

Monitoring Remote Workers Productivity in Institutions of Higher Learning: A Case of the University of Venda

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Abstract: This study evaluates the process of monitoring the performance and productivity of staff working remotely amid the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has profound impact on how different institutions operate, especially on ensuring effective performance management of employees working remotely. Despite all odds, some workers continue working remotely during these extraordinary circumstances. There is a need to acknowledge that the world has changed and that these changes could last for some time, and perhaps even more permanently. A sample of 80 and 10 participants for quantitative and qualitative, respectively, was chosen to fully represent the staff. The data collection methods included interviews and questionnaires with selected staff. The Convenience Sampling Method was used to select respondents amongst staff members assigned to work remotely based on the fact that they were either sharing office with colleagues or had capacity to work remotely. The questionnaires were physically administered by the Researcher, whereas interviews were conducted with individual staff. Quantitative data was analysed through SPSS software, and qualitative data was analysed through themes and coding. The study revealed that some staff members are not ethical when working from home with minimal supervision. The study also revealed that when staff are not closely monitored, they tend not to focus and spend some time performing non-work-related activities which negatively affects the performance and productivity of the institution. The study further revealed that remote working led to poor quality of reports and missing of deadlines, signifying lack of proper planning.

Keywords: Business continuity, Effective communication, Staff performance monitoring, Remote workers productivity

1. Introduction

Remote working has become a norm due to COVID-19 pandemic. Employers and employees are being connected globally using technology. Institutions are rethinking and reviewing their policies to adapt to the new ways of working. This study focuses on monitoring remote workers performance at institutions of higher learning, a case of the University of Venda. Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, institutions of higher learning made provision for some employees to work remotely or from home. To ensure effective performance by employees, there was a need to monitor the performance of remote workers. The study targets institutions of higher learning, particularly employees and those in senior management positions. The formulation of problem and delimitation of the study were considered.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent levels of lockdown which were intended to minimise the spread of coronavirus, as part of business continuity, institutions of higher learning were left with no other options but to resort to remote

working. In most institutions, employees who could work remotely were allowed to work from home on a rotational basis. At the beginning of lockdown levels in 2020, only essential workers whose nature of work does not make provision for them to work remotely were required to report for work. Due to the unprecedented situation, most institutions did not have policies for remote workers and policies had to be developed as and when arrangements were already underway for employees to work remotely. Unavailability of policies also posed challenges like mechanisms for monitoring the performance of remote workers (Parker & Grote, 2020).

Remote working refers to work performed outside of the normal institutional confines of space and time. Because employees work from home, it implies that information technology tools that permit work to be performed remotely are substituted for travelling to the respective workplaces. Although there are advantages and disadvantages, this could lead to saving of resources, elimination of constraints pertaining to office space and time (Hern, 2020). It is important to clarify if indeed remote work implies

strictly working from home or whether it includes a situation where the employee is physically separated from the employer. The preceding paragraph made it explicit that remote work entails an arrangement in which employees perform their regular work at a place other than the ordinary workplace, with the necessary information and communication technology tools for remote work (Wang et al., 2020). The following are research questions: Do institutions of higher learning have tools to monitor the performance of remote workers? Are the tools available to monitor the performance of remote workers effective? Are there reporting structures for monitoring performance? What challenges are faced by remote workers? What factors influence productivity and; What is the impact of remote work tools?

2. Methodological Approach

The study focused on monitoring remote workers productivity at institutions of higher learning. The research was based on a case study of the University of Venda which is situated in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The University of Venda is a comprehensive University situated in Limpopo Province, about 170 km from Polokwane in South Africa. It comprises of about 800 staff. A mixed method approach was used.

2.1 Qualitative Approach

The qualitative approach is interpretive and seeks to translate and describe and it focuses on words and feelings. Qualitative research is intended to indicate how and why things happen in a particular manner. According to Struwig and Stead (2004) in qualitative research, the emphasis is on concepts and the way people perceive various activities and it is not based on rigid and fixed procedures. Interviews were used as one of the primary techniques for collecting data. The interview method enabled the interviewer to probe for more specific answers.

