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REMOTE WORK PRACTICES AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN THE OIL AND GAS FIRMS IN RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT-----

Many organizations have been thrown into unfamiliar waters by the negative impacts of the Coronavirus (COVID19) pandemic. As a result, businesses have derived response mechanisms and aligned themselves to the unpredictable current situation. This paper focused on the impact of remote work practice on employees. The paper reviewed extant literature on the subject and adopted the diffusion of innovation theory as a based-line theory. The findings revealed that remote work practice through job autonomy, social support, and monitoring has positively impacted the performance of employees. This paper has therefore contributed to the body of knowledge by establishing a positive relationship between remote work practice and employee performance. This paper further recommends that organizations should embrace remote work practices, encourage employee collaboration and provide the support necessary for the use of virtual platforms.

KEYWORDS: Remote Work, Job Autonomy, Task Performance, Adaptive Performance, Social Support------

INTRODUCTION

Remote working is also commonly known as 'telecommuting', it represents "the use of information and communications technologies for work that is performed outside the employer's premises" (Miele & Tirabeni, 2020). Remote working offers employees the flexibility to carry-on official duties outside office locations, principally from home (part-time or full-time). While the concept of remote work became more popular due to the COVID19 pandemic, the concept of telecommuting is not new (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). Remote working become more common because of the worldwide lockdowns brought about by the Covid19 pandemic (Carroll & Conboy, 2020).

Remote work practices have been known to help both employees and employers in several ways. On the part of employees, remote work practice can help, (1). It allows employees to completely and independently customize their working setup, (2). It has helped employees to keep their full pay and other benefits as they now save commuting time and money, (3). It helps employees who are physically challenged because of the less time spent moving from one point to another, (4). It helps employees to enjoy autonomy with fewer office interactions, (5). It can help improve the employee process in decision-making. On the part of the employer, remote work practices can: (1). Help in extending the operational hours of the organization, (2) Fewer parking spots and office space are needed to perform organizational assignments. (3) The organization is exposed to a greater pool of potential talents with no limitations in geography when employees are considered for employment. (4) Less time and resources are spent on scheduling meetings. (5) Can help employees to better multi-task effectively (Janza, 2020; Soroni, 2021).

In a highly dynamic business environment, successful organizations have employees who are open to learning and willing to go beyond the call of duty to contribute to the survival and competitiveness of their organizations. One of the ways to demonstrate this willingness is for employees to embrace change such as working from home (remote working) in achieving organizational goals by performing their duties promptly. As acknowledged by Kossek and Lautsh (2018), remote working was not a popular practice before the COVID-19 pandemic era. As observed by Eurofound (2017), remote working was seen as a "luxury for the relatively affluent" designed for high-income earners and white-collar job workers. The situation is not substantially



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different in Nigeria as most employees are used to the conventional face-to-face workplace and organization arrangement (Ajayi, 2020). As a result of the novel nature of remote working in Nigeria before the COVID-19 era, most workers had little experience in remote working due to a lack of proper preparation by the employees and their organizations for such a paradigm shift orchestrated by the pandemic.

Higher levels of employee performance can be achieved when the leadership of the organization actively engages and involve employees in the day-to-day pursuit of the attainment of the mission and vision of the organization. Similarly, Pradhan and Jena (2017) pointed out that daily task performance and adaptive performance by employees can go a long way to achieving high employee performance. They further opined that task performance requires a high cognitive ability that enables employees to undertake fundamental job responsibilities that can primarily facilitate task knowledge on the job. Task knowledge here connotes technical knowledge or basic principles that ensure the ability of the employee involved to handle multiple assignments. Again, within the context of adaptive performance, employees should have the ability to adjust, adapt, and accommodate changes and provide the necessary support to the job profile even in a dynamic work situation. A typical example of a dynamic work situation is remote work practices.

Several scholarly research has been conducted to examine the influence of remote work practices in line with world best practice on one hand, while several others have been also performed to examine employee job performance at different times and in different industries (Carrol & Conboy, 2020; Kossek & Lautsch, 2018; Tende & Alagah, 2018; Abiante, 2018). None of these studies saw the need to investigate remote work practices on employee performance, especially in Nigeria. Therefore, this study is designed to examine the relationship between remote work practices and employee performance.

