivation makes a case that all people have certain hygiene or basic needs that are fulfilled by work [26]. However, a sole focus only on work is unlikely to lead to overall life satisfaction and instead may lead to dissatisfaction. This sets up the argument for the much-discussed concept of work-life balance [27]. It is to be noted that hereon, 'personal life', 'family life,' 'life' and 'home life' will be used interchangeably to refer to non-work life.

Initially, the segmentation theory was rather popular and as per this theory work and home, life is dichotomous and detached from each other being self-ruling and uninfluenced by the other [28]. It was theorized that people who work hard, manual labor jobs with limited job satisfaction and high levels of disappointment, tend to compartmentalize the work-life away from home life. However, the theory was later tested further and found that work and family are nearly related spaces of human life [29].

This brings us to the next concept that has become quite popular today. The spillover theory has been crucial in the advancement of research in the field of work-life relationships [30]. Therefore, satisfaction in one life domain (here; work) has an impact on the satisfaction levels in another domain (e.g: personal life/ home life) [28]. Similarly, positive overflows of satisfaction and accomplishment in one area may encourage a sense of enthusiasm and fulfillment in another domain [28]. Therefore, physical ailments can lead to inefficiency or demotivation at the workplace. Similarly, stress at work can result in health concerns or relationship strain as it spills over into the family domain [31]. Moreover, they fail to provide a guiding framework for the analysis of the boundaries of the two domains of work and non-work life [32].

This brings us to the model developed by Clark to overcome these issues, referred to as the Border Theory. According to this theory, the level of combination, the simplicity of moves, and the level of connections between the two domains are influenced by the porousness and flexibility of the borders between work and life [28]. According to Guest "Border Theory opens up a rich vein of analysis focusing on the nature of work and family domains, on the borders between these two domains but also on borders 'permeability and the ease with which these borders can be managed or moved. That being said, individuals tend to cross these borders daily as they go about managing and executing work and life commitments and expectations [32]. According to this theory, work-life balance and general wellbeing can only be achieved through the creation of these separate segmented domains through boundaries or mental fences [33]. According to Clark this essentially meant being in a state where one can satisfactorily fulfill all their roles in the workplace and their family/personal life [34]. The critics of this theory argue that the theory only factors in 3 types of boundaries special, temporal, and mental, and does not take into account other important factors such as work culture, individual workers temperament, and attitude all of which influence areas of work-life balance [32]. Therefore, there is a need to separate the two so that the emotions from one domain do not negatively impact the other (Border theory). However, there are times when the border is porous/strained and therefore separation becomes difficult causing a spillover effect.

The evolution of the work setting globally and contrasting it with India

The work culture and formats have been claimed to be an important element of any organization that wants to be successful in the business world [35]. Organizational culture or work culture has various definitions. A popular definition is Organizational culture refers to a system of shared

assumptions, values, and beliefs that show people what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Employee behavior and organizational performance are both highly influenced by the work culture. While it is invisible, it is effects are far-reaching and as such the kind of work culture often has a key role to play in the kind of decision making and flexibility offered by any organization. The organizational culture is influenced and impacted by external factors like political, social, technological, and legal factors as well as by internal factors like the leadership style, level of transparency and communication, organizational structure, and the nature of work [36]. The work environment and culture have evolved over the years, influenced by both the internal and external factors; that is to say 'where' and 'how we work have undergone a big change from the 1900s [37]. Let us look at how the workspace in the west evolved.

In the Industrial age, things began to change as efficiency received greater impetus under the teachings of Frederick Winslow Taylor; His theories emphasized efficiency through top-down management, economies of scale, and task repetition and therefore, labor was brought to a central location to generate output [38]. Therefore, interest in the idea of working from home and telecommuting took root in the 1900s. The second factor that possibly influenced this idea further is the rapid advancements in technology in the US like the invention and popularization of computers and access to the internet. In 1995, there were a meager 22 million internet users in the US and b 2002 this figure rose to 135 million users meaning that 51% of Americans owner at least 1 computer, and a large chunk of that also had access to the internet [38]. With the fading importance of geographical boundaries, Jack Niles coined the popular term 'Telecommuting' in 2007 and defined it as, "technology-assisted work performed outside of an office'.