2.2 Quantitative Approach

The Quantitative approach entails knowledge, opinion, or attitude of an individual and it primarily focuses on words and numbers. Struwig and Stead (2004) refers quantitative approach as a form of conclusive research that involves large representative samples and data collection procedures that are structured. According to Dawson (2006) quantitative research is a method that generates

statistics making use of questionnaires and the method enabled the researcher to reach many participants. The quantitative research design using questionnaires to collect data were utilized. The respondents included academic, administrative and support staff (Struwig & Stead, 2004; Dawson, 2006; Cooper & Schindler, 2006; Walker, 2015; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Niethammer et al., 2017). Some questionnaires were e-mailed to respondents while others were handed to the respondents to complete at their own time without assistance by the researcher. The questionnaire comprised both open and closed ended questions on issues related to monitoring the performance of remote workers (Cornelissen, 2000; Freeman, 2004; Rensburg & Ferreira, 2004; Cooper & Schindler, 2006; Babbie, 2013; Peter, 2015; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Niethammer, 2017).

2.3 Research Population

The population consisted of internal stakeholders of the University of Venda and other identified institutions of higher learning employees. Internal stakeholders comprised of staff. These target audience were identified to participate in the research because of their familiarity with the institutions of higher learning environment.

2.4 Sampling Method

Sampling refers to the process of selecting a portion of the population to represent the entire population. Both purposive and cluster random sampling methods were used. The simple random sampling procedure was used to select respondents who participated in the study. A sample of 80 and 10 participants for quantitative and qualitative, respectively, was chosen to fully represent the staff. The sample size comprised of 100 questionnaires that were distributed to internal stakeholders and a purposefully selected 10 members of Senior Management participated in the semi-structured interviews. The sample size was put into groups, each group representing various levels of stakeholders. Where a group of people believed to be reliable enough for the study, purposive sampling was used.

2.5 Data Collection Methods/Instruments

The study used structured and semi-structured interviews as well as questionnaires that are closed and open ended.

2.5.1 Semi Structured Interviews

Semi structured interview entails a situation whereby the respondents who have relevant information about the proposed research are interviewed. To make provision for flexibility and responses that are not anticipated, open ended questions were more effective. The study also used closed ended questions (Barbie & Mouton, 2001; Miles & Mangold, 2004; Hesse-Bibber, 2010; Babbie, 2013; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; van Ruler et al., 2017). The interviewer asked the same questions that were adjusted from time to time depending on the background and educational level of the participants. The participants in the semi-structured interviews include members of senior management. The respondents were identified from a target audience that has participated in remote work. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that were analysed by the researcher (Barbie & Mouton, 2001; Miles & Mangold, 2004; Hesse-Bibber, 2010; Babbie, 2013; Peter, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur et al., 2017).

2.5.2 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were used to collect data from targeted stakeholders. This included open ended and closed ended questions. The questions were physically administered by the researcher. The questionnaires were accompanied by a letter outlining the legitimacy of the study. The questionnaires were used to respondents who could read and write which include academic and administrative staff. To encourage the respondents to participate in the research, sensitive questions that were considered not to be necessary were eliminated. In a situation where a respondent was reluctant to participate in the research due to amongst others unavailability of time, it was considered imperative to explain the importance of his/ her participation and to also indicate that the respondent could not be substituted. Respondents were assured of anonymity (Barbie & Mouton, 2001; Miles & Mangold, 2004; Hesse-Bibber, 2010; Peter, 2015; Kapur et al., 2017; Niethammer et al., 2017).

3. Data Analysis

The data collected was analysed using qualitative and quantitative approaches. The data collected was analysed through the percentage and weighted mean. These two statistical methods enabled the researcher to make a comparison of data collected. The Statistical Programme for Social Science (SPSS) was used to analyse both qualitative and

quantitative data. Cross tabulations showing percentages and frequency distributions were used to analyse data collected.