1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study aims to ascertain the relationship between remote work practices and employee performance. Specifically, the objectives are to:

- i. Ascertain the relationship between job autonomy and employee performance
- ii. Assess the relationship between social support and employee performance
- iii. Investigate the relationship between monitoring and employee performance

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Remote Work Practices

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) in the year 2019 caused a rapid shift to full-time remote work for many workers including those in the oil and gas industry. Although some workers were already working remotely before the pandemic, especially workers in the information technology (IT) sector and talented workers the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic led to an increase in the number of remote workers (Zoonen, & Sivunen, 2021). Although remote working is not new (Hafermalz, 2020), never before have so many companies been obliged to let their workers work from home at the same time as in 2020, when the COVID-19 issue erupted internationally. This has major ramifications for businesses, such as how they might push their people to perform at their best (Delfino & van der Kolk, 2021). When the world is in a state of emergency, such as when a pandemic is sweeping the globe. Many businesses are impacted and must adapt their working practices.

The global COVID-19 epidemic has caused a significant shift in how many companies operate. This has resulted in a significant increase in remote workers with little or no prior experience working remotely from companies and organizations that are most likely unprepared for this change (Neely, 2020). Furthermore, these remote workers are largely involuntary and would not be working remotely if the ongoing crisis had not occurred. As a result, many employees and supervisors are dealing with common challenges that come while working remotely, such as loneliness, feeling left out, a lack of motivation, and trouble separating work and personal life. New technologies provide opportunities to organizations, and businesses must embrace flexibility and adaption for optimal utilization (Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). The rapid dispersal of information and communication technology not only brings helps employees work remotely efficiently and effectively but also raises unique supervisory demands regarding manager-employee relationships, work assignments, and accountability (Schuster et al., 2020). Remote work has fundamentally changed how organizations do business



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and has implications for issues such as employee management, security risks, and employee productivity (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015).

Remote work offers employees the flexibility to work away from their office locations remotely, principally from home (part-time or full-time). While the concept of remote work became more popular due to the COVID19 pandemic, the concept of telecommuting is not new (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). Remote working has become more common since 2020 because of the lockdowns worldwide brought about by the Covid19 pandemic (Carroll & Conboy, 2020). As far back as 1977, Harkness (1977) predicted that in the future, more than 50 percent of office duties will be performed from the workers' homes or other locations rather than a central office. Advancements in computer and communications technology may permit more jobs to be performed remotely than were possible before (Zoonen, & Sivunen, 2021).

2.1.2 Job Autonomy

Job autonomy is the degree of freedom or discretion a worker has in terms of how tasks are accomplished (Langfred, 2000; Mergener, & Mansfeld, 2021). Yu and Wu (2021) define job autonomy as the permitted extent of independence and discretion when performing professional tasks including time and scheduling. In general, working from home or remote working is associated with an increase in job autonomy (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Saragih, Margaretha, & Anantyanda, 2021). Furthermore, studies revealed a positive relationship between levels of job autonomy and both employees' motivation and sense of responsibility (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Employees who have more discretion in procedures, methods, or time schedules to perform their occupational tasks are more positive about their work (Golden, 2007).

Autonomy is characterized as the extent to which the job presents valuable freedom, independence, flexibility to make changes, and choice in determining the procedures to execute the work successfully (Burcharth, Præst-Knudsen, & Søndergaard, 2017). Autonomy is an important job resource because it enables employees to coordinate their work time to suit their preferences and schedule their work to ensure personal productivity and to self-organize their work tasks to cope more effectively with stressful job demands (Davidescu, Apostu, Paul, & Casuneanu, 2020), ensuring greater job satisfaction (Burcharth, et al., 2017). However, an opposing view suggests that flexible working hours can create insecurities related to performance evaluation criteria and supervisor expectations, adding to working time and stress and reducing job satisfaction (Yu & Wu, 2021).