The work-pace organizational structure, values, and structure in America have undergone a substantial change over time. For instance, In the 1930s there doubles earning households at about 16% households but by 1975 this figure rose to 38%. With the adults in the family working there was little time left to manage the household and as this resource got scarce Americans began seeing the value of time as on par with the value of money. The reduction of time spent in travel when one works online from home began to see greater merit [38]. However, resistance to a full-blown shift did exist even then. The American economy started as being built on several small businesses. The International Telework Association and Council (ITAC) estimated that the number of employees who had worked at least 1 day a week remotely had increased by 17% from 2000 to 2001. Moreover, the conceptualization of the 'Third Place' by sociologist Ray Oldenburg was defined as the 'third place' refers to social environments outside of the home and office and urban planner Edward Soja built on this theory to come up with the concept of the 'Third workplace.'

A report from FlexJobs and Global Workplace Analytics showed that the number of employees working from home in the US increased by 159% from 2005 to 2017 with 44% growth taking place over the short span of the last 5 years [39]. Employees are increasingly looking for perks of working from home resulting in 51% of employees in the 2018 Global Talent Trends survey polling that they wished their employer offered them the telecommuting opportunity [40]. In a Flex Jobs survey conducted in 2016, 84% of parents who are working voted that flexible working is the most important consideration in any job [40]. However, some resistance to the idea did exist. The work culture as such was rather close-knitted at the time and hence the prospect of remote work gave rise to the fear of the potential shredding and fragmentation of the social and corporate values of the company [38]. While the majority of the Fortune 100 companies were offering the opportunity of flexible work, most other workplaces were not. A large part of this resistance came from the mid and senior management who operated from a 'line-of-sight style of management and, in absence of sufficient research and information, were afraid of the impact of remote working on targets and the bottom line. Europe was even farther behind America when it comes to the percentage of people telecommuting however; the numbers were on the rise. From 2006 to 2015, the number of workers working outside of office rose from 11.8% to 14.5% in Europe with the system being most favored in Scandinavian countries [41].

The EWCS 2015 research revealed that the top industries that are rather popular are IT, financial services, general services, and Public administration. The focus shifted from job creation to job quality and the work-life balance conversation which led to the concept of remote working or telecommuting as per the European Employment Strategy and Europe 2020 strategy and Guidelines [41]. The Global State of Remote Work survey conducted by Owl Labs in 2018 (gathered data from over 3000 employees across 6 continents and 23 countries reported that 40% of companies are hybrid meaning that they offer a mix of work from home and in-office work. The primary number 1 reason that employees want to work from home is since they feel a sense of better productivity/focus [5].

The Indian work evolution

India has been a culturally-rooted country governed by various norms and standards which is also reflected in the work environment of Indian companies. A report in 2012 explained the work culture in India is highly hierarchical with a clear top-down management structure and limited employee autonomy. Working overtime without pay for up to 10-12 hours a day is not uncommon in India [42]. However, with millennials entering the workforce about 15 years ago, the dynamic has seen a considerable shift. Millennials are also known as Gen Y are born between the early 1980s to mid-1990s and hence grew u witnessing the technology and internet boom that was taking place at the beginning of the millennium. Organizations have come to realize that while millennials are hardworking, they place a premium on leisure time and personal life much more than previous generations [43]. According to Deloitte research, 43% of millennials are expected to quit their jobs in 2 years as the quality of life and finding one's purpose takes priority over job stability for most. A Morgan Stanley research stated while millennials are young, they are stepping up to shoulder the responsibility of being the chief wage earner in the household with millennial income contributing to 70% of the aver Indian household's income [44]. Unlike the generation of hardship that characterized the Baby Boomers, or the beginnings of progress witnessed by Gen X, the Millennials grew up in a country that was benefiting from policy reforms, liberalization, and globalization. Hence, their expectations from the workplace reflect this exposure [45].