4. Reliability, Validity and Objectivity

To ensuring that the research remains reliable, valid, and objective, strategies were put in place to monitor and evaluate quality throughout the research. To conduct and present quality research findings, it was considered of utmost importance to take into cognizance matters pertaining to reliability, validity, and objectivity. This was ensured by having several respondents providing similar responses. The researcher endeavored to ensure that the research is interpreted in a professional manner.

5. Ethical Considerations

The researcher endeavored to ensure that when conducting research as well as when presenting the research findings, for the purpose of complying with the research ethical standards, appropriate mechanisms were put in place. This included making available forms of confidentiality and consent. This implies that the dignity and welfare of participants was protected. Throughout the research, appropriate credit was given for the work of others through quotations. Before collecting data from the respondents, the purpose of the study: Monitoring remote workers productivity at the institutions of higher learning, was given to the participants. Further, the researcher asked for permission to administer questionnaire to those participants. They were told that they would be free to stop taking part in the study in case they feel they could no longer continue. Should they decide to continue taking part in the study, they were requested to read and sign a consent letter.

6. Literature Review

According to the literature available, the concept of working from home became more eminent following the emergence of coronavirus in 2020. Before the emergence of COVID-19, remote working was not widely practiced (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

6.1 What Employee Monitoring Entails

Monitoring entails the process of observing employees and their performance. Depending on the type of

monitoring, this practice is useful for protecting the institution's resources, with the primary objective of ensuring that performance standards are being met, whilst improving productivity. Below are some of the ways of monitoring employee performance (Desilver, 2020):

- Report submission.
- CCTV.
- Access cards.
- Network monitoring.
- Email monitoring.
- Call monitoring.
- Employee monitoring software.
- Project management software.

Employee monitoring tools includes software and hardware used to perform the monitoring indicated in the previous paragraph. Through the CCTV monitoring, cameras and the software are used (Bavik et al., 2020; Hern, 2020). About access cards, there is software which makes provision for programming used for different access levels. There are also instances where employees swipe cards to open doors within the premises. The software is installed on employee devices, for the purpose of tracking activities performed through network, email, and calls (Akbar, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020).

6.2 Legitimacy of Employee Monitoring

Although this matter varies from country to the other, in most instances, monitoring the performance of employees is legitimate or legal. It is however important to note that employee performance should be monitored in accordance with stipulated regulations. The process of employee consultation is of critical importance (Kazekami, 2020; Parker & Grote, 2020).

6.3 Communicating Employee Monitoring

Prior to implementation of employee monitoring, it is important to get the buy-in from relevant stakeholders. It is unlikely that most employees would respond in the affirmative. It is therefore important to be prepared for resistance. It is of

great importance to introduce the system through physical meeting with all relevant stakeholders. This implies that all internal stakeholders should be involved from the onset (Desilver, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). The actual implementation phase should be preceded by the testing stage to ensure that the system is effective. Reasons which led to the identification and implementation of the system should be adequately explained. The benefits of using the software should also be explained (Alghaithi, 2020; Kawohl & Nordt, 2020).

6.4 Importance of Employee Monitoring

The process of monitoring employees is important because it has among others the benefits such as Data security Enhancement, Productivity Improvement, Project deliverables Optimisation and Detection of malicious behavior. To ensure achieving the intended outcome, relevant tools are identified. These tools are also helpful to achieve productivity (Kawohl & Nordt, 2020; Sytch & Greer, 2020).

6.5 Importance of Remote Employee Monitoring

In order to ensure productivity within an institution, it is of critical importance to regularly assess the performance of employees. The process of employee monitoring could be done the same way irrespective of whether employees are working on site or remotely. This implies that the same software that could be used to monitor the performance of those working from office could be used to monitor the performance of remote workers or those working from home (Bavik et al., 2020; Hern, 2020). It is however necessary to monitor employee performance taking cognisance of the necessary regulations. Monitoring remote workers enables the institution to ascertain that employees do not feel that they are on an extended holiday by working from home (Desilver, 2020; Hern, 2020). There should be a process of taking employees through how they need to conduct themselves whilst working from home. The risks associated with noncompliance to remote working guidelines should be outlined upfront (Bavik et al., 2020; Wright & Silard, 2020).