Many firms utilize telecommuting (Onyemaechi et al., 2018), flexible working hours (Kattenbach, Demerouti & Nachreiner, 2010; Beckmann, 2016), and job sharing (Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2013). In human resource management, work autonomy is taken into account during the job design process. Job autonomy is a contentious issue in both for-profit and non-profit businesses, since it works well in certain cultures but is frowned upon in others. As a result, both bosses and subordinates struggle. Wu et al., (2015) provide a new layer to the notion of job autonomy by stating that it allows employees to control their behavior and attain goals based on their personal preferences. Job autonomy is also described as an employee's ability to complete their task and make decisions (Lippke, 1989; Laceulle, 2018), as well as how to achieve objectives (Fuller et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2015). It's worth noting that top management in businesses is actively involved in enforcing job autonomy inside the workplace. Transformational leadership, according to Fernet et al. (2015), is linked to empowerment, independent motivation, and self-reflection.

2.1.3 Social Support

Social support is a critical feature of the workplace because good relationships are necessary between employees and between employees and leadership (Chandra, 2012). Social support refers to an individual's belief that he or she is: valued; informed; communicated with; emotionally cared for; and part of a related group or network (Fernandes & Tewari, 2012). Social support is critical in most contexts in organizational life. In particular, support from leadership and coworkers has a positive impact on well-being; employees who feel supported feel less stressed and believe themselves fairly rewarded for their efforts (Demerouti et al., 2014; Fischer & Martinez, 2013; Thi-Giang et al., 2013).

Social support is the belief and reality that one is cared for, that one may get help from others, and that one is a member of a social network that is encouraging as well as the belief that help is available, the actual aid received, or the degree to which a person is incorporated into a social network (Bavel, Baicker, Boggio, et al.,



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2020). Social support comes in the forms of emotional support, physical support, information support, and companionship support (Bavel, et al., 2020). The provision of social support can be one of the most important ways of promoting psychological well-being and buffering the negative impact of workplace stress (Fernandes & Tewari, 2012; Jamal, 2013). Social support represents the robust social networks available to staff through: colleagues; managers; friends; and employee assistance programs to help staff cope with workplace stressors (Nair, & Xavier, 2012; Walinga & Rowe, 2013). Employees with robust social support at work are better able to cope with stressful workplaces and are more effective at coping with stress (Ladegård, 2011). Coworkers who have a positive disposition and are emotionally supportive have a positive impact on performance and act as an effective buffer for stress (Smith et al., 2012).

Social media support may offer emotional consolation by connecting users with others and raising awareness about health problems (Shensa, Sidani, Lin, Bowman, & Primack, 2016). Kraut et al. (2002) found that women with breast cancer who participated in an online support group in an asynchronous format could form satisfying supportive relationships. This type of support effectively reduced participants' depression, perceived stress, and cancer-related trauma scores. The capacity to deal with stress may be improved by using internet communication. Users may build connections and get encouragement for a range of problems, including uncommon illnesses or situations, via social media-based social support (Naslund, Bondre, Torous, et al., 2020).

Using online support groups, health care providers may learn about patients' perspectives and experiences (Kraut et al., 2002). Studies in social network site usage and perceived social support have shown that both predict improved well-being, although only experimental research has shown this to be the case. In online groups, more and more interventions are being used to build or improve social support (Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013). Despite several studies suggesting that many online programs are well accepted by users and may be beneficial, some also disregard such submissions (Naslund, et al., 2020).

2.1.4 Monitoring

Monitoring is the ability to check the progress or quality of a job done over some time, thereby keeping it under systematic review. Monitoring has both positive and negative effects on employee performance (Gerten, et al., 2019). Ball (2010) established that monitoring affects employees' well-being, work culture, creativity, productivity, and motivation, especially when it has to be monitored using surveillance technologies which are usually obtainable in remote work. Employees find these surveillance technologies quite intrusive and unreasonable, leading to lower employee morale (Charbonneau, & Doberstein, 2020). Such monitoring also diverts managerial attention and may strain organizational resources (Molino et al., 2020). At the same time, little is also known about the possible limits of employer surveillance. Also, it is difficult to tell whether any potential negative impacts on employees may offset the pursuit of productivity that employers claim as the reason for surveillance. Gerten et al., (2019) highlighted that employee monitoring systems might not accomplish what they were expected to. The evidence in the literature is that they do not make people feel good about their work or happy and secure in their employment and tend to lead to burnout and lower morale (Ulrike, 2013). At the same time, the psychological pressures of being watched can impair employees' productivity (Charbonneau & Doberstein, 2020). Implementing surveillance software for productivity tracking essentially masks the deeper issue of a lack of trust between managers and employees.