According to the report by job portal Shine.com, over three-quarters of the millennial Indian respondents were in favor of working from home as a job option. The most important reason that was cited is the importance of maintaining a work-life balance with nearly 60% of participants saying so and the rest cited reasons like greater autonomy, health, traffic, saving on travel costs, and spending time with kids at home [46] (Figure 1).
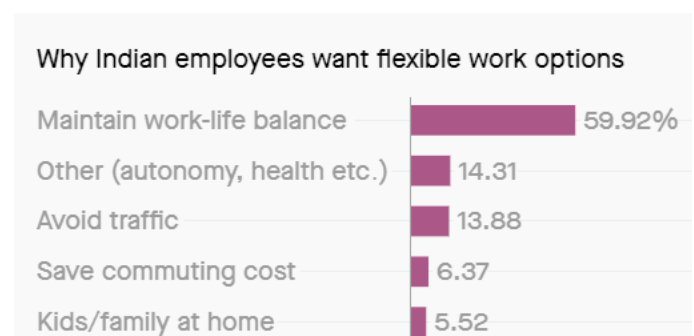

Why Indian employees want flexible work options

Maintain work-life balance	59.92%
Other (autonomy, health etc.)	14.31
Avoid traffic	13.88
Save commuting cost	6.37
Kids/family at home	5.52

Figure 1. Source: Shine.com, 2019.

According to a study conducted by Suleman and Nelson, millennials tend to define themselves by their unique passion and interests. They are often considered to be career-oriented, proactive, and self-driven people [47]. They are firmly against being slaves to their jobs like they have seen their parents in the baby boomer generation grow to be [48]. A Research Report by Johnson and Haworth on the global millennials also sheds light on the Indian millennial perspective. The survey showed that 56% what the flexibility of choosing where to work, 79% prefer doing mobile and not static

work and 32% prefer 'break out spaces' rather than a conventional meeting room. Prof. Bruce Tulgan asserts that 'Millennials want to create a custom life and create the kind of career that fits around the career they want to have [48]. Martin identified that millennials are independent, entrepreneurial thinkers who gravitate towards responsibility, boldly demand immediate feedback and expect a sense of reward or accomplishment.

However, recent reports on millennials have thrown light on the stressful working conditions faced by this cohort. A 2018 report by Cigna TTK Health Insurance stated that 95% of Indian millennials admit that they are stressed [49]. This figure is substantially higher than those in other countries. The primary reason attributed to this is that millennials are reporting high work hours and are struggling to balance work and life which is of paramount importance to this cohort [49].

The argument in favor of working from home

Flexibility in work policies is linked to higher productivity and has been seen by employees as a means to balance work-life responsibilities. One-Third of Americans polled 'always feeling rushed' with these feelings being more amplified by people with higher education levels or who are at the stage of starting a family, according to the University of Maryland. Considering applicants from across the country for jobs where one can work from home allows greater access to untapped talent and ability from remote parts of the country [50]. Nicholas Bloom, professor at Stanford along with his student James Liang researched to evaluate the effectiveness of working from home. Liang was the CEO of Ctrip, a China-based travel agency, and was looking to reduce office rent costs in Shanghai by offering his call center employees the option of working from home, Moreover, since the rent rates in the city were so exorbitant most employees traveled long commutes to get to work since they stayed outside of the city and this was negatively impacting attrition [51]. For 9 months, half the volunteers were allowed to work from home and the other half served as a control group and continued to work from the office. The fear was that productivity would take a hit when employees left the disciplined and supervised space of the office. However, the results proved otherwise with people working from home making 13.5% more phone calls than those working from the office. More importantly, the at-home set of employees reported higher levels of job satisfaction. Even sick days for these employees were reduced [51]. The rationale behind the positive results was attributed to:

• A quieter space at home unlike the chaotic office which has the 'cake in the break room effect' and this, according to Bloom, contributed to 1/3rd of the increase in productivity.

• The remaining 2/3rd were attributed to the fact that people ended up starting work earlier and putting in more hours at work.