6.6 Performance Plans with Deadlines

Employees should be familiarised with institutional strategic plan and annual performance plans. This would enable employees to prepare their

respective tasks and plans in accordance with the university wide performance plans. Setting of performance plan with deadlines provides a guideline for employees to know precisely what to do and when to do that (Akbar et al., 2020; Desilver, 2020; Golden & Gajendran, 2019). The presence of a performance plan also helps the employees to compile reports which are in accordance with the performance plans (Alghaithi, 2020; Kawohl & Nordt, 2020). When employees are familiar with the strategic goals of the institution, it becomes easier for them to prepare their plans with deadlines. It is therefore important for management to have internal stakeholder engagement sessions which are intended to familiarise employees with the strategic direction of the institution and their expectation. To ensure adherence to the performance plans, it is of vital importance to also have regular sessions to track progress and to ensure that employees continue to perform in accordance with the agreed performance plans (Bently et al., 2016; Desilver, 2020; Wright & Grote, 2020).

6.7 Regular Performance Review

As outlined in the preceding paragraph, to avoid disappointment at the end of the project, it is important to have regular sessions with employees to check progress on the implementation of tasks. The preparation of plans and setting of deadlines should be done in a transparent manner. Regular performance review enables the institution to detect challenges early so that mechanisms of addressing such challenges could be put in place before it is too late. When it comes to remote work, there should be transparency. Transparent workflow and goals are just the beginning (Perry et al., 2018; Sytch & Greer, 2020; Wright & Silard, 2020).

The process of regular performance review would give employees the opportunity to check if their performance is still in line with the goals and objectives of the institution. Employees should be made to understand their respective roles in support of the strategic goals of the institution, irrespective of their positions. For instance, cleaners within a university should proudly say that their role is to support the university in the production of quality graduates (Akbar et al., 2020; Bavik et al., 2020; Hern, 2020). By doing this, the institution would be helping employees to understand how they fit in, what is expected from them and their deliverables. This will further enable employees to know how

their performance contributes to the efforts of the team and the results thereof. Through these regular performance reviews, the institution would be able to provide feedback on the performance of employees and enable them to improve. This process will certainly transform and instill the team spirit among employees (Alghaithi, 2020; Bavik et al., 2020; Hern, 2020).

6.8 How Tracking of Employee Internet Usage is Perceived

Some institutions consider tracking of employee internet usage as one of the tools that could be used to track the performance of employees. It is however worth noting that this could be viewed as an intrusion into employees' personal space. This could sometimes lead to a situation where employees become demotivated and trust could be lost. To avoid a situation where there could be unnecessary tension, employees should be consulted about the appropriate tools to be utilised to monitor employee performance. Employee consultation would ensure transparency between employees and the employer. It is therefore of vital importance to involve employees in every part of the process (Hern, 2020; Kniffin et al., 2020; Parker & Grote, 2020).

6.9 Effective Supervision of Employees Remotely

It is worth reiterating that transparency is very critical in the process of supervising remote workers. Transparency should be practiced by both the employer or line managers and remote workers. Transparency could avert mistrust and unethical behavior or conduct by remote workers. Trust between the employer and employees is important. If there is no trust between the employer and employee, the employer could go to an extent of installing invasive tracking technology or devices (Akbar et al., 2020; Desilver, 2020; Kazekami, 2020). To maintain a healthy working relationship between the employer and employees, supervision should be conducted in a transparent manner and in a human level. This could be achieved by involving employees in the determination of appropriate tools that could be utilised to monitor the performance of employees. The process should make provision for regular feedback for identified tasks. Employees should be given the opportunity to significantly contribute when it comes to feedback and review of fellow colleague's performance (Bavik et al., 2020; Hern, 2020).