Charbonneau and Doberstein (2020) argued that the modern limitless use of digital surveillance and employee monitoring leads to a significant invasion of employees' privacy. Green, Tappin, and Bentley (2021) observed that the data gathered by employers on workers often extended to their health and fitness, aptitude and skills, and psychological disposition, which might lead to workplace discrimination regarding promotion, salary increases, bonuses, training, and career development opportunities. On the other hand, substantial attention has been gained to the relationship between employee monitoring and increased work intensity, which results in worker burnout, increased stress, and health-related problems. Work surveillance mechanisms also adversely affect job satisfaction. The sense of being monitored intensely makes employees adopt communications and emotional attitudes to do their best, which often involves unseen and unpaid work, resulting in additional stress (Charbonneau & Doberstein, 2020; Gerten et al., 2019).

Ball (2010) categorizes a wide variety of methods as ones that assess productivity, behaviors, and personal qualities. Ball compares surveillance and monitoring to one other, but with distinct audiences, which divides the study in an undesirable way. Ball (2010) uses the politically neutral term "surveillance," which is



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consistent with the idea of "monitoring." Recording phone calls, monitoring visited websites, using video cameras, monitoring email content, location tracking, and internet blocking software are examples of these tactics (Holland et al., 2015).

2.1.5 Employee Performance

Employees are crucial to the continuous growth of organizations and for this reason, it is safe to state that employee performance is a key variable in management research, and perhaps the most significant measure of organizational performance. For this to happen, management entails that the employee is motivated and inspired enough to get the best out of them (Chigozie et al., 2018). The study tests the extent to which reward management motivates and inspires employees to not just increase performance levels but also sustain them. In this regard, employee performance is the measure of individual output against established standards or goals (Bosco, 2014; George et al., 2016). George et al. (2016) add that employee performance is indicated by employee service delivery, effectiveness and efficiency.

Employee performance is defined as the quality and quantity of work completed by an employee while performing the tasks assigned to them (Aima, Adam & Hapzi, 2017). Employee performance, according to Fareed (2016), refers to what someone has accomplished after doing a task. Employee work performance is the consequence of an employee's efforts in completing the task at hand, which is dependent on abilities, experience, devotion, and time. Work performance is defined by Ayub (2018) as "everyone's true behavior expressed as work achievement delivered by employees relevant to their job in the company." Work performance is a representation of a condition within an organization over some time, as well as a result and success impacted by the operational activities of the company in utilizing its resources. Employee job performance is a work result of work achievement of one or group's quality and quantity achieved in an organization in performing its jobs.

Employee performance is the end outcome of a person's efforts to complete a task. Performance refers to the consistency of early work planning for the process and staying put until the objectives are met (Sita & Pinapati, 2013). Job performance, on the other hand, is a metric that measures how successfully people execute their jobs, how they take initiative, and how they deploy available resources to solve issues and produce outcomes (Rothmann & Coetzer, 2003). Employee performance refers to how effectively and efficiently employees of a company accomplish their daily tasks to fulfill management and consumer expectations (Pierce et al, 2004). It is also the extent to which people put their talents, expertise, and attitudes to work to achieve the intended outcomes and satisfy the set goals (Rehman, 2009). Employee performance is typically judged indirectly by utilizing features of employee behavior at work such as speed, civility, etiquette, accuracy, time management, consistency, and effect on other workers, (Bohnstedt, & Larsen, 2008).

2.2 Theoretical framework

2.2.1 The Self-Determination Theory – R.M. Ryan and E.L. Deci (2000)

The Self-Determination Theory is one of the important theories that explain why individuals adapt to changes and use online platforms so swiftly during the Covid-19 outbreak (Al-Habaibeh, Watkins, Waried, & Javareshk, 2021). The self-determination theory supports remote work practices as asserted by Ryan and Deci (2000), the theory explains why individuals have accepted global technological advancements so quickly, particularly concerning working from home. Employees' global attitude toward digital technology as a "survival kit" or "necessity", rather than an optional choice, as most innovation adaptation theories address, could be explained by intrinsic motivation such as the pleasure of working from home, combined with extrinsic motivation such as maintaining employability. Additionally, the dire consequence of non-conforming could be costly such as showing incompetency and lack of control (Ryan, & Deci, 2000).