The study also shed light on the kind of person who is predisposed to prefer working from tended to be people with settled social lives who were married, have kids or aging parents with younger employees being less keen on working from home full time [51]. While this study shows positive results, the study had been focused on call center workers and Bloom admits that the results may vary for knowledge workers who need greater creative stimulation [51]. Therefore, the author of this paper has also included questions around the industry of work and the sample design is largely made-up knowledge workers to assess their experience with working from home. Another reason in favor of working from home was that people who commuted longer distances were less physically fit, had higher blood pressure and greater instances of obesity along with simply being more mentally tired and exhausted than their counterparts who commuted short distances [52]. Some employers have also seen merit in offering working from home as a facility and it has become a key recruitment and retention strategy. Ceridian Employer Services, US reported that over 50% of their survey participants reported that the flexibility of working from home was an attractive incentive to join a company. Working from home is also considered to be especially beneficial for women. A report by the University of British Columbia stated that working mothers can earn more than women that do not have kids. Prof. Sylvia Fuller mentions that working from home

provides flexibility to the mother while also doing away with any concerns that the boss may have regarding whether the employee will be able to do it and do it well [53].

This is a new finding that goes against what one has been come to known by sociologists as the 'motherhood penalty' as per which moms earn a lesser amount for each child that they have and are often viewed as less competent as their female counterparts without kids [54]. The gender wage gap between men and women in India was 19% as of 2019 and India ranks 112th on the Global Gender Gap Index released by the World Economic Forum [55]. This gap is only worsened in India due to the socio-economic conditions and patriarchal society that women must face. According to a 2019 Salary Index report by job portal Monster.com, 46% of women believe that people in the office assume that they will quit after maternity leave, 86% of women feel like safety is a factor when choosing a job and 50% prefer to avoid night shifts; These constraints further widen the existing gender gap particularly in certain industries [56]. However, with increased flexibility and the opportunity to work from anywhere, women have a chance to stay home to manage a home and yet also chase their dreams [50]. In the future as well, work-from-home opportunities will allow women in smaller towns who are restricted from leaving the hometown to follow their career paths in certain industries by working from home. The added flexibility combined with the Government's new policies on working may encourage more Indian women to enter or re-enter (from a hiatus) the workforce [50].

The argument against working from home

For senior staff who are used to monitoring and supervising daily work, the lack of ability to monitor work being done becomes a challenge and constraint. There seems to be a clear level of distrust for some regarding whether the employees can stay motivated on their own without supervision. Many corporate leaders believe that the adoption of these surveillance tools is not surveillance but are ways of using technology to reduce the loneliness of working from home and to further a sense of connectedness [57]. Working from home may not be everyone's cup of tea. People who are highly social and need to work in teams to feel productive and motivated may not do well in a remote working setting. Similarly, managers of teams that are remotely working need to be comfortable with a style of management that is built on trust, relationships, and output vs. seeing work being done [38]. The workplace, an integral part of the social system, has much to contribute utilizing healthy social interaction and building of collaborations and even friendships. Working from home may further perpetuate the growing trend of 'individualization' where individualization at the workplace may also contribute to individualizing the society which may over time alter the social norms and landscape [38].

Working from home simply adds to the pressure since there's a compulsion to be emotionally available to the family when at home while also needing time and energy to do well at work [50]. Pandemic burnout and fatigue can result in low productivity, stress, and anxiety for workers, and also contributes to the COVID fuelled an exodus of working women from the workforce. The Bureau of Labour Statistics in the US showed that there were more than 2 million lesser women in the labor force in around November 2020 than the same time a year ago. Eldercare can be very unpredictable and therefore may be very disruptive to daily work life, and this is especially true if the employee is attending to a parent with dementia or degenerative diseases [58].

Significance of this study

Millennials account for about one-third of the population of the country and constitute about 50% of the workforce and by 2025 this number is expected to go up to 75% [59]. Given their importance to the Indian economy and larger ecosystem, it is critical to understand their expectations from the workplace and their experience with work from home. The present study has taken up 3 variables: Work from home, stress, and burnout. The relationship among the 3 variables holds significance [23]. This is especially the case for millennials who tend to be predisposed to burnout even before Covid-19. In a Gallup study of nearly 7,500 full-time U.S. employees,

28% of Millennials claimed to feel frequent or constant burnout at work, compared with 21% of workers from older generations. An additional 45% of Millennial workers say they sometimes feel burned out, suggesting that about seven in 10 Millennials are experiencing some level of burnout on the job. Even in COVID times, according to research conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, 43% of millennials report that they are feeling emotionally drained from work compared to 29% of baby boomers who felt the same way. These statistics may vary for the Indian market which makes an even stronger case for researching it. India has one of the largest millennial populations in the world at 34% of the total population, a demographic dividend if you will. This population also forms approximately 47% of the total workforce. According to research by Deloitte, the generation has become the chief bread earner in most Indian households.