6.10 Importance of Compiling End of Day Report

To maintain accurate reporting, it is important to encourage employees to keep a summary of activities performed daily. This also helps in situations where employees have multiple tasks to be performed simultaneously. This enables the employees to keep track of what they accomplished during the day. However, the daily report summary should comprise of strategic matters performed which are contained in the list of daily activities (Akbar et al., 2020; Bavik et al., 2020; Desilver, 2020). Compiling of accurate report on daily activities could also be a tool that would help in the identification of opportunities and areas for improvement, as well as outlining any steps to be followed in order to improve performance and overcome challenges that could hamper effective performance. This could be achieved by having regular sessions with employees to ensure that there are no misunderstandings (Alghaithi, 2020; Hern, 2020; Parker & Grote, 2020).

6.11 Maintenance of Remote Workers' Accountability

As outlined in the preceding paragraphs, remote workers become more focused on their work if they are familiar with what is expected of them. The employer should also devise mechanisms of appreciating and acknowledging employee performance. Institutions should also ensure that the tools of trade are made available for employees to perform their respective tasks effectively. It is practically impossible for line managers to regularly check on the performance of remote workers. Employees should be trained about ethical conduct and working without close supervision (Dasilver, 2020; Hern, 2020; Wang & Parker, 2020). Employees should also be given the opportunity to work flexible hours. By doing this, line managers will only focus on the product instead of checking if remote workers are always at their remote workstations. This also implies that employees should be accountable. Institutions should engage employees in a transparent manner and hold them accountable for their performance, irrespective of when and where their respective tasks have been completed. Giving remote workers the opportunity to work independently with minimal supervision is the best way to keep employees motivated and productive (Akbar et al., 2020; Kazekami, 2020; Kawohl & Nordt, 2020).

6.12 Challenges Associated with Remote Work

There are some challenges associated with working remotely. In this study, only four challenges have been identified. This however does not imply that the list of challenges has been exhausted. These are futile communication, work-family intrusion, deferment, and isolation. These four challenges are viewed as being detrimental on the performance of remote workers.

6.12.1 Futile Communication

Communication is considered by some authors as the lifeblood of institutions. The institutions of higher learning are not immune to this. There is no doubt that remote workers should be in possession of appropriate information technology tools for them to perform effectively (Alghaithi, 2020; Bavik et al., 2020; Hern, 2020). This is also imperative for those working at the respective institutions. Remote workers should have the necessary communication tools for them to communicate with various stakeholders, both internal and external. If there is poor communication, remote workers cannot be productive. Over and above the tools of communication provision should be made for remote workers to have sufficient data bundles to access the internet (Akbar et al., 2020; Desilver, 2020; Hern, 2020).

6.12.2 Work-Family Intrusion

When employees are expected to work from home, there is no doubt that they could not experience interference. Unless if a dedicated area could be identified for remote work for employees working from home, remote workers tend to experience interruptions from friends, relatives, and family members. This could negatively affect the performance of remote workers (Desilver, 2020; Bavik et al., 2020; Hern, 2020). Unless if there is a plan agreed with the line managers, remote workers will continue to struggle to balance their roles within the family and work. This could lead to a situation where remote workers feel exhausted. Some remote workers could find themselves missing the deadlines, failing to attend meetings, and spending more time attending to personal matters (Akbar et al., 2020; Wright & Silard, 2020). This could also lead to a situation where remote workers tend not to take leave to attend to their personal matters, because they feel that such matters could also be attended to during working hours. There are also instances where some remote workers are unable to meet the family obligations to being online indefinitely (Hern, 2020; Wang & Parker, 2020; Wright & Silard, 2020).

6.12.3 Deferment

Deferment can be defined as the process of postponing the performance of certain tasks which could lead to missing deadlines (Kühnel et al., 2016). According to Steel (2007), deferment or postponing the performance of tasks negatively affects the performance of institutions. This is more common in office-based work environment. This is normally the situation where employees need close supervision to perform effectively. In most situations, staff would defer the performance of certain tasks due to being committed with non-work-related activities performed during working hours (Akbar et al., 2020; Hern, 2020; Steel, 2007).