Thus, the theory of self-determination offers insights into how employees are encouraged to embrace the new working style from home and excel in a short period (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Al-Marri, Al-Habaibeh, & Abdo, 2017). The self-determination theory advocates that individuals are either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to behave in specific ways (Ryan, & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation becomes the dominant driver when an individual wants to perform a certain act for the internal and personal reward or benefit associated with that act (Frederiks, Stenner, & Hobman, 2015) such as in this occasion, maintaining their satisfaction and sense of achievement. Extrinsic motivation, however, is related to the desire to perform a specific action for the sake of



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an external reward or penalty (Maslow, 1943; Wu, 2012). Thus, extrinsic motivation within the parameters of self-determination theory might explain why most employees seek to adopt their work practice from home due to economic persuasion, that is, keeping their job perhaps for them to feel part of the 'team' by working closely with colleagues on-line and even becoming more active about that.

2.3 Relationship between Remote Work Practices and Employee Performance

Atoko (2021) examined the impact of remote working on employee performance during the coronavirus (covid19) pandemic. The study adopted a longitudinal design. Secondary data were collected from previous studies and analyzed using hierarchical regression. The findings of the study revealed that remote working has positively impacted the performance of employees during the Coronavirus (COVID19) pandemic ($r^2 = 0.36$, p < 0.01). The study concludes that remote working is here to stay, and is a permanent change that is referred to as the 'new normal.

Blumberga and Lapkovska (2021) examined the engagement and involvement of personnel during remote work among Latvian financial establishments. The study aimed to establish the level of employee engagement and involvement while remote working. The study adopted a survey research design. Three surveys were conducted focusing on 98 full-time financial institutions employees practicing remote work during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was used in testing the study hypotheses. The outcomes show that there were statistically significant positive correlations between dimensions of employee involvement (physical involvement, emotional involvement, and cognitive involvement) and remote work (r = .474 and p = 0.000; r = .205, p = .043, and r = .349, p = .000, respectively). The findings of the study show that only a small percentage of financial institution employees are engaged and involved in their remote work and that institutions must take further steps to increase employee involvement and engagement and improve operational performance.

Delic, Djedovic, and Mekic (2021) explored job autonomy, job satisfaction, and job performance in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The study adopted a survey design, while data were generated via the distribution of copies of questionnaires to 242 workers. PLS-SEM was used to test the hypotheses and result revealed that job autonomy has significant effects on job performance (P = .000, t-value = 10.468) and job satisfaction (P = .000; t-value = 10.360). Hence, the study concluded that with more autonomy employees will feel more satisfied with their job and provide better performance in their job.

Farooq and Sultana (2021) tested the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on work-from-home and employee productivity in Indian hospitality, banking, and information technology industries. The study aimed to unravel the association between work from home and employee productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey instrument was used to collect data from 250 remote workers and tested using structural equation modeling and multi-group moderation analysis. The outcome shows a negative relationship between working from home and employee productivity (r = -0.45). the study recommended that since working from home is becoming a new normal now, thus remote managers need to encourage their employees to create a separate dedicated workstation at home to boost productivity.

Wai (2021) investigated the influence of Telework on employee engagement and employee performance. The paper used documentary research methodology for exploring the impact of telework on employee motivation and employee performance. This study used documentary and secondary research by reviewing past research, journals, and electronic sources which have studied telework challenges and their impacts on employee engagement and employee performance. The findings show that 67 percent of the reviewed works agree that telework affects employee performance. Also, 26 percent concord that flexible work conditions are considered to be necessary for a company to remain desirable to employees.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that the adoption of remote work practices will induce employee task performance. Specifically, higher levels of job autonomy, social support, and monitoring will provoke an increase in employee performance in respect of their capacity to carry out their tasks and adapt to changes in the workplace and external environment. Therefore, the use and implementation of remote working are important and increase the overall organizational performance. Given the research and the importance of remote working in enhancing employee performance, this study recommends that:



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- i. Organizations should give employees some measure of discretion in setting targets, selecting work methods, and sequencing activities to conveniently carry out their tasks when working remotely.
- ii. Management should encourage employees to freely communicate with supervisors and co-workers for clarifications when faced with challenges at remote locations.
- iii. Organizations should embark on collaborative monitoring using remote working platforms such as Zoom, and Google Meet and employees should be trained on how to use these platforms.

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