Hence, this research has been designed to assess the impact of and relationships between working from home, stress levels, and burnout in Indian millennials (both positive and negative). This in turn will help to strategize and plan for proactive and intervention measures to enhance the quality of the work from home experience.

Research design

An exploratory research design was used for this research. A representative sample of the population was taken for this study. Nonprobability sampling methods were used in the present study. In this, purposive sampling will be used. Judgment or purposive sampling has the advantage of being time-and cost-effective to perform whilst resulting in a range of responses. We surveyed those individuals in the age band of 24-39 years in India. The survey was completely online, and Google Forms was used, and they were contacted via digital means of WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, etc. given that in-person meetings are difficult due to COVID-19. A total of 164 audiences were taken for this study with a 60:40 mix of female: male.

Tests and inventories

The following was used to assess the impact of work from home on burnout and stress levels.

Perceived Stress Inventory: The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is one of the most widely used, valid, and reliable stress measures. It is a measure of the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. Items in the test are designed to tap into how overloaded, uncontrollable, and unpredictable respondents find their own lives. The scale is simple to understand and respond to and also includes several direct queries about current levels of experienced stress. The questions in this popular test of PSS ask about feelings and thoughts in the last one month and can be quite evocative. In each case, the survey asks how often they felt a certain way.

Copenhagen Burnout Inventory: We used the CBI inventory to assess the levels of burnout. Kristensen and colleagues developed the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) to help understand a conceptually more consistent and statistically even more reliable and valid measure of burnout that can even be applied to a broader range of professions. While burnout in professions has been traditionally measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), this inventory is quite limiting since it was the applicability of the MBI to some professions has been questioned since it was designed to measure burnout in human services and helping professionals only.

Analyses of the CBI have demonstrated it to be a highly validated instrument with applications to a wide range of professions. The CBI has 3 sub-sections: personal burnout (6 questions); work-related burnout (7 questions); and client-related burnout (6 questions).

For this research, we will only use the work-related burnout scale. All questions have their own 5 possible answers and each of these answers is assigned a certain number of points: 0, 25, 50, 75, and 100. The value of the burnout level is then meticulously calculated as the mean value; therefore, every scale has a value of 0-100.

Questionnaire on working from home: We also incorporated a clear understanding of the kind of work from home and experience therein. To do this, we used the 'Thrive at Work from Home' Survey. Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) in Australia has approved this study (HREC number HRE2020-0141). The survey was successfully carried out between 21st April-5th May 2020 and was later published as a research paper (CTWD, 2020)

Data analysis technique

We used the total score, percentage, correlation, and t-test to assess the statistical significance of any gender/type of living arrangements or family differences/prior experience with work from home, etc. We used a correlation coefficient to analyze the positive/negative relationship between hours of working from home and stress and burnout levels.

Some caveats of this research: Since the start of the pandemic, many offices went online. Some returned to hybrid offline work systems around the period of December 2020-January 2021 when the COVID situation seemed to be getting better. The research focused on studying only current/present behavior and feelings concerning working from home and not looking at it from a retrospective lens since respondents may often speak from memory, not reality and hence the picture painted may be inaccurate. Therefore, some respondents who coded that they are working from the office may have been working from home before December 2020 due to COVID. For ease of analysis, we have bifurcated the sample into those who are 'Office Goers' and have been going to the office daily or very often and those who are 'Working from home' who spend a minimum of 3 days a week working from home [60-69].

Results and Discussion

We have organized the results by splitting the sample into those working from home and those who have been working from the office/very rarely worked from home in the months of January/February 2021 before the second deadly wave of COVID-19 in India.