6.12.4 Isolation

Working remotely leads to a situation where there is minimal face to face interaction with fellow co-workers and line managers. The primary purpose of remote work is to reduce the number of workers on the premises at a given time to minimise the spread of COVID-19. As part of COVID-19 Regulations, associated with different alert levels of lockdown, particularly in South Africa, leading to a situation where there is a minimal number of people to participate in face-to-face events, workers feel isolated (Akbar et al., 2020; Desilver, 2020; Hern, 2020). This could also have a psychological effect. This is even though colleagues could make video calls and see each other during events and meetings as well as related gatherings. This could also lead to poor performance because there won't be that sense of affiliation (Wienclaw, 2019; Wang & Parker, 2020; Wright & Silard, 2020).

7. Results, Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that when more employees are working from home, employers become vigilant in terms of devising strategies to effectively monitor their performance. Some institutions were using performance monitoring tools that could easily track the active and idle time which could lead to loss of trust between the employer and employee. The study revealed that some staff members are not ethical when working from home with minimal supervision. The study also revealed that when staff are not closely monitored, they tend not to focus and spend some time performing non-work-related activities which negatively affects the performance and productivity of the institution. The study further revealed that remote

working leads to poor quality of reports and missing of deadlines, signifying lack of proper planning. The study revealed that it is important to make technology equipment available for employees to perform their duties. Employers should not assume that employees know how to use the equipment. Therefore, necessary training should be provided. The study revealed that two-way dialogue between managers and employees is of critical importance. Two-way communication leads to a situation where the information is shared. Most employees expressed that managers should focus on outputs than processes.

Since some workers feel that introducing monitoring tools could compromise their privacy, it is important for employers to ensure that whatever tools are implemented to monitor performance, do not interfere with the privacy of workers. Institutions need to be clear about their intentions of introducing performance monitoring tools. Although it is important for remote workers to be ethical, responsible, and accountable, it was made explicit through the results and confirmed by the literature that remote working has its own challenges which need to be addressed. Some respondents recommended that employers should work together with employees to identify mechanisms that could be used to address the identified challenges and appropriate tools for monitoring the performance of remote workers. It was made clear through available literature that although there are positive aspects of working remotely, there are also challenges. However, with the relevant and appropriate tools, it could be easy for institutions or employers to interact with and effectively monitor the performance of remote workers.

The study revealed that to maintain healthy working relationship, there has to be transparency. When there is transparency, ethical conduct will be promoted. This would further ensure that there is effective performance. The study further revealed that some employees do not have appropriate mobile communication tools that they could use when working remotely. It was further indicated that some employees had a challenge of connectivity and insufficient data provision. It is therefore recommended that the employers should make provision for the necessary tools for remote workers and ensure regular communication. Line managers should ensure that information is promptly communicated with employees.

To improve communication and better understanding of activities taking place within the institution, the university should consider making use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to communicate with all employees, including those working remotely. Electronic, mobile communication tools would be better and more up to date communication tools to use in the future, for effective performance at the university. The study found that some remote workers had limited communication from their line managers during the performance of their respective responsibilities. During times of working remotely, employees have a delicate sense of isolation. From the analysis University of Venda staff revealed that effective internal communication can enhance effective performance. It is therefore evident that regular communication contributes immensely to the effective performance and productivity at institutions of higher learning.

The study revealed that it is not easy to separate work from personal life when working from home. In some instances, this could lead to a situation where employees lose track of how long they are working. This is because most employees working from home tend to work long or extended hours. According to some respondents, working from home eliminates the travelling challenges and save time of travelling. As such committed employees could go the extra mile to improve productivity with clear plans and goals. Through effective and regular communication some problems could be avoided within institutions and employee performance could be improved. It is therefore recommended that institutional leadership should develop performance monitoring structures and have regular sessions where all staff could get the opportunity to engage on matters of strategic importance. It is further recommended that to effectively monitor the performance of remote workers, there should be plans with measurable targets. Development of effective performance monitoring tools within institutions is of critical importance and vital for carrying out institutional tasks consistently and improving productivity amongst staff working remotely.

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