Demographic data

The research was focused on recruiting largely only millennials and hence the skew towards the 24-33 age band which makes up 69.1% of the overall sample design. Similarly, the 35–43-year-olds also are largely part of the millennial target audience and hence sees a high number of responses of about 18%. We also had some representation of 44–53-year-olds, 54–63-year-old, and 64+ age bands to understand how their responses to working from home vary from their younger counterparts. 63% of the sample sizes were female while the rest was largely male. The majority of the respondents had never worked from home, or their companies never allowed them the opportunity to work from home before the pandemic. These were largely people who are full-time employees who went to the office daily. However, since the start of the pandemic, many offices went online. Some returned to hybrid offline work systems around the period of December 2020- January 2021 when the COVID situation seemed to be getting better. Nonetheless, there is a significant shift in the number of people working from home with almost 80% of the sample saying that they have been working from home either daily or for a minimum of 3 days a week. The figure indicates that more than thrice the number of people working from home before COVID is now working from home.

Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1: Stated that 'There will be significant gender difference between levels of stress and burnout for people working from home and those not.'

The total stress scores of the working from home and those going to the office were calculated and the gender was considered when analyzing the data. In Fig. 8 it is clear that the mean stress of females is higher than that of males by a differential of 0.992. Moreover, the burnout scores of females are also significantly higher than that of their male counterparts at the 12.7 percentile.

The statistics show that the overall stress and burnout levels are much higher in women than in men at a regular work-life level of working from the office. For those working from home, the females have continued to see higher levels of stress at both the levels of workplace and life. However, males and females have equally high levels of burnout. It is interesting to note that, at an overall level, the mean PSS scores for Regular office goers are higher than that of those working from home. However, the mean CBI score is significantly higher by almost 10 points for the working from home audience. This is potential because the stress scale measures overall stress which could be high right now due to having to go out to work and risk oneself during the pandemic. The burnout index, however, is focused on work stress only and therefore is a more accurate measure of the mental health of employees which seems to be worse for the ones working from home (Tables 1 and 2).

Hypothesis 2: stated that 'There will be a significant correlation between stress and age, gender, burnout levels, etc. for those working from home.

The Pearson's correlation coefficient is a measure of the strength of a linear association between two variables and it is denoted by r. We have used this measure to identify whether a relationship exists between various variables and stress. The table below makes it evident that there are strong correlations at the 0.01 level between stress and CBI as well as between stress and household structure. There is a strong significant correlation between stress, age and gender at a significance of 0.05. Age has a negative correlation with stress, indicating that the older age bands report lower stress levels than the higher age bands and as age increases the stress levels decrease. Gender is positively correlated to stress and therefore, greatly impacts stress as well. Whether people who live alone or with roommates, with joint families or nuclear families also plays a part in stress (significance of -0.267) at a strong correlation. Therefore, the bigger the family, the lesser the stress levels are experienced.

Finally, Burnout is correlated with stress levels at high strength (significance=0.632) and therefore is the most significant of all the variables when it comes to stress. Essentially burnout at the workplace when employees feel like they have no more left to give also impacts their overall stress at a live level with a positive relationship. Therefore, the greater the burnout, the greater the amount of stress. What this means is that of all the variables that we have tested stress relationships with, burnout is the most strongly correlated to and hence most likely to influence overall stress levels. After burnout, the family structure becomes an important consideration that has an inverse relationship with stress. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted (Table 3).

Hypothesis 3: stated that 'There will be a significant difference between work from home, stress and burnout levels on account of prior experience with work from home- whether people had experienced work from home in some form before COVID or not'.

Table 3 indicates that both those who had as well as those who did not have prior experience with COVID had moderate to low burnout. At a comparative level, the burnout level for those with prior experience working from home was higher than those who had never worked from home. This could be because those working from home previously would have had the facility to work remotely and therefore work never took a lull during COVID but went full swing anyway. Secondly, the t-test showed some signs of the two as well (Tables 4 and 5).

Looking at some other interesting analysis from the research. From Figures 2 and 3 below, when comparing emotions on how both types of workers react to working from home, those who are working from home rate 'connectedness to team-mates', productivity and collaboration a lot lower than their counterparts going to the office (Figures 2 and 3).

When asked if they would like to work from home, post-COVID, most respondents (50%) said they would want to work from home daily or very frequently, 30% said that they would like the flexibility of working from home occasionally (Figure 4).

Table 1. Looking at the mean differential in the levels of stress and burnout for those regular office goers.

Gender		Regular office goers PSS	Regular office goers Avg. CBI
Male	Mean	15.4286	32.6531
	N	14	14
	Std. Deviation	5.62569	14.81553
Female	Mean	16.4211	45.3008
	N	19	19
	Std. Deviation	3.35519	20.6558
Total	Mean	16	39.9351
	N	33	33
	Std. Deviation	4.4088	19.22142

Table 2. Looking at the mean differential in the levels of stress and burnout for those working from home.

Gender		WFM_PSS	WFH Avg. CBI
Male	Mean	11.3556	49.7619
	N	45	45
	Std. Deviation	4.85309	17.16854
Female	Mean	13.5176	49.5798
	N	85	85
	Std. Deviation	5.07471	16.57297
Prefer not to say	Mean	13	57.1429
	N	1	1
	Std. Deviation	.	.
Total	Mean	12.771	49.7001
	N	131	131
	Std. Deviation	5.06658	16.66362

Table 3. Pearson's correlation coefficients.

|		WFM_PSS	2-Age	3-Gender	4-Household structure	WFH Avg. CBI
WFM_PSS Total	Pearson Correlation	1	-.220*	.198*	-.267**	.632**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.012	0.023	0.002	0
	N	131	131	131	131	131
2-Age	Pearson Correlation	-.220*	1	0.131	.534**	-.244**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.012		0.137	0	0.005
	N	131	131	131	131	131
3-Gender	Pearson Correlation	.198*	0.131	1	0.062	0.004
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.023	0.137		0.485	0.96
	N	131	131	131	131	131
4-Household Structure	Pearson Correlation	-.267**	.534**	0.062	1	-.272**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002	0	0.485		0.002
	N	131	131	131	131	131
WFH_ Avg CBI	Pearson Correlation	.632**	-.244**	0.004	-.272**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0.005	0.96	0.002	
	N	131	131	131	131	131

Note: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed),**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4. The mean differential in CBI for those who worked from home pre-COVID and those who had no exposure to working from home before COVID.

13-Exp with WFH before CV	Mean	N	Std. deviation
No	46.9077	82	15.34604
Yes	54.3732	49	17.86109
Total	49.7001	131	16.66362

Table 5. T-Test results.

		Paired samples T-Test							
		Paired differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence interval of the difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	13-Exp with WFH before CV - WFH_ Avg CBI	-48.33	16.5647	1.44726	-51.1893	-45.46282	-33.391	130	0
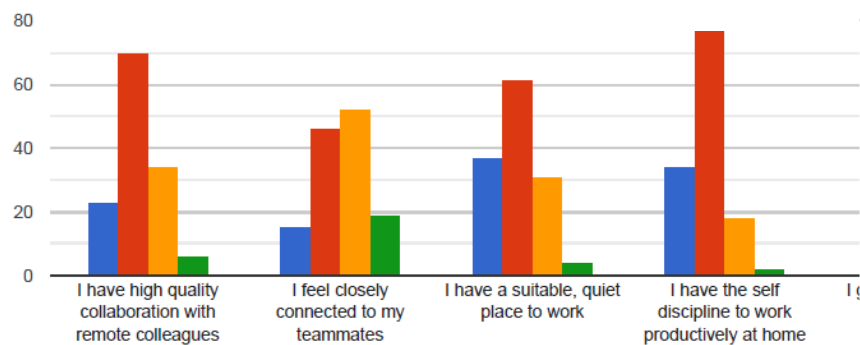
Figure 2. Evaluating the work life of those who work from home. Note: (▬) Blue- Strongly Agree (▬) Red- Agree; (▬) Yellow- Disagree; (▬) Green- Strongly Disagree.
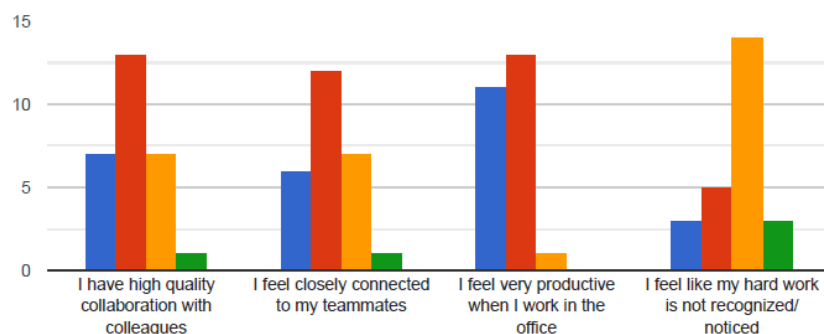
Figure 3. Evaluating the work-life for office goers. Note: (▬) Blue- Strongly Agree (▬) Red- Agree; (▬) Yellow- Disagree; (▬) Green- Strongly Disagree.
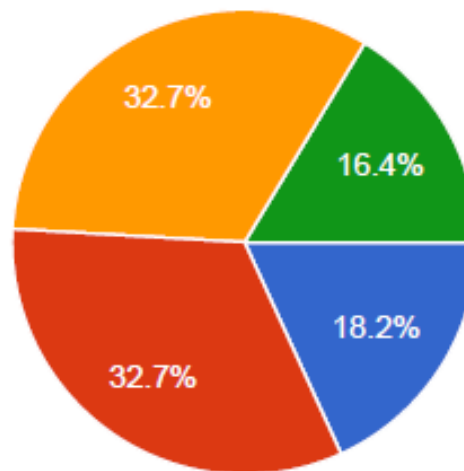
Figure 4. Preference for working from home in the future. Note: (●) Blue- Yes, I would like to work from home daily; (●) Red- Yes, I would like to work from home most of the time (3 or more days a week) and go to office regularly; (●) Yellow- Yes, I would like to work from home most of the time (2-4 times a month) and go to office regularly; (●) Green- I would not want to work from home.

Conclusion

The research provides important insights into stress and work-related burnout just before the 2ndd wave of COVID in India. The sample was primarily made up of well-educated people, who were holding a bachelor's if not a master's degree and were all working respondents. There was a mix of people who had exposure working from home before and after COVID. "I'm not working from home; I'm living at work' has become a very popular meme and this is more so in India where the work culture is very dogmatic and inflexible. The researcher was expecting a higher level of stress and burnout to exist in the audience however; the figures do not seem to be too alarming despite several international studies and Indian research pieces talking about work burnout. This could be due to multiple reasons. One is that the research, unlike others, was conducted much after the pandemic began. Hence it is possible that people got used to working from home and even started to appreciate it once the initial phase of adapting to it was over. Secondly, it is important to note that the overall burnout scores in the sample continue to be higher than stress scores. This could be due to the burnout scale being specific to work and the PSS scale being used at an overall life level.

In conclusion, the research makes it clear that there is no single correct path to be taken, however, flexibility is the way to go, and making employees a part of the decision-making process will increase productivity which is taking a hit currently. Moreover, the hybrid work model seems to be the work model of the future that marries the productivity and sense of belonging that comes with the group working with the freedom and flexibility of working from home.

The research was primarily conducted online and therefore assumes the digital savviness of the respondent. The sample design was a little skewed toward females. Participants are less likely to stay fully engaged for a survey of more than 8-10 minutes than with other research methods. Repeated requests to complete the survey can be perceived by participants as annoying and can therefore backfire against a business. Unless an identification verification tool is used, it is impossible to know if the sample providing answers is the right person (i.e., it could be a family member, friend, etc.) or if one person is submitting multiple responses Difficulty reaching certain types of participants, such as those who do not have internet access or non-customer samples in niche industries. The lack of quality random sampling leads to questionable (if any) statistical confidence and margin of error. A topic that is a major challenge the market research industry faces right now.